**Rigorous Schools Put College Dreams Into Practice**



Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

Najee Little in a college-level Shakespeare class at Bard High School Early College in Newark. His dream is a bachelor's degree. People he knows without a degree have low-paying jobs, no job or deal drugs. [More Photos »](http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2013/04/14/education/edlife/20130414BARD.html)

**By KYLE SPENCER**

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ALONG his block in Newark’s West Ward, where drugs are endemic and the young residents talk about shootings with alarming nonchalance, Najee Little is known as the smart kid. He got all A’s his sophomore year, breezing through math and awing his English teachers. His mother, a day care worker, and father, who does odd jobs to make ends meet, have high aspirations for him. They want him to earn a college degree.

**Multimedia**

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So last year, when Bard College opened an early college [high school in Newark](http://www.bard.edu/bhsec/) for disadvantaged students with dreams of a bachelor’s degree, he was sure he’d do well there. He wrote his first long paper on Plato’s “Republic,” expecting a top grade. He got a D minus. “Honestly,” he recalled, “I was kind of discouraged.”

That paper marked the beginning of a trying academic path that would both excite and disillusion him. The past two years have been peppered with some promising grades — an A in environmental science — and some doozies. He failed “Africa in World History” and squeaked by in calculus. Mostly, he came to realize that getting into college and staying there would be a herculean task. There was tricky grammar, hard math and tons of homework. There was the neighborhood cacophony to tune out and the call of his Xbox. And there was the fact that no one in his house could help him.

“My work is more advanced than anyone at home has experienced,” he said. And that, it turns out, is why the school had accepted him.

Across the country in communities like Newark, the early college high school model is being lauded as a way to provide low-income students with a road map to and through college. According to the most recent figures from the [National Center for Education Statistics,](http://nces.ed.gov/) 68 percent of all high school graduates make it to a two- or four-year institution, but only 52 percent of low-income students do the same. Of poor students in four-year institutions, only 47 percent graduate within six years, compared with 58 percent of the general population.

Not surprisingly, the challenges are greatest for students whose parents did not attend any college: their graduation rate hovers around 40 percent. Early college high schools seek to rectify that, by merging high school and some college. Students can earn both a high school diploma and an associate degree, and some are set on the path to a four-year degree.

Educators and big-ticket donors have praised the schools for saving students money and time — most schools compress the academic experience into four years. Since 2002, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has provided more than $40 million toward initiatives. The Ford Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York have also chipped in. President Obama is a proponent, giving a shout-out in his State of the Union address to [P-Tech](http://www.ptechnyc.org/site/default.aspx?PageID=1), a public-private partnership that pairs the New York City public school system and the City University of New York with I.B.M., which promises graduates a shot at a well-paying job.

There are now more than 400 early college high schools across the country — North Carolina has 76 of them — educating an estimated 100,000 students.

Bard, a liberal arts college in Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y., is at the vanguard of the movement, with a president, Leon Botstein, who has long chastised the American high school system for its inefficiencies. More than 30 years ago, Bard took over [Simon’s Rock](http://simons-rock.edu/), a private college for 11th graders and up in Great Barrington, Mass. In 2001, it opened an early college [high school in Lower Manhattan,](http://bhsec.bard.edu/manhattan/) enormously popular with hyper-motivated New Yorkers, and in 2008 it started [one in Queens](http://bhsec.bard.edu/queens/) that has become a magnet for the high-achieving offspring of Chinese, Polish and Bengali immigrants. Until now, Bard’s model has largely focused on elite students.

In Newark, Bard moved into a school building across from a tire shop and a bail bond business. Hanging outside is a cheerful red banner with the Bard name etched in white, as if to signal that new life is being breathed into the neighborhood.

Administrators admitted 87 eighth graders as freshmen in fall 2011, and 36 sophomores as juniors who could expect to start college-level work immediately. This year, there are students in all four grades.

Najee seemed like a perfect fit. He had been pulling in top marks as a high school sophomore, but was bored by a math class that rarely progressed past the basics and never required homework. Essays for other classes were usually half a page long. Only once did a teacher assign a full-length book to read — “Fahrenheit 451.” And that was over the summer. Najee was also eager to create some distance between himself and his rough-and-tumble neighborhood, where a good friend had been stabbed to death “over an incident with a girl.”

His new classmates at Bard were similarly seeking to cocoon themselves somewhere safe and supportive. Miles Scott lives with his grandmother after his mother and father died within two years of each other. Billy Caraballo has been in and out of half a dozen schools. He calls Bard “a second chance.” Marvin Pinkrah transferred from a low-performing high school but had strong early preparation in Ghana. Friends call him “the human dictionary” and turn to him for help.

