

U.S. Department of Education
2020 National Blue Ribbon Schools Program

[X] Public or [] Non-public

For Public Schools only: (Check all that apply) [X] Title I [] Charter [] Magnet[X] Choice

Name of Principal Mr. Edward Conner
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., etc.) (As it should appear in the official records)

Official School Name DeKalb Early College Academy
(As it should appear in the official records)

School Mailing Address 1701 Mountain Industrial Boulevard
(If address is P.O. Box, also include street address.)

City Stone Mountain State GA Zip Code+4 (9 digits total) 30083-1027

County Dekalb County

Telephone (678) 875-2402 Fax (770) 934-9781

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I have reviewed the information in this application, including the eligibility requirements on page 2 (Part I-Eligibility Certification), and certify, to the best of my knowledge, that it is accurate.

Date _____

(Principal's Signature)

Name of Superintendent* Ms. Cheryl Watson-Harris E-mail Cheryl_Watson-Harris@dekalbschoolsga.org
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., Other)

District Name DeKalb County School District Tel. (678) 676-1200

I have reviewed the information in this application, including the eligibility requirements on page 2 (Part I-Eligibility Certification), and certify, to the best of my knowledge, that it is accurate.

Date _____

(Superintendent's Signature)

Name of School Board
President/Chairperson Mr. Marshall Orson
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., Other)

I have reviewed the information in this application, including the eligibility requirements on page 2 (Part I-Eligibility Certification), and certify, to the best of my knowledge, that it is accurate.

Date _____

(School Board President's/Chairperson's Signature)

The original signed cover sheet only should be converted to a PDF file and uploaded via the online portal.

**Non-public Schools: If the information requested is not applicable, write N/A in the space.*

PART I – ELIGIBILITY CERTIFICATION

The signatures on the first page of this application (cover page) certify that each of the statements below, concerning the school’s eligibility and compliance with U.S. Department of Education and National Blue Ribbon Schools requirements, are true and correct.

1. All nominated public schools must meet the state’s performance targets in reading (or English language arts) and mathematics and other academic indicators (i.e., attendance rate and graduation rate), for the all students group, including having participation rates of at least 95 percent using the most recent accountability results available for nomination.
2. To meet final eligibility, all nominated public schools must be certified by states prior to September 2020 in order to meet all eligibility requirements. Any status appeals must be resolved at least two weeks before the awards ceremony for the school to receive the award.
3. The school configuration includes one or more of grades K-12. Schools on the same campus with one principal, even a K-12 school, must apply as an entire school.
4. The school has been in existence for five full years, that is, from at least September 2014 and each tested grade must have been part of the school for the past three years.
5. The nominated school has not received the National Blue Ribbon Schools award in the past five years: 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, or 2019.
6. The nominated school has no history of testing irregularities, nor have charges of irregularities been brought against the school at the time of nomination. If irregularities are later discovered and proven by the state, the U.S. Department of Education reserves the right to disqualify a school’s application and/or rescind a school’s award.
7. The nominated school has not been identified by the state as “persistently dangerous” within the last two years.
8. The nominated school or district is not refusing Office of Civil Rights (OCR) access to information necessary to investigate a civil rights complaint or to conduct a district-wide compliance review.
9. The OCR has not issued a violation letter of findings to the school district concluding that the nominated school or the district as a whole has violated one or more of the civil rights statutes. A violation letter of findings will not be considered outstanding if OCR has accepted a corrective action plan from the district to remedy the violation.
10. The U.S. Department of Justice does not have a pending suit alleging that the nominated school or the school district, as a whole, has violated one or more of the civil rights statutes or the Constitution’s equal protection clause.
11. There are no findings of violations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in a U.S. Department of Education monitoring report that apply to the school or school district in question; or if there are such findings, the state or district has corrected, or agreed to correct, the findings.

PART II - DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Data should be provided for the most recent school year (2019-2020) unless otherwise stated.

DISTRICT (Question 1 is not applicable to non-public schools)

1. Number of schools in the district (per district designation):
- 83 Elementary schools (includes K-8)
 - 21 Middle/Junior high schools
 - 33 High schools
 - 1 K-12 schools
- 138 TOTAL

SCHOOL (To be completed by all schools)

2. Category that best describes the area where the school is located. If unsure, refer to NCES database for correct category: <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/schoolsearch/> (Find your school and check “Locale”)

- Urban (city or town)
- Suburban
- Rural

3. Number of students as of October 1, 2019 enrolled at each grade level or its equivalent at the school:

Grade	# of Males	# of Females	Grade Total
PreK	0	0	0
K	0	0	0
1	0	0	0
2	0	0	0
3	0	0	0
4	0	0	0
5	0	0	0
6	0	0	0
7	0	0	0
8	0	0	0
9	32	54	86
10	30	50	80
11	25	42	67
12 or higher	17	45	62
Total Students	104	191	295

*Schools that house PreK programs should count preschool students **only** if the school administration is responsible for the program.

4. Racial/ethnic composition of the school (if unknown, estimate):
- 0 % American Indian or Alaska Native
 - 4.2 % Asian
 - 87 % Black or African American
 - 4.5 % Hispanic or Latino
 - 0 % Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 - 2.6 % White
 - 1.7 % Two or more races
 - 100 % Total**

(Only these seven standard categories should be used to report the racial/ethnic composition of your school. The Final Guidance on Maintaining, Collecting, and Reporting Racial and Ethnic Data to the U.S. Department of Education published in the October 19, 2007 *Federal Register* provides definitions for each of the seven categories.)

5. Student turnover, or mobility rate, during the 2018 - 2019 school year: 3%

If the mobility rate is above 15%, please explain:

This rate should be calculated using the grid below. The answer to (6) is the mobility rate.

