

# No shame in a 5th year

Dowagiac schools  
launch Early Middle  
College program

By **DEBRA HAIGHT**

HP Correspondent

**DOWAGIAC** — Dowagiac Union High School students are the latest to join the statewide Early Middle College movement.

Nineteen students have agreed to stay in school one more year and earn a high school diploma and college associate's degree at the end of that fifth year.

"We felt it was a good program and would be very beneficial to offer students this opportunity," Dowagiac Superintendent Paul Hartsig said. District officials began talking with and recruiting students for the program earlier this year.

Program director Mikki Spagnoli said the Dowagiac program allows students to get associate's degree from Southwestern Michigan College in four career paths or areas of study: engineering, nursing, general arts and general science.

A unique part of the Dowagiac program is a partnership with Western Michigan University. The agreement allows engineering students take classes at SMC and then make a seamless transition to Western's engineering program.

"We are the first ones to have an articulation with a four-year university," she said.

Spagnoli said Dowagiac's effort stems from a state initiative encouraging school districts to start such programs in cooperation with community colleges. Berrien County school districts have started an Early Middle College program, forming a consortium with Lake Michigan College.

"This was part of (Gov. Rick Snyder's) initiative and the Legislature backed it," she said. "It's an opportunity for students to be college and career ready."

She said Dowagiac has 10 sophomores and nine juniors participating. High school sophomores are taking a college success course this year to learn time management and study skills, while juniors are taking two college classes this year. The



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**JAMIE O'BRIEN**

Dowagiac junior

juniors will take more college classes the following two years.

Dowagiac juniors Daniela Morales and Jamie O'Brien say they're glad to be part of the program. Daniela is getting an associate's degree in science and hopes to become a marine biologist or veterinarian. Jamie is studying to be a nurse.

Daniela said it's taken time to get used to her college classes. She said she doesn't see staying in high school an extra year to get both degrees as a problem.

"I think it's beneficial for students," she said.

Jamie said she was going to do dual enrollment and then switched to the Early Middle College.

"I thought I'd try it. I can save a lot of money by doing this," she said. "My family said it would be an awesome opportunity, and it has been."

The girls said that they've learned valuable lessons about taking more responsibility for their educations and managing time.

"I love the program. It's one of the best decisions I've made," Jamie said. "I'm learning study skills. It's had a super positive impact."

Spagnoli said the district has built support into the program, such as offering mentoring and other assistance. She meets weekly with juniors, and students in their senior year will mentor students coming into the program. In addition, all students can get help anytime.

Spagnoli said Early Middle College goes a step beyond the dual enrollment college classes more and more high school students are taking.

"We say it is dual enrollment with a purpose where students leave with an end product," she said.