2019 Spotlight on Sonoma County Schools
Preparing Students for their Future
Table of Contents

2  Superintendent’s Letter: Preparing Students for Their Future
3  Portrait of a Graduate
4  Connecting Learning to Local Careers
5  Bridging the Gap Between School and Work
6  Fostering a College-Going Mindset
8  College and Career Readiness for All | Resources

Cover photo: Students at Dunbar Elementary in Sonoma Valley Unified School District attend an AVID rally to get excited about going to college.

Preparing Students for Their Future

As a new school year gets underway, it is helpful to reflect on what educators, family members, and students are striving for through all the hard work.

At the Sonoma County Office of Education (SCOE), one of our main goals is College and Career Readiness for all Sonoma County students. This term describes students who leave high school with the academic, life, and social-emotional skills needed to thrive in an ever-changing world. While College and Career Readiness may bring to mind images of high school graduates, we believe that preparing students begins in elementary school and continues all the way to graduation.

SCOE strives to assist schools and districts in preparing students for their future by supporting academically rigorous and relevant career and college preparation for all students; and promoting 21st-century teaching and learning to ensure that students acquire critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity skills.

I’m glad to say that the rate of students graduating from high school in Sonoma County has risen significantly over the last decade, thanks to the efforts of local educators, community organizations, students, and their families.

Between 2010 and 2018, the county graduation rate has risen from 75 to 81 percent. This is the case even though the state increased the rigor of the performance criteria used to measure graduate outcomes in 2017, resulting in more conservative graduation rates.

At the same time, the achievement gap between all students and Latinx students has almost disappeared. The graduation rate for Latinx students has risen 14 percentage points over the last eight years. This progress wouldn’t be possible without the dedicated work of Sonoma County public school employees and numerous nonprofit organizations that support our schools. These same people are dedicated to further increasing the graduation rate for all students in the years to come.

While disparities in achievement remain, these new graduation rates show that we’re on the right track in Sonoma County with our efforts to graduate students college- and career-ready.

In this publication, you will see shining examples of the efforts within our local schools to address the achievement gap and enhance academic outcomes for all students, from kindergarten through high school.

Sonoma County Office of Education
Santa Rosa High School (SRHS) students have access to an enriching agriculture program that prepares students for a career in agri-sciences while also providing them with an education that is transferable to a four-year college. The SRHS ag program showcases the importance of career technical education (CTE), providing students with hands-on experience that translates to the working world.

What sets the program apart is the successful integration of A-G academic coursework. A-G refers to a series of 15 high school classes designed to help prepare students for college. Classes are in six subject areas, each represented by a letter from A to G. Students wishing to attend a University of California or California State University must complete these courses with a grade of C or better to be eligible to apply as a freshman. Sometimes CTE is considered an alternative track to taking these academic classes, but the program at SRHS shows that well-designed courses can prepare students for both college and a career.

Instructor Lisa Piehl says that A-G-approved CTE courses can offer relevancy that can make the coursework more interesting to students. Using CTE courses as a bridge to college preparedness became an initiative for SRHS about 15 years ago, when the school partnered with the state to rewrite the ag program’s curriculum with the goal of providing students with multiple avenues for success. “We’re doing things that are just as difficult [as traditional A-G coursework], but kids don’t realize it because they’re enjoying it and finding it relevant at the same time,” says Mrs. Piehl.

Students in the Santa Rosa High School agriculture program get hands-on experience with livestock as well as academic grounding in biology, chemistry, and more. Students Sierra L. and Niza Z. became interested in agriculture through programs such as 4-H prior to high school, and their enjoyment of the subject has expanded during their time at Santa Rosa High. Each wishes to pursue agricultural studies in college. Both students said they appreciated the balance of hands-on learning and academic rigor that the SRHS ag program offered.

A clear example of the CTE and A-G integration can be found in the floriculture class. Students gain exposure to fine arts and core art principles such as composition, while also learning the art of creating floral arrangements. The fine art component of the class provides the students with UC-approved course work that is transferable, and the floral design component provides hands-on experience applicable to the workforce.

Mrs. Piehl has seen firsthand the program’s success in engaging students that might not otherwise be interested in academics. Mrs. Piehl is always glad to learn that a previous student went off to college and wound up majoring in an agricultural field of study. “Students always come back around to what they know,” she says. “We’re doing things that are just as difficult, but kids don’t realize it because they’re enjoying it and finding it relevant at the same time.”