Steps For Determining Mobility Rate	Answer
(1) Number of students who transferred <i>to</i> the school after October 1, 2018 until the end of the 2018-2019 school year	0
(2) Number of students who transferred <i>from</i> the school after October 1, 2018 until the end of the 2018-2019 school year	8
(3) Total of all transferred students [sum of rows (1) and (2)]	8
(4) Total number of students in the school as of October 1, 2018	308
(5) Total transferred students in row (3) divided by total students in row (4)	0.03
(6) Amount in row (5) multiplied by 100	3

6. Specify each non-English language represented in the school (separate languages by commas):

Amharic, Arabic, Bariba, Bengali, Bosnian, Burmese, Ewe, French, Fula, Kinyarwanda, Nepali, Oromo, Somalian, Spanish, Swahili, Tigrinya, Vietnamese, Yoruba

English Language Learners (ELL) in the school: 3 %
8 Total number ELL

7. Students eligible for free/reduced-priced meals: 60 %

Total number students who qualify: 176

8. Students receiving special education services: 1 %
3 Total number of students served

Indicate below the number of students with disabilities according to conditions designated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Do not add additional conditions. It is possible that students may be classified in more than one condition.

- | | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| <u>0</u> Autism | <u>0</u> Multiple Disabilities |
| <u>1</u> Deafness | <u>0</u> Orthopedic Impairment |
| <u>0</u> Deaf-Blindness | <u>1</u> Other Health Impaired |
| <u>0</u> Developmental Delay | <u>1</u> Specific Learning Disability |
| <u>0</u> Emotional Disturbance | <u>0</u> Speech or Language Impairment |
| <u>0</u> Hearing Impairment | <u>0</u> Traumatic Brain Injury |
| <u>0</u> Intellectual Disability | <u>0</u> Visual Impairment Including Blindness |

9. Number of years the principal has been in her/his position at this school: 6

10. Use Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs), rounded to the nearest whole numeral, to indicate the number of school staff in each of the categories below:

	Number of Staff
Administrators	3
Classroom teachers, including those teaching high school specialty subjects, e.g., third grade teacher, history teacher, algebra teacher.	11
Resource teachers/specialists/coaches e.g., reading specialist, science coach, special education teacher, technology specialist, art teacher etc.	7
Paraprofessionals under the supervision of a professional supporting single, group, or classroom students.	1
Student support personnel e.g., school counselors, behavior interventionists, mental/physical health service providers, psychologists, family engagement liaisons, career/college attainment coaches, etc.	11

11. Average student-classroom teacher ratio, that is, the number of students in the school divided by the FTE of classroom teachers, e.g., 22:1 15:1

12. Show daily student attendance rates. Only high schools need to supply yearly graduation rates.

Required Information	2018-2019	2017-2018	2016-2017	2015-2016	2014-2015
Daily student attendance	97%	98%	92%	97%	97%
High school graduation rate	99%	100%	100%	97%	98%

13. **For high schools only, that is, schools ending in grade 12 or higher.**

Show percentages to indicate the post-secondary status of students who graduated in Spring 2019.

Post-Secondary Status	
Graduating class size	72
Enrolled in a 4-year college or university	96%
Enrolled in a community college	0%
Enrolled in career/technical training program	0%
Found employment	2%
Joined the military or other public service	2%
Other	0%

14. Indicate whether your school has previously received a National Blue Ribbon Schools award.

Yes No

If yes, select the year in which your school received the award.

15. In a couple of sentences, provide the school’s mission or vision statement.

We create a dynamic learning community where scholars are immersed in a college preparatory curriculum, community service, and multiple career paths through college exposure.

16. **For public schools only**, if the school is a magnet, charter, or choice school, explain how students are chosen to attend.

DeKalb Early College Academy is a school choice option within our district. Potential scholars submit an application packet of basic demographic information, attendance, discipline record, transcript to-date, standardized test scores, referrals from two teachers (preferably English Language Arts and Math) and a counselor, as well as a writing sample about why they want to attend. The 200+ packets we receive are scored on a rubric with different point values for various line items (e.g., first generation college goers earn more points than other options like parent attended some college, parent earned a Bachelor's degree, etc.). The top 130 are called in for an interview and to do a timed writing sample and math quiz. The goal of this stage is to further differentiate applicants based on maturity/grit, literacy, and numeracy skills. In the end, accepted scholars will be taking full time college courses by 11th grade. Each year we invite roughly 100 students to attend as the incoming 9th grade cohort. We can also accept 10th graders who would have to apply through the same process above. This leads to an additional four to six new scholars in that class yearly as well.

PART III - SUMMARY

Established in 2006, DeKalb Early College Academy is the only early college model high school for the DeKalb County School District. We are a Title I, school choice option serving 9th through 12th grades. Any family with legal residence within the county can apply to attend our school. We have yearly recruitment visits to the middle schools in which our scholars and parents promote our program in their prior schools. We also have a kick-off breakfast and tour with the 8th grade counselors. These efforts and the school's sustained excellence have allowed us to draw students from all over the district. This has, thankfully, increased the diversity of our student population.

In conjunction with our educational partner, our students take all their upper division courses at Georgia State University. They receive high school units towards graduation and post-secondary credits simultaneously. Upon completion of the program, students earn their high school diploma and up to 60 credit hours toward an Associate degree, with the possibility of earning both the diploma and the degree. Since these courses are paid for with the dual enrollment funding, there are minimal costs incurred by scholars and their families. This aggressive approach to dual enrollment is built on the foundation of strong instruction and social-emotional supports in the ninth and tenth grades. This "all scholars attending full-time college" structure is unique to even the other seven early college model high schools in the state and likely in relation to the majority of the 225+ others in the nation. A great result of this caring, yet high expectations approach is that our high school graduation rate [98.3%] for the four-year cohorts from 2012-2020 is sixteen points higher than the state average. Amazingly, the strategies and programming detailed in this application have also led to our Associate degree graduation rate meeting or exceeding the state's high school rate for the last three years. In other words, roughly 85% of our graduating scholars from 2018-2020 have earned an Associate degree two weeks prior to the high school diploma.

