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### On the fast track: Students at FAU High School in Boca take full load of college courses

#### FAU High School students taking full load of college courses

By Jonathan Del Marcus

South Florida Sun-Sentinel

November 23, 2008

Taylor Burnham is a lot like many other 15-year-old high school sophomores. She enjoys English classes, plays volleyball and basketball, and socializes with friends.

But she is definitely not an ordinary high school student. Rather than attending a traditional high school, Burnham is taking a full load of college courses at Florida Atlantic University in [Boca Raton](#) through its unique high school dual enrollment program.

This year, Burnham and 77 other students are enrolled at FAU High School, a public school founded in 2004.

"I wanted to be around more determined students who were also serious about their work, and I thought that coming to FAU High would be a great opportunity for that," Burnham said.

Although the high school exists without a single unifying building, it offers high school-level sports, clubs and support services in conjunction with a vast array of college-level opportunities throughout the university.

"This innovation has erased the borders and the walls and the restriction of high school for a particular age group," said Dr. Ira Bogotch, an associate professor in the university's college of education who is studying the program with a colleague, Dr. Diane Wright.

The high school is part of the larger Florida Atlantic University public school system, which encompasses several laboratory schools, including A.D. Henderson University School, with a state-mandated mission to conduct research into educational programs.

The lab schools admit students on the basis of demographic profiles to mirror the percentages of ethnic groups throughout the state, said Glenn Thomas, assistant dean of the office of PK-12 schools and programs at the college of education.



The high school, however, conducts admissions on a competitive basis and seeks to enroll the highest-caliber students it can attract, Thomas said. Students are highly talented, very motivated, mature beyond their years and mostly make responsible decisions, he said.

"We're not trying to take them away from the proms, and the football games, and all the other stuff. They are pretty normal kids, but they're just real, real bright," Thomas said.

Ninth-graders take a set curriculum in a small school-within-a-school model at Henderson with the goal to prepare them for the next three years spent exclusively in college courses. Of the students now enrolled in the dual enrollment program, 58 are in 10th to 12th grade and are taking all of their courses at the college level.

While many high schools offer dual enrollment programs, officials said they know of no other program where 10th- to 12th-graders exclusively take college courses.

"This is immersion. They are on the FAU campus 100 percent of the time. That is what is unique," Bogotch said.

"You have to learn a whole new way of learning, and going to your classes and making sure you're there. It's a lot different from the traditional five or six classes a day in high school," said FAU High School senior Harrison Pontijour.

Prior to coming to FAU High, Burnham was home schooled. And like many other dual enrollment students, she has a close relationship with her family.

"My family has been very supportive, especially my mom and dad. They just want me to try to do my best and they'll do whatever they can do to support me," she said.

"I usually exercise a lot to take the stress out, and that helps a lot. My parents are always very supportive when there are a lot of tests and exams coming up," said sophomore Aline Yonezawa.

Although when home schooled Burnham was ahead of others in her grade, she said she thought of herself as just like other students.

"I never thought of myself as a gifted student or anything. I was a pretty fast learner at certain subjects," she said.

Students at FAU High earn credits that are awarded on both their high school and college transcripts. After four years, students complete a high school diploma and generally earn between 60 and 90 college credits, Bogotch said.

They tend to take it all in stride and point out the need to balance school requirements, extracurricular activities and socializing.

"College is all about studying and time management, and if you get that under control, it helps reduce the stress. I will definitely try my hardest, but at the same time, school does not fully occupy every single thing I do," Burnham said.

Many dual enrollment programs have recently developed throughout the country, and the programs, standards and requirements vary widely.

"They have a lot of potential ... but we have a lot more research to do before we can definitely say whether they work or they don't," said Dr. Melinda Mechur Karp, a senior research associate at the Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teacher's College who has extensively studied dual enrollment programs.

Burnham, though, is happy with the experience and education. She foresees a future as a teacher and hopes to provide her students with the lessons she has learned from her unique learning experiences.

"After going here, I wouldn't want to go anywhere else," she said. "I would like to be an elementary school teacher one day — to use the experiences I've had this year, and try to focus on finding new ways to educate my students in the future."

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