On a spring day at Windsor High School, teams of middle and high school students practiced table placements in preparation for a special dinner to be held at a local winery. Students would prepare all the food for the event as well as provide the waiting and busing services. The proceeds would go to help fund the entire 2019-20 food budget for the middle school’s culinary program.

Windsor High School’s Vineyard Academy teaches 10-12th graders skills that can help them succeed in Sonoma County’s hospitality and viticulture trades while also instilling college-level academics in the students. The successful program is now expanding thanks to a grant that will allow them to serve students as young as fifth grade. They will use the $125,000 grant to create a culinary program at Windsor Middle School tied to gardening, farm-to-table cuisine, and career exploration.

“Of the outstanding things about this is a collaboration between three districts,” said Marie Ganister, coordinator of the Vineyard Academy program. “It’s pretty exciting.”

The program serves students from a range of demographics, from those who will be attending four-year colleges with a full ride upon graduation to others who are planning to take trade classes at Santa Rosa Junior College.

A team of Windsor middle and high school students practiced setting tables in preparation for a special dinner to be held at a local winery.

“The goal for our program is for our kids to leave ready to be productive citizens,” Ganister said. “I hope our seniors walk out into the world with an elevator pitch, and the ability to shake hands and present themselves appropriately in a business setting.”

The expanded program will begin in fifth grade, when students from Brooks Elementary will visit the middle school each week and learn about different careers in the hospitality, tourism, and recreation trades. In middle school, every 6th-grade student will be introduced to career exploration while 7th and 8th-grade students can choose to pursue food science, cooking, plant science, and more. From there, interested students can apply for the high school program.

“Kids often say of what they’re learning in school, ‘I’ll never use this,’” Mrs. Lands said. “That’s not the case here at all. Everything they’re learning in this class is a life skill.”

A tenth-grade student named Genesis said she appreciated how the program offered the chance to learn about many subjects all at once, including food, plants, and nutrition. At the same time, she’s enjoyed learning different job skills and how to be a professional. While she’s not sure what she’d like to do after graduation, she knows that she’s very interested in a career related to the culinary industry. “Living in Sonoma County, there are so many opportunities,” she said.
The result is a schoolwide AVID assembly. Students aren't the only ones being exposed to the possibility of college. At each assembly, parents, guardians, and family members are invited to take part in the celebration of academic growth and success. Chants, stumps, and claps echo “Dunbar Scholars” to the beat of Queen’s “We Will Rock You,” inspiring stories from local professionals who are first-generation college graduates. To reinforce the message, students are presented with a list of careers that require college degrees. To motivate the students to work hard and pursue their college-going dreams, they receive their very own college t-shirt accompanied by a letter from a college grad encouraging the recipient to seek a college education.

In 2015, Jenni launched the College Tee Project with the help of Sonoma County leaders and supporters including County Board of Education Trustee Herman G. Hernandez. Their mission is “to help create a college-going culture for all students, especially focusing on first generation kids, by giving them and their families a tangible connection to college along with information regarding college preparedness and opportunities.” About nine Sonoma County schools have participated by hosting College Tee Project rallies for their students. During these events, students listen to inspiring stories from local professionals who are first-generation college graduates. To reinforce the message, students are presented with a list of careers that require college degrees. At the conclusion of each rally, students receive their very own college t-shirt accompanied by a letter from a college grad encouraging the recipient to seek a college education.

Walk onto the campus at Dunbar Elementary and you will quickly find a culture of high expectations partnered with unwavering support from educators. This culture is thanks to the school’s adoption of the AVID approach to college readiness. AVID, or Advancement Via Individual Determination, is a college readiness system that accelerates underserving students who have potential into more rigorous courses. AVID is typically associated with middle and high school, but the program is now being adapted to younger grades. AVID Elementary focuses on developing higher-level academic and thinking skills at an early age.

Dunbar is a clear example of successful AVID adoption at an elementary level. Every classroom from TK through 5th grade adopts a college university. Students are given t-shirts with their adopted university’s name and school colors. The back of each t-shirt reads “Dunbar Scholars.”

Through the implementation of the AVID philosophy, students have been asked—some for possibly the first time in their lives—to envision themselves as successful college students. The result is a schoolwide college-going culture. For instance, fifth-grade student Lindsey S. has her sights set on higher education after participating in AVID. When asked what her plans are for the future, she stated she would like to attend college and become a veterinarian.