Keeping with the fundamental principles of the national early college initiative, we maximize college exposure to young people who can excel in this rigorous academic environment. Our target population is mostly underrepresented students in post-secondary institutions such as low-income, likely first-generation college goers, female scholars, and students of color. The increased academic rigor, compressed time frame for beginning post-secondary work, and required commitment to community service creates conditions where our dynamic scholars flourish. This has led to tremendous successes as a school, including being a Title I Distinguished School from the Georgia Department of Education (2012-2019), a Top 4 High School in Georgia on the College and Career Readiness Performance Index (2013-2019), including a #1 Ranking in 2013, being named a Georgia School of Excellence in 2012, and a U.S. News & World Reports Best High Schools – National Bronze Medal Recipient (2012-2019) to name a few accolades. More importantly than these school-wide highlights, our graduates go on to highly esteemed universities to earn bachelor's degrees and graduate degrees to contribute to society in impressive ways.

We also dedicate equal energy to the social-emotional supports required for this challenge. This has resulted in our school having the highest climate rating based on attendance and discipline data, as well as surveys from all stakeholder groups for the last six years. If a scholar is intellectually ready, but lacks the maturity to be on a university campus, then they will struggle. We would have failed them. We create opportunities for scholars to breathe, reflect, and take stock individually and collectively through our Advisories. We have safety nets for at-risk scholars that include small group sessions on time management and study skills, as well as a mentor program. We are constantly building a cohort of scholars with a collective pride in their accomplishments and, by extension, a staff committed to getting the scholars to earn two degrees in four years.

The core work of schools is learning and teaching. Our continuous success generates from how we approach both. The "DECA Way" involves taking district resources, like the curriculum, and leveraging the learning of these concepts and skills to the utmost advantage for scholars. We never teach to the test, because proficiency on a 10th grade assessment indicates readiness for their junior year, not college. As you will see in the following sections, the Common Instructional Framework creates a student-centered learning environment in which they take ownership of the process. The ones doing the talking and the working are the ones doing the creating and the learning. As such, our classrooms are abuzz with mostly teenage voices

with teachers facilitating as they move from group to group. Dweck's growth mindset traits (i.e., accepting challenges, persist with maximum effort in the face of obstacles, etc.) are adopted by the scholars. DeKalb Early College excels because no one rests on past laurels. This is reflected in our recognition from the Governor's Office of Student Achievement's Single Statewide Accountability System Awards in both categories, Greatest Gains and Highest Performing, every year since 2015, including platinum in both categories in 2017 and 2015. A great school like ours only sustains and grows because the staff knows that each of us can lead, teach, and support even better.

PART IV – CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

1. Core Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment.

1a. Overall approach, which may include overarching philosophy or approaches common across subject areas

DeKalb Early College Academy's mission is to create a dynamic learning community where scholars are immersed in a college preparatory curriculum, community service, and multiple career paths through college exposure. This mission is shaped from two sources. The Common Instructional Framework, created by Jobs for the Future, consists of six strategies that are used across disciplines to increase student achievement, raise content engagement, and develop college readiness. The second foundational source is the Early College High School Design Initiative, started by the Gates Foundation, which strives to increase college exposure for low income students of color and first-generation college goers. The utilization of the Common Instructional Framework strategies (i.e., Writing to Learn, Classroom Talk, Scaffolding, Questioning, Literacy Groups, and Collaborative Group Work) affirms the belief that supplied with research-based tools, underrepresented students not only thrive academically in a college preparatory secondary environment, but also perform well in actual university classes.

Professional development, collaboration, and monitoring of the Common Instructional Framework strategies is a fundamental element of DeKalb Early College's success. One of the most powerful elements of our professional development is the Instructional Rounds protocol. This protocol consists of a pre-conference in which a hosting teacher will share with observing teachers the context of the lesson they will observe, which Common Instructional Framework strategy they will be using, and a review of the prompts (e.g., How many times did you see scholars ask follow-up questions of one another?) that will generate the data for post-Rounds discussion and further reflection. Next, in the Rounds visits, observing teachers gather low inference, non-evaluative data on both teacher and student actions by silently watching and reviewing work samples. The protocol concludes with a post-conference in which the data is shared by the observers but, most importantly, teachers collaboratively discuss the implications on their own practices. This format creates a standardization of these strategies across the curriculum. Observational rounds also increase teacher collaboration and innovation as they note how the strategies can be implemented across disciplines throughout the building.

1b. Reading/English language arts

At DeKalb Early College Academy, student literacy is a primary academic objective. Using the Common Instructional Framework strategies enable our scholars to meet all of Georgia's academic benchmark targets as defined by the End-of-Course Milestones Assessment scores in Ninth Grade and American Literature. Another key factor in reaching these achievement levels is the effective application of data-driven planning.

The use of data assists with guiding instruction, as well as the choice of materials and strategies to use with each scholar. Teachers use NWEA Measures of Academic Progress assessments to determine students' skills aptitudes within reading and language usage. These assessments are taken three times during the academic year to periodically measure student growth and to examine the effectiveness of strategies and interventions used to-date. Each academic unit also includes a pre- and post- assessment which provides data to analyze for both individual and class mastery of standards and teacher success in conveying those standards and skills. The English Language Arts department reviews this data and determines next steps in the form of remediation strategies and how best to address the skills and content needs of the students.

