

on the fast track

by esther sanchez

As he sits in class, the material doesn't look that difficult. It's not much different than the assignments he's used to, but there's a difference. Freshman Ruben Villarreal isn't sitting in a high school environment, but a class at El Paso Community College (EPCC).

Villarreal is part of the newest concept, not just on campus but in the city. He joins 114 students who make up the first class of the Burges Early College High School (BECHS). Those who graduate from the program will have earned 60 college credits, enough for an associates degree of arts. By Spring, 91 of those students completed their first college course, Education 1300.

"At the time, the early college concept was already here in El Paso, assistant principal Laurie Enloe said, "but the idea of having the early college in a traditional high school setting has never been proposed in this area. It wasn't just my vision, it was a combination of what we were trying to do. We want the campus to achieve college readiness across the campus, not just part of it."

The plan was to start small, so there was room for 125 students. Interested parents had to attend meetings and their

"Not only are we the first class, we get all these advantages that other freshmen don't get, not even seniors. We get homeroom, extra tutoring and we go to EPCC to use the equipment there."

- alfredo sanchez- BECHS student



children had to fill out an interest survey as well as the common application called "Apply Texas." Students also had to be at-risk and a first generation college goer.

"I always got a little bored with my school work and I was making A's all the time," Villarreal said. "I just felt I needed more of a challenge and sure enough, I made the criteria. I couldn't stop blushing because I was flattered that they accepted me. I showed everyone in my family and they were all happy for me."

Another attraction for parents, Enloe said, is how much they can save. BECHS students who wish to attend EPCC will save \$10,000 in tuition. Students who wish to venture to other universities will have to research whether their earned college hours will be accepted.

Although students don't have to

declare a major, they do have to follow a high school endorsement, which includes their study of interest. Freshman Alexa Leyva had to learn to find balance.

"Academics come first, but I love sports," she said. "I go to tutoring and the coach understands if I need to go. The teachers support us by taking the time of day to help us with things we find challenging. You have to move on and focus on one thing at a time when the work gets too difficult."

By January, interest grew. Campus administrators visited numerous open houses and held parent nights to get the word out. 169 parents and their children went through the process, including individual interviews. A lottery had to be established because only 125 spots were available. By March, those families were contacted.

Alfredo Sanchez admits that being a BECHS student can get overwhelming at times.

"Nobody expected it to be like this," Sanchez said. "It's a big change from middle school to high school as it is. To be part of the Early College High School is a huge change. There is nothing I dislike about it. It's an amazing program and so is what I will get out of it."



CAMERA READY
As part of an infomercial for the early college, students stand on the bleachers and cheer. The infomercial can be seen on both the EPISD magnet program and the early college websites as a part of a recruitment campaign. The two minute video was shot in one day by district media services. (photo by annabeth burgess)

ribbon cutting

Two weeks before school, the city's first early college high school opened its doors. Dignitaries from EPISD and EPCC, as well as parents and students, celebrated the official opening.

NEW ADDITION

Principal Randall Woods introduces the eight BECHS teachers to parents, students and the community as part of the opening ceremony. "The teachers were selected by administration," English teacher Alice Drury said. "I knew that it was going to be a great learning experience not just for the students, but the teachers as well."



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FRESH CUT

Official scissors in hand, principal Randall Woods speaks before handing them to Belen Robles, who was chosen for the official ribbon cutting in front of the freshman center. Robles is the District 3 EPCC board member.



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A BITE INTO THE FUTURE

After the BECHS ceremony, freshman Oscar Millan sits down with his father Oscar Millan III to grab a quick bite. "The ceremony lasted more than an hour," Millan said, "so it was nice of them to make food and play some nice music for us." The grand opening took place Aug. 13.

WATER BREAK

Trying to hold in her water, freshman Sara Velasquez shares a laugh with BECHS classmates Bryana Moreno and Christian Acuna. "Being in the program meant I had to change a lot of things, like the way I conducted myself with schoolwork and friends," Velasquez said. In the end, it was all worth it."



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PATTY PATROL

After all the formal happenings, assistant principals Juan Duran, Michael Paulino and Scott Gray put their barbecuing skills to the test by making more than 200 hot dogs and hamburgers for students and parents. "It is really hard to make a mistake on the grill," Duran said, "so I didn't feel much pressure cooking for everybody."