Bard’s goals are unapologetically ambitious, mimicking those at its other schools. Most teachers have doctorates, and some of its curriculum is borrowed from the college itself. Freshmen and sophomores cram yearlong high school math, social studies and science classes into one-semester chunks. Juniors and seniors — they’re called first years and second years — take 60 credits’ worth of college-level courses, on Caribbean literature, multimedia studies and Shakespeare. A series of classes known in Bard parlance as “seminar,” a replica of the series taught on the college campus, explores ancient philosophers and great American and European thinkers.

Meandering through the bustling hallways of the Newark school one day this winter, waving at students as they passed, Lori Ween, dean of studies and faculty in English, was hopeful but frank: “We tell our students whatever happened before this, this is where you are now.” Still, she acknowledges, it has turned out to be harder than many of the students expected. This is in part because Newark’s most promising high school students flee for better districts, although officials say that as Bard’s reputation grows, they expect more will stay.

**Multimedia**

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So far, the school has lost 7 of the 36 students who entered in 2011 as first-year college students and 20 of the 87 who entered as high school freshmen.

Najee has repeated one class. Both Miles and Billy have repeated several. More than half the class had to repeat one of the required seminars in a monthlong intensive at the end of the last school year. A “free” period that had always been used as a study period at the other Bard high schools needed to be renamed “enrichment period” to signal it was intended for work.

Dr. Ween says students come to school with problems that can easily derail them. One sophomore, after a few days off, announced that her father had been murdered, shot seven times. Another complained that she had been in a hospital room all weekend. When Dr. Ween asked if she was sick, she responded, “No, my boyfriend was shot.” Another is his younger brother’s primary caretaker, making him dinner and getting him ready for school.

“When you hear these stories, it’s really easy to say, ‘Take a break,’ ” Dr. Ween said. But she resists. Her students, she said, need to be supported, but not let off the hook from schoolwork.

Taken as a group, early college high schools place a premium on teaching rudimentary study skills — how to take notes, how to interact with professors, where the best spot is to sit in a classroom. But the greatest emphasis is on thinking. Students are encouraged to see themselves as participants in an academic world, and as interested in gaining knowledge as in getting good grades. Dr. Ween calls it “joining the debate.”

The students at [Duplin Early College High School](http://www.duplinschools.net/Domain/313) in eastern North Carolina take an applied math class in which they learn about velocity and graphing by building roller coasters out of wire, piping and masking tape. Then they are asked to defend the project. At the [Dayton Early College Academy in Ohio](http://daytonearlycollege.org/), students learn about constitutional law in mock trials. And at Bard, in an environmental science class, students read articles about the effect biofuel is having on corn prices and debate the merits of renewable energy.

“You cannot pull off an early college high school successfully without fundamentally changing pedagogy,” said Joel Vargas, vice president of [Jobs for the Future](http://www.jff.org/), a nonprofit organization based in Boston that develops early college high schools. He calls it the opposite of “chalk and talk.”

The model reverses ideas about how to best serve students whose parents haven’t gone to college. Gone is knee-jerk vocational tracking. Gone is the thinking that students must master all the basics before taking on more challenging work.

“Traditionally, what has happened is that kids who come in below standards are put in a remedial track and they do addition and subtraction over and over again,” said Cecilia Cunningham, executive director of the [Middle College National Consortium](http://www.mcnc.us/), a network of more than 30 early college high schools. “They’re bored out of their minds and the message is: ‘You really can’t do this.’ ”

Studies show that high school students who take classes in which they get both college and high school credit — often referred to as dual-credit courses — fare better academically.

According to Jobs for the Future, which is behind 246 early college high schools, 76 percent of its 2011-12 graduates have enrolled in college. A study last year of more than 30,000 Texas high school graduates found that those who took college-level classes in high school were more likely to have finished college after six years. Studies showing such attainment, however, aren’t able to determine if it is the type of students drawn to college-level coursework that makes the difference. And no long-term studies have been conducted about early college high school students and college graduation.

This concerns Sandra Stotsky, a professor emerita in the University of Arkansas’s Department of Education Reform, who notes that there is not any substantial evidence that the model being tried out in Newark will help at-risk students get through four years of college. Dr. Stotsky finds the idea that students should have to go to college to get a good high school education counterintuitive, and has called on educators to refocus their efforts on making high school coursework more challenging.

The ethos of early college high schools: catch students up, not by relegating them to the kind of remedial classes required at community colleges but by bombarding them with challenging work. At the Bard school, that means works by Dante, Locke and W.E.B. Du Bois that have populated and enriched the lives of their more affluent peers.

Students say the transition has been tough. Al-Nisa Amin, now a sophomore, remembers slumping over a math problem that first year, crying out of sheer frustration. But she has stuck it out, partly because she is scared of being sent to a zoned high school.

For those who parachuted into college-level classes, the climb has been steep, and often eye-opening.

On a recent afternoon, Najee and his classmates, some in the optional uniform of khaki pants and rust-colored sweatshirts, settled into steel-framed desk chairs for a Shakespeare class.