Baseline data provides the platform upon which the department begins to utilize the Common Instructional Framework strategies. Writing to Learn occurs daily with low stakes, quick writes that take the form of anticipatory writing that stimulates prior knowledge before introducing new concepts, and reflection pieces which captures student thinking at the conclusion of a daily lesson or unit. In addition, Writing to Learn is used in the formal writing process in the rough draft phase. This provides students the opportunity to express their thinking in a minimal risk setting before their writing is formally evaluated. Teachers also use Writing to Learn assignments as a formative assessment to see where students are and to make proper

adjustments to their own instruction.

Literacy Groups is another strategy which the teachers engage in regularly to provide effective, student-centered instruction. The English Language Arts department has all scholars either read the same text or will differentiated the groups such that multiple texts are being examined together. Each student is assigned a specific role that is often determined by the collected data. This allows the teacher to observe and support student comprehension and use of specific literacy skills. Although each student has an identified role, literacy groups emphasize collaboration. Each student brings a different perspective of the text to the group based on their role and the collaborative nature of the strategy creates a synthesis in which new ideas are shared and created.

The department scaffolds instruction in creative ways as well. In reading Hamlet, students are exposed to the rigors of Shakespearean writing; however, it is accompanied by a graphic novel. This type of scaffolding meets students where they are by providing a compelling platform on which to increase engagement with difficult text through the students' common interest in graphic novels. Scaffolding, Literacy Groups, and Writing to Learn provide opportunities for classroom talk in which students converse using the essential language of the discipline.

1c. Mathematics

Historically, the highest achievement and greatest gains in student growth at DeKalb Early College have been in mathematics. Using NWEA's Measures of Academic Progress, Advanced Placement Exams and End-of-Course Assessment data, students perform at tremendous levels. This success can be attributed to collaboration, data analysis, and effective instruction.

The Math department creates diagnostic assessments drawing from district guidelines and Georgia's Standards of Excellence to determine where students are upon entry into our program. Each unit has pre- and post- assessments to monitor students' standards acquisition. When students do not meet the standards, they are assigned remediation activities using Khan Academy and other resources. The data collected from the assessments also determines the instruction provided in before school, lunch, and after school tutorials. This data is shared with the students which allows them to self-monitor their comprehension of the standards, level of skill acquisition, and take ownership of their overall progress. For students who meet the standards, they are provided different tasks which stretch their mathematical knowledge. Data provides insight into optimal differentiated instruction during class time. Students are assigned to collaborative groups and work on tasks based on their current level of understanding and a reasonable stretch concept or skill. This allows the teacher to work with the various groups in acquiring different, specifically needed skills and the flexibility to provide enrichment and remediation simultaneously in the same classroom. While one group participates independently on extending the learning via enrichment activities, the teacher can scaffold instruction with another group.

Data analysis is at the core of the teacher collaboration component as well. Teachers of the same content disaggregate the data and determine next steps by relying on each other's knowledge of the scholars and content expertise. For example, the Coordinate Algebra team notice areas in which students excelled or struggled based on the data. They also will reexamine the question and answer choices to see how scholar analysis trends impacted their responses. Next, they collaboratively develop common lesson plans for the following week and meet throughout the week to determine the effectiveness of their instruction. Excellent professional conversations occur from this arrangement as the data can also uncover discrepancies. During a data talk, the team may notice that Teacher A's students scored significantly higher than Teacher B's students on comparing linear and exponential functions. Teacher A is asked how the concept was taught and what specific instructional strategies were used. While lesson plans in math are often developed collaboratively, this type of discussion will uncover where individual teachers incorporated additional strategies and instructional techniques.

As it is with all instructional departments at DeKalb Early College, Math utilizes the Common Instructional Framework strategies. With Collaborative Group Work, students are assigned real world tasks to solve cooperatively. Students are asked to explain how they solved a problem using Classroom Talk and Writing

to Learn. With Classroom Talk, students use mathematically precise terminology and logical sequencing to show mastery. With Writing to Learn, students are asked to write how and why they solved a problem in that particular way or engage in error analysis with prior work. This strategy provides a non-evaluative way for students to demonstrate their theoretical understanding and a formative assessment strategy for teachers.

1d. Science

A major initiative for DeKalb Early College is incorporating the National Science Foundation's Biological Science Curriculum Study's [BSCS] 5E Instructional Model. This research-based approach greatly assists students in the learning of fundamental scientific concepts across its specific subject matters. The combination of the 5E Model and the Common Instructional Framework contributes to high achievement on the Biology End-of-Course assessment. These strategies have been chosen due to their effectiveness in explaining and exploring science concepts with students who may enter our school as beginning or developing learners in eighth grade science.

Engagement incorporates low stakes writing assignments to access prior learning and arouse curiosity which is consistent with Writing to Learn. This writing prompt and ensuing discussion allows the teacher to gauge students' initial readiness to interact with the concept more fully. Exploration occurs utilizing Collaborative Group Work in the form of lab activities such as working with applied force, change of direction, and acceleration properties using bowling balls and mallets. This Common Instructional Framework strategy allows for individual roles often determined by the teacher's use of data, as well as by the collaboration and self-selection of roles among students to generate new ideas and understandings cooperatively. Explanation occurs after the lab. The scholars use this forum to discuss insights and details of how the lab unfolded and concepts were discovered. Here the teacher embraces the Common Instructional Framework strategies of Questioning and Classroom Talk to improve comprehension, use of essential terms properly, and to constantly assess understanding. The elaboration phase follows in which students extend their understanding of the concept. At DeKalb Early College, this takes many forms. Our participation in Science and Technology Fair competitions has served as a major outlet historically for students applying their understanding of scientific concepts. Finally, students self-evaluate by turning their previous low stakes writing into a formal explanation and justification for their answers. The teacher's feedback keeps the learning going with respect to the remainder of this course and the essential perspective to adopt to be successful in their college science courses on the near horizon.