Principal Jillian Beall spearheaded the idea of piloting the AVID program for her elementary school. Her goal is to meet the needs of her community and close the achievement gap at Dunbar. The seed of college readiness is planted in each student and is nurtured in the classroom and at a weekly, school-wide assembly. Students aren’t the only ones being exposed to the possibility of college. At each assembly, parents, guardians, and family members are invited to take part in the celebration of academic growth and success. Chants, stumps, and claps echo “Dunbar Scholars” to the beat of Queen’s “We Will Rock You,” spreading the culture of college readiness throughout the school community.

Santa Rosa City Schools Board President Jenni Klose recalls her niece asking her about college at a very early age. The question, prompted by the UCLA attorney Jenni often demanded, was the spark that set things in motion for the College Tee Project.

It was not lost on Jenni that many young children in Sonoma County are not receiving the same exposure to college as her niece. The college-going seed isn’t always being planted organically at home, often because parents lack experience with higher education themselves.

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The program is a collaboration between The Career Technical Education (CTE) Foundation of Sonoma County, North Coast Builders Exchange, Santa Rosa Junior College, and SCOE.

The North Bay Construction Corps is a 5-month training program that introduces high school seniors to careers in construction and other trades while earning college credit. Classes are taught by local industry representatives so that students get exposure to employers and a sampling of what it’s like to work in a variety of trades—from tool handling and personal safety to the fundamentals of electrical, plumbing, carpentry, and solar. Students also earn certifications in forklift operation, CPR/First Aid, and other areas that will make them competitive candidates for employment.

The Construction Corps aims to provide students with hard skills, such as welding, along with soft skills, like communications. Students listened to a team from Black Iron explain how to break into the trade: be a hard worker, be reliable, be versatile and familiar with a range of materials. Then they broke into small groups to practice their experience with tools such as welding torches.

Meanwhile, Daisy, also a Healdsburg High senior, hopes to earn a engineering degree from Life University. She plans to start her higher education at Santa Rosa Junior College, where she can explore specific types of engineering. The Construction Corps has enabled her to speak to experts from a range of trades and find mentors to guide her.

North Bay Construction Corps Connects Students With Local Experts

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The Construction Corps is building a bridge for high school seniors between the classroom and the work of the world. The program is a collaboration between The Career Technical Education (CTE) Foundation of Sonoma County, North Coast Builders Exchange, Santa Rosa Junior College, and SCOE.

Healdsburg High School Senior Emmanuel became interested in the construction trade when his freshman shop class teacher told him it was a good career to pursue. He plans to go into construction immediately after high school. He appreciates the specifics he’s learned through the Construction Corps, including safety rules and how to read plans.

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Halea Waters, the first in her family to go to college, keenly remembers how the 24-7 encouragement and support of a program called 10,000 Degrees helped her persevere through the many challenges college presented. So Ms. Waters, who now works for 10,000 Degrees, was glad to help when a student texted her at 10:00pm on a recent night with an urgent request to review a scholarship application that was due the next day.

“Yes I was up late, but I knew that she works a lot in addition to school, and I was happy to help,” she said.

Sonoma County has made significant strides in raising the graduation rate for all students, as well as closing the graduation achievement gap for Latinx students. This is thanks to the efforts of programs like 10,000 Degrees, which provides support and scholarships for disadvantaged high school students who may be the first in their families to go to college. More than 80 percent of four-year college students who participate in this program go on to earn college degrees.

Students participating in 10,000 Degrees receive personalized mentorship and assistance from Success Fellows, many of them former 10,000 Degrees recipients like Halea.

Participating students attend a kickoff program the summer before their junior year. They stay the night in a dorm room, become acclimated to the idea that college is accessible to them, and begin to build a sense of community with their peers in the program. During the school year, fellows meet with students each week to check in, connect them with resources, and help them with college applications. Once students are accepted to college, 10,000 Degrees offers ongoing support and a community of peers to connect with.

Now, the program is even expanding into middle school. Success Fellow Ramona Polk works with eighth-grade students at Kenilworth Junior High in Petaluma who are at risk of failing. She focuses on everything from homework assistance, to helping students identify things they like about school. “Little do they know all those things are getting them ready for college,” she says.

Whatever the grade level, a key to the success of 10,000 Degrees is building a strong sense of community and belonging for students.

“We create a community where you feel like you belong, where you can trust someone and be supported.”

SCOE has developed a college/career preparation checklist and guide for 8th-12th grades. Access this helpful resource at scoe.org/yourguide.