Flipping through their Signet Classic paperbacks and scribbling notes, they reviewed the first act of “Twelfth Night,” intuitively understanding that Orsino, Duke of Illyria, had become obsessed with Olivia. When their professor, David Cutts, asked what was going on in Orsino’s heart, several called out matter-of-factly: “Love.” The class then discussed the vagaries of love at first sight, and voted on whether they believed in it. Most didn’t.

Some were confused by the shipwrecked noblewoman Viola and her motives in disguising herself as a servant. “He’s rich, so why is she trying to hide?” one student asked, befuddled. Another hypothesized: “I think she’s interested in him.”

When Dr. Cutts reviewed a plot point toward the end, one girl scolded him: “spoiler alert.”

Less lighthearted was seminar, which on this day involved mulling over a densely written essay by the Marxist political theorist Fredric Jameson on the meaning of self in a postmodern world. Reading aloud a 2006 article in The Economist titled “Post-Modernism Is the New Black,” one student stumbled over “facade,” “anachronistic” and “grandeur” — words that would seem fair game for late high school.

Another student wanted to know: “What’s a phenomenon?” One inquired about the meaning of “sinister.”

The article cited Auschwitz as an example of how the Enlightenment had “given birth” to totalitarianism. Not one of the 10 students knew what Auschwitz was. Debate ensued over whether it was a city in Switzerland, Russia or Poland. Their professor finally interjected: “It’s usually used as the big example of the Holocaust.”

In similar classes in Bard’s New York schools, students’ vocabulary, communication skills and historical knowledge appear noticeably more advanced. During a recent discussion in the Manhattan school on punishments doled out in the ninth and tenth pouches of Dante’s Inferno, one student said she thought the physical torture was “consistent with the logic of the story.”

“Their souls do inhabit a form,” she mused. “They do have an underworld body. He even describes the shape of their tear glands.”

Another student disagreed, pointing to the way the sinners who had split with the Catholic Church were being split open with swords. “I think this is really about metaphorical pain,” she said confidently. “It’s not literal.”

The disparity raises an uncomfortable question. Can students who are so behind be brought up to college level in a few efficient years, even with good teachers and good intentions?

Critics also worry about rushing students through the material and pushing them prematurely onto college campuses, thus dumbing down classes for the other students. Many colleges have resisted the pressure to promote 18-year-olds to sophomore or junior status. In 2009, New York University stopped accepting dual-enrollment credits, saying it was impossible to determine the rigor of the classes.

Bard officials say public colleges are generally more open to accepting credit earned in high school. They estimate that more than half of last year’s 143 Manhattan graduates were able to transfer two years of credit.

Ray Peterson, who has helped start all three of Bard’s public high schools, says that given the Newark students’ struggles, he is pleased with where they are: of the remaining 29 second-year students, 21 have been accepted to a four-year college. It’s promising news, but no guarantee of a bachelor’s degree. While some of the colleges have impressive graduation rates, many do not.

Najee has been accepted to Bloomfield College and Felician College, both in New Jersey, and is awaiting word about scholarship money. His parents cannot afford to assist him financially, so he hopes to gain junior status. Marvin has been accepted by St. John’s University in Queens and, with a partial scholarship, D’Youville College in Buffalo.

The school’s star pupil, Katrina Anderson, who attended a well-regarded charter school before Bard, has been accepted on a four-year scholarship to Oberlin. But Billy has failed most of his college-level classes and is working toward a high school diploma.

“My prediction after the first year was that a lot more kids would drop out and go somewhere where they had less stress,” Dr. Peterson said. “But most came back. They really appreciated the faculty holding onto its standards.”

Leon Botstein says there has to be room for fits and starts. He is planning to take the model to Baltimore and Cleveland, two cities with ailing public schools, and to Harlem.

“With idealism comes tolerance for failure,” said Dr. Botstein, chatting from behind his desk at his office at Bard’s campus upstate. “We need to think about these efforts the way we think about hospitals. Mortality rates can be zero if you don’t take any patients who are really sick.”

For Najee, failure would come at a disheartening price. The people he knows without a college degree have low-paying jobs or no jobs, or deal drugs.

So, when he is feeling overwhelmed or simply in need of a pep talk, he sometimes calls on Dr. Ween. One afternoon, they sat together in her office discussing strategies. Najee had a paper due and calculus to study for. Dr. Ween told him to plan out what he was going to do step by step. “Find a place where you are capable of doing work,” she said. “If it’s the library go to the library. If it’s my office, come here.”

And so he saddled up in a chair in the library recently. For an essay on postmodernism and music, he browsed the review of a book by a University of Louisiana jazz professor and an excerpt from a book by two music professors at Stony Brook University.

“I realize that a lot of people really want me to succeed,” he said. Even the neighborhood drug dealers. “That,” he added, “is my motivation.”