1e. Social studies/history/civic learning and engagement

The application of the Common Instructional Framework strategies in Social Studies allows for students to apply their learning to historical themes and current civic issues. The strategies culminate on a macro level through our participation in National History Day. These solo or group projects in various platforms (e.g., performance art, documentary film-making, and traditional research papers) require scholars to use a wide range of essential college-ready and 21st Century skills. Our most accomplished entry was selected as one of only fifteen student-teacher pairs in the nation to be a part of the Normandy: Sacrifice for Freedom Project sponsored by the Albert H. Small Student and Teacher Institute.

Students routinely analyze original historical documents and artifacts using Primary Source Circles, a social studies application of Literacy Groups. Students are assigned different roles often using their Lexile scores as an entry point to engage these sources. Students share their learning and create a group summary that synthesizes each student's reflections. For example, one student in the role of the "author" primarily focuses on capturing what the author values or thinks through citing textual evidence. Another student may be the "connector" and looks for similarities between this primary source and other pieces the group has already studied.

Before major writing tasks are completed, students regularly participate in smaller Writing to Learn and Classroom Talk activities to get them to think about key historical themes. One example of this low stakes writing in Social Studies are RAFT activities. Students are assigned a Role (an 1868 African American sharecropper), Audience (Congress), Format (a letter), and Task (explain why or why not the Freedmen's Bureau should be continued). These activities engage students and serve as formative assessments for the

teacher to evaluate their instructional effectiveness. They also promote creativity and the higher levels of Bloom's Taxonomy as scholars speculate what-if scenarios and anticipate emerging historical trends.

1f. For secondary schools:

Our curriculum is primarily geared toward college readiness. This is a chief priority because every junior and senior takes full time college courses. To set our scholars up for success, we teach the district curriculum of the state's standards with an eye towards instilling post-secondary skills and Kallick and Costa's 16 Habits of Mind. By building up persistence, thinking flexibility, listening with empathy and understanding, etc. – we are developing a necessary repertoire of 21st Century skills for college and the workplace.

As the scholars move through the lower grades, we are laying the foundations with respect to key content knowledge. High stakes testing and in-house assessments allow students and staff to track their progress. By constantly promoting independent and interdependent learners, we work with our scholars on self-management skills, having a growth mindset, problem formation, and metacognition. Once the scholars move to the university, we highlight the essential features of how to navigate a college campus successfully. This heightened awareness of college life includes understanding the roles of various departments and services on campus, the how's and why's of visiting a professor during her office hours, and the benefits of study groups.

We connect these efforts to key post-secondary transitions through yearly Career Days, field trips to local industries, and tracking scholar interests. We also take advantage of the ninth and tenth grade advisories to discuss the trajectory of our program in relation to college and career paths. One of our most success ventures in the upper grades is called "Future Planning Friday." At these biweekly sessions, we have a mix of college recruiters, public and private sector employers, and military personnel meet with our scholars to discuss career fields, work expectations, the value on internships, and the power of networking. Our goal is for the scholars to see that the true value of developing this array of competencies and likely earning an Associate degree is for their next phase as young adults.

1g. For schools that offer preschool for three- and/or four-year old students:

2. Other Curriculum Areas:

Turning to other curriculum areas, one sees a wealth of experiences to build critical thinking skills, as well as to provide a deeper connection to each scholar individually with faculty and as a community of young learners. None of these non-core content areas are tied to the state's high-stakes testing requirements and metrics for school-wide report cards. Instead of seeing these subject areas as places to ease off on rigor and inquiry, DeKalb Early College approaches them as perfect environments to further promote scholars' growth mindsets and practice the Common Instructional Framework strategies to better prepare college-bound eleventh graders. These non-core classes and Media Center programming have the freedom to make constant connections to how ninth and tenth grade learning and social interactions are reflective of the best practices needed for college success.

Our music program attracts veteran and novice players and vocalists alike. Through differentiation, our instructor meets them where they are and provides the appropriate challenge for all of them to constantly improve. We have recitals every semester so that everyone can celebrate their growing musical talents. The teacher further hones key 21st Century skills by having them perform together. Creativity, collaboration, leadership, and the role of persistence in the face of challenges are just a few of the essential traits that emerge from these experiences. With our visual arts instruction, the scholars are once again pushed just beyond their comfort zones in a loving, supportive way. The shift from "I am not artistic" to "look at what I made" is one of building confidence. Their artwork is displayed throughout building to enjoy and ponder. This process of [i] awareness of self-doubt, to [ii] self-reflection and critical thinking, to finally [iii] applying themselves with grit and curiosity that leads to success is rehearsed often in the lower grades to the ultimate benefit of when the scholars are on the college campus.

With our health and physical education offerings, as well as the foreign language courses, they satisfy state and district requirements for a high school diploma and earning an Honors and Distinction seal. The sustained excellence of DeKalb Early College is grounded in the willingness to push beyond mere compliance and explore how can we maximize these experiences so that they are best for scholars. With health and physical education, we have constant opportunities to reiterate the importance of how self-care is critical to the early college journey. To be college-ready in half the time, scholars need stamina and the psychological wherewithal to thrive in the face of the challenges and setbacks they will encounter. Our foreign language classes give the scholars an opportunity to develop a broader perspective on and deeper appreciation of the multicultural nature of our communities, whether school, local, state, or national in scope. Like the visual and performing arts, foreign language instruction has a natural affinity for cross-curricular educational experiences. Social studies and English Language Arts are only enhanced when they jointly explore the music, artwork, and cultures around the globe. With respect to our early college mission, we are in an optimal position to remind scholars that this inter-disciplinary learning in the lower grades is a precursor to a liberal arts education at the university.

The DeKalb Early College administration conveys the message that its Media Center is the school's largest classroom and the training ground for college level, research-driven study. We are fortunate to have a fantastic teacher-librarian at its helm. Her contributions to the academic success during high school and post-secondary readiness of our scholars are immeasurable. The librarian is committed to making that space vital to the social connectedness of our scholars. At times this is to decompress together with arts and crafts; other times it is for the collaboration on Tech Fair competition projects and apps. Given our majority Title I population of mostly first-generation college goers, our media specialist is keenly aware that some of the best learning is experiential in nature with direct real world connections. This leads to constant field trips and guest speakers either in the building or conversing with our scholars in a virtual platform on a variety of subject matters. The best example of this department's enrichment support of scholars is the steady stream of nationally acclaimed, award-winning young adult authors (e.g., Jason Reynolds, Nic Stone, and Becky Albertalli) who have visited our scholars to discuss the writing process and, more importantly, the struggles and triumphs of growing up.

3. Academic Supports:

3a. Students performing below grade level

DeKalb Early College understands the need for and has put in place safety nets to assist those students who may struggle at some point in this highly rigorous academic environment. Teachers can refer students to Student Support Services if they are struggling academically. Students are also identified if they have below a 2.750 grade point average at the end of a grading period. A conference is held with the student, parents, teachers, and student support specialist to discuss current academic and behavioral observations of the student and to introduce the student support process.

Students meet either individually or in a support group weekly with an assigned student support specialist to work on academic soft skills like note taking, time management, and organization. These students' teachers are asked to complete a Student Instructional Plan every two weeks noting academic strengths and weaknesses as determined by standards mastery based on assessments and classroom behaviors. Next, a remediation plan is created for the student and a date established to reassess their progress. These plans are shared with the student, student support specialist, and parents. If students have improved their grade point average at the conclusion of the grading period, they can exit the student support program but may choose to remain voluntarily. This collaborative intervention has significantly decreased the number of students who leave our program by not maintaining the required grade point average.

Similar intervention occurs for dual-enrolled students. Students not meeting professors' work product expectations convene every other week in a Focus Group at the college. These Focus Groups work on the soft skills that are needed to be successful at the college. These students are required to attend weekly study sessions with tutors that specialize in the content that is proving most difficult and/or take advantage of the university's Writing Center for feedback. The Focus Groups are led by a Student Support Specialist who monitors the interventions, supports the scholar, and communicates with parents.

3b. Students performing above grade level

DeKalb Early College provides multiple outlets in and out of the classroom for students who demonstrate academic mastery quickly at deeper levels. We have scholars extend their learning into topics of interest through competitions like National History Day, as well as local and state Science and Technology Fairs. For those who display a stronger creative aptitude, there are a host of outlets – like poetry contest and literary magazine articles – that we assist scholars to participate in. We have even had a scholar publish his first novel through such competitive endeavors. Students, who show advanced skills in music, are mentored by our piano and chorus teacher. They are now a performance level jazz ensemble with several shows throughout the year. We find ways for our university students to apply their extensive mastery of standards and advanced skills to new challenges such as writing for the college newspaper, being leaders of Georgia State’s Student Government Association, working in research labs, and being part of highly select student art shows.

Looking at enrichment within the classroom, we see a myriad of examples of how scholars are pushing their challenge thresholds across all subject matters. For the juniors and seniors at the college, it is a matter of selecting courses beyond the ones that satisfy basic requirements. We treat the college Honors classes as their version of Advanced Placement courses. We make Advanced Placement courses available to ninth and tenth grade students to pursue richer studies of various subjects. To mirror the rigor of a college seminar experience, these AP courses are paired with another course to create a year-long, in depth experience (e.g., Constitutional Theory, followed by AP U.S. History). The Common Instructional Framework creates a student-led learning environment. Therefore, much of the enrichment involves extending the classwork into more intricate analysis and discovering real world implications of the issues at hand. As the advanced scholars work collaboratively with their other peers, they model quality academic behaviors and, in turn, challenge them to grow. This aspirational strategy is effective because, in the end, the whole cohort of scholars will be taking full-time college course loads by eleventh grade.

3c. Special education

DeKalb Early College Academy has a limited number of students with Individual Education Programs. All of them succeed academically and social-emotionally. For the dual-enrolled students with IEPs at the college, they meet weekly with their Special Education teacher who is housed at Georgia State. The interventions provided by the special education teacher are both individualized and done within a group. By sharing ideas and college experiences, these scholars gain new insights and the teacher adds to their repertoire to assist special education scholars in the lower grades. Through accommodations and modifications, these students will graduate high school with 45+ college credits and possibly earning an Associate degree.

In the lower grades, a great example of providing the needed supports for success involves our sign language interpretation services. We currently have two interpreters who work collaboratively with the teachers in providing instruction. The content demand of multiple Advanced Placement courses and the naturally increased rigor levels of our classes required moving to two interpreters for the tenth grade. Teachers and classroom peers interact with the assistance of the interpreters, whiteboards, and shared documents using their Chromebooks. Several students started a Sign Language Club as a way to strengthen the community, to increase their aptitude in sign language, and the needs of the hearing-impaired. Interestingly, this club's activities were featured in local and national media news outlets, namely in the Atlanta Journal Constitution and the NBC Nightly News. The honor student at the center of these various news features receives standard accommodations on state assessments, the College Board for Advanced Placement exams, and the SAT suite of assessments.

As these cases illustrate, the expectations and the mission are the same for scholars guided by an Individual Education Program and our 504 population as it is for all other scholars. The conditions are such that there is no achievement gap to close, because this subgroup is performing just as well as their peers. With the assistance of faculty and staff, as well as strong support from home, they are prepared and succeeding in a rigorous college preparatory high school environment and in a college setting itself in half the time.

Through equity of access and full participation modifications, this category of students are on a path to life-long learning, independence, and robust career pursuits.

3d. ELLs, if a special program or intervention is offered

DeKalb Early College currently has students who are on monitored status for English Language Learners. Due to their length of time in the country and hard work, they are expected to exit the ELL program this year. Our non-native English-speaking students typically score as proficient or distinguished learners on the Ninth Grade Literature End-of-Course assessment. By engaging in the Common Instructional Framework strategies, these students have demonstrated both achievement and growth in literacy. We anticipate a larger enrollment of ELL students in the future and the potential hiring of an English Learner instructor to provide interventions needed to accommodate this growing population.

The rise in English Learner scholars comes about for two reasons. One is the sheer demographics of being a large metro area school district. The other reason is something to take pride in as a school. Our sustained excellence, stellar reputation as a school, and outreach work with middle school counselors is paying huge dividends. This population is even more likely to be first generation college goers; our program is a perfect fit to put them on a better path for success. By employing the instructional strategies detailed throughout this application within a caring educational environment, ELL scholars will not only meet – but surpass – our high expectations. With SIOP strategies being employed from the early college model perspective, our current ELL scholars bolster their pride in their cultures and languages. They use their growing competencies in speaking, listening, reading, and writing English through Classroom Talk and Collaborative Group Work to share insights and enhance our school culture. They thrive in the college setting by leveraging their English literacy skills to understand concepts and master requisite skills across all content areas. With the student-centered framework at our school and the university seminars, their abilities to communicate well bring their indigenous cultural perspectives to the forefront and show themselves to be truly interconnected, worldly scholars.

3e. Other populations (e.g., migrant), if a special program or intervention is offered

PART V – SCHOOL CLIMATE AND CULTURE

1. Engaging Students:

At DeKalb Early College Academy, we engage our scholars in a multitude of ways. From the outset, we hold a Summer Bridge Orientation for the incoming ninth grade cohort the week before pre-planning. In this week-long session, the scholars get to interact with their teachers and staff, as well as with upperclassmen and alumni. It sets the tone about the early college mission, as well as our collective belief and commitment to getting the whole cohort college-ready in half the time. Secondly, our counselors and support staff hold regularly scheduled advisories on both campuses to either whole grade levels or smaller groups. These advisories allow the school to dispense vital information regarding key transitional phases of one's high school career and, more importantly, give the scholars a forum to share their thoughts and feelings. One of our most popular annual sessions is the alumni panel in which five to six alumni speak to and hold a question-and-answer segment with each grade level. Having been in their shoes, their advice resonates strongly with our current scholars. This further creates ever stronger bonds as a community.

With respect to at-risk scholars, we have formal and informal safety nets to keep them motivated to succeed. Our Student Support and Instructional Support Specialists run weekly small group meetings and one-on-one sessions to discuss requisite skills and serve as a psychological pulse check for their journey. To individualize this process, each scholar is assigned an adult and/or upperclassmen mentor to serve as a sounding board and provide feedback. To build the familial aspect of our scholar community, many of the tutorial sessions are led by highly successful juniors and seniors. Their willingness to invest in their peers conveys a strong message of support and togetherness.

As a non-traditional high school, we do not have sports. Our students can participate at their home, feeder pattern high schools. We do, however, offer clubs on both the high school and college campuses. These organizations allow for social interaction with peers and school staff on a much deeper level based on common interests. Some of these clubs are competitive in nature (e.g., Mock Trial); so, there is a buildup in school pride as they succeed in local and state competitions. Also, one of the best ways we build student camaraderie is by having as many student-led activities and assemblies as we can. Some of them are simple like having scholar pairs do the morning and afternoon announcements. Others are more elaborate in that they work with staff to produce a showcase (e.g., for Black History Month). Finally, to celebrate scholars early and often, we hold many honorary events often emceed by students. A prime example is our Senior Walk that is attended by the whole student body, parents, and alumni in which the graduating class parades down the aisle with their college of choice and career plans announced.

2. Engaging Families and Community:

With a school geared towards all 11th and 12th grade scholars attending full time college and factoring in that a large majority of our scholars are first generation college goers, a strong partnership between families and the schoolhouse is paramount. For most of our parents, the concepts and requisite skills needed for college success are unfamiliar. Therefore, we must interact with them regularly for the sake of their children's long-term success in our program and beyond.

Two of the better, formal ways we connect well with our parents are through Title I Parent and Family Engagement events and our parent volunteer hour commitments. As a recipient of federal dollars, we dedicate a bulk of our resources and energies to Title I programs. We hold six seminars throughout the year for parents to increase their awareness of high school procedures but, more importantly, to emphasize early college model principles, best practices, and their roles in their child's success. These sessions include participation from our college partner and draw on the wisdom of the parents of successful alumni. Another cross-promotional way that we connect is during our extended tutorials on Saturdays prior to high-stakes testing. Once a semester, we co-sponsor a Parent University with our amazing Parent Teacher Student Association that runs concurrently with one of these Saturday Boot Camps. The speakers, work sessions, and camaraderie provide so much momentum in our collective success and allows us to bring in community partners for the cause. The other formal way we build community is through the required yearly parent

volunteer hours in our parent and scholar agreement. There is a lot of flexibility in how parents can serve the school. So, they vest their energies on supplies and travel for their child's class or clubs or make a school program like International Day even better by organizing a food buffet after the performances that equally represents our diverse population.

With such a high performing school, there are reasons throughout the year to honor the scholars. We are fortunate in that our school year ends with an Associate degree graduation ceremony at the college and the typical high school commencement a few weeks later. Our strongest informal way to engage families is by inviting them to every celebratory and performance-based event possible. This open-door policy and dedication to positive culture makes them feel welcome and highlights that DeKalb Early College succeeds because of the scholars' efforts, the staff's dedication, and the family's supportive relationship to the school.

3. Creating Professional Culture:

Administration ensures that all faculty and staff feel valued by focusing on their various processes as educators, counselors, and support specialists. By concentrating their professional growth work as it relates to scholars' overall achievement, the outcomes are phenomenal individually and collectively. We further secure this sense of community by sharing in all accolades equally. Everyone deserves credit for our sustained excellence and our celebrations reflect this collective effort. We each recognize our colleagues' exceptional work in a regularly produced in-house communication called "The Shouties." Staff acknowledges, either anonymously or not, the above-and-beyond efforts of co-workers by submitting a brief write-up. These testimonials are presented to everyone, both in print and electronically. It is mutually satisfying because the writer has a platform to express their admiration and the receiver feels validated for their hard work.

Administration fosters the respect for the staff's professionalism by leaning into their expertise. We have designed yearly learning communities around topics of their choosing and allowed them to join whichever group they prefer. You have committed individuals deciding what are the big issues (e.g., 9th Grade Experience, 10th Grade Experience) for the year and getting to work on one due to it being a passion project. Smart folks who collaborate well on a self-selected project they care about for the sake of benefiting our scholars are optimal arrangements.

We also build our professional culture based on the style of school that we are. Early college high schools share some core teaching and philosophical components. The key one with respect to pedagogy is using the six strategies of the Common Instructional Framework. To ensure that this is a building-wide practice, we dedicate time for observational rounds. This is a teacher-led endeavor in which the hosting educator seeks data on scholar behavior and their own teacher actions in order to improve their craft. The hosting teacher generates questions on one of the six practices. There is a pre-meeting in which guest colleagues ask clarifying questions. The post-observation meeting is non-evaluative in nature. The guests share their data and ask open-ended questions. The host has the last word to give their initial processing impressions and possible next steps. The host learns about their specific classroom behaviors and the reflective nature of their colleagues. The guests learn about the host teacher's style and gain insights into the scholars outside of their own classrooms. Its inherent value of mutually improving practices and collectively forging a school identity of professional growth is a major force in our success.

4. School Leadership:

Our school operates on two campuses that are roughly five miles apart. The ninth and tenth grades take traditional high school courses in a district location; the junior and senior classes take full-time college coursework at Georgia State University. DeKalb Early College's leadership team is flexible, innovative, and has a strong collaborative spirit.

The leadership team consists of a principal and two assistant principals, two counselors, five department chairpersons, two instructional support specialists, and our media specialist. We structure our work so that as many people as possible are well versed on the school operations of both campuses. One counselor primarily serves ninth and eleventh grades; the other serves the tenth and twelfth cohorts. While one

instructional support specialist is primarily charged with growing teachers on the lower campus, this person is heavily involved at the college with scheduling and student outreach. The other instructional support specialist is mainly at the college overseeing tutorials and being a liaison to college personnel. However, they also report to the lower campus to run clubs and build relationships with future college-bound scholars. The three administrators oversee their respective components of school operations (e.g., textbooks, testing, general and Federal Programs budgeting, scheduling). However, none of these happen in isolation. There is constant conversation regarding deadlines to be met, compliance requirements, and stakeholder engagement opportunities to explore.

The leadership philosophy that the principal models is one not driven by ego. The administrators build an incredible amount of staff good will and dedication to purpose by taking less credit than they deserve and more blame than is required. The school's continuous success is grounded on the notion that anyone's best idea will only improve through dialogue and collaboration. We currently have a pilot program that was spearheaded by two department chairs at the lower campus. They developed a rubric to track academic behaviors essential to college success. By using it in their own classes and sharing the document with others, this is shaping up into an ideal college-ready assistance tool. Our proactive nature anticipates problems; but it is also about innovating new opportunities for scholars. A prime example of this kind of forward thinking is much of the programming at the college campus. Initially we were focused on student retention and dedicating time on campus during scheduling. With added personnel and taking advantage of the scholars' relatively open Friday schedules, we have moved beyond safety nets to a robust future planning programming to assist with post-secondary transitions.

PART VI - STRATEGY FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS

To highlight one practice that has contributed most significantly to DeKalb Early College Academy's sustained excellence, it would have to be our methods of shaping and living out our mission and vision. This collective narrative we tell ourselves and broadcast to others about what we do, believe, and stand for is our essential "Why." It is the true North Star for all the other practices discussed within this National Blue Ribbon application. This storytelling is on-going in that we capture where we have been (i.e., honoring the past), what is going on now, and where we aspire to go (i.e., school improvement with respect to metrics and the quality of the experience). The chorus of voices is inclusive as we tap into alumni and their parents for guidance, have current scholars recruit at various middle schools, and use social media to share current happenings. Most importantly, our building's culture and climate are structured such that scholars and families know and can feel that they are the most vital part of this continuous narrative every time they walk in the door and attend a school-sponsored event.

Administration monitors and collaborates with various stakeholders to make sure we keep the elements of great storytelling prominent for the sake of our scholars' fantastic tale. The best stories have characters to root for; our scholars and their families are worth the fight. Stellar narratives are riveting because they are passionately told and access a higher moral mission. By reminding ourselves that we are helping mostly first-generation college goers strive for and achieve greater things, this keeps the population we serve in the forefront. Each schoolhouse endeavor is now keenly operating for a larger purpose. Staff willingly sacrifice and commit to something larger than themselves, because they want to be a part of this incredible school's story.

Great narratives appeal to our deepest emotions. We structure our culture and climate to celebrate the metric-driven accolades, but - more importantly - to honor the "stories behind the numbers." We have had multiple Gates Millennium scholars. We have played a part in scholars attending very prestigious and highly selective institutions such as Harvard, Cornell, University of Chicago, and Duke to name a few. We continue to be a catalyst for a scholar to walk onto a University System of Georgia campus as an eighteen-year-old college junior who will earn a bachelor's degree in half the time and at much reduced costs. Scholars beam with pride knowing that their own family's story arc is drastically improving due to their perseverance. DeKalb Early College Academy creates the environment and supporting conditions for scholars to dream about and realize educational and work possibilities that likely seemed unimaginable when they were in elementary and middle school.