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Media Release

Early College High School hosts graduation for inaugural class



Early College High School

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Charleston, SC – One hundred students walked onto the Early College High School (ECHS) campus in 2017, daring to successfully complete a program new to the district. That first year, 20 students left before the tenth day of school, and over the years others moved away from Charleston. Four years later, 71 remain. All of those students [graduated](#) with a high school diploma and nearly half with an associate's degree.

The school is a small, personalized learning program for students enrolled in Charleston County School District (CCSD). ECHS is a partnership between CCSD and Trident Technical College (TTC). Early College High School serves students who have the academic potential, desire, and determination to be successful in high school and beyond.

Located on TTC's Palmer Campus in downtown Charleston, priority is given to those who would be first-generation college students, (but all students are invited to apply).

Students from all over the district make up this diversified program. They must master the art of balancing their time between high school work, college work and extra-curricular activities.

Instructional Coach Jennifer Houston explained that even if students don't achieve an associate's degree, their earned credits are transferrable so students can continue their course of study.

"Each student here has it in them to be successful in college-level courses," said Houston. "We just provide the support in order for them to tap into what they already have. We can offer all the support they need to be the best potential student they can be."

This first graduating class has a lot to brag about:

- 100% on-time graduation rate

- 29 associate's degrees (41%)
- 3,149 transferable college credits earned

Principal Vanessa Denney said that the school was designed based on models in other parts of the state and over the last four years, has morphed into something unique.

"This school has become what it is because of our student body and this first graduating class," said Denney. "The legacy they are leaving defines Early College. Everything that is the Early College way is because of this group of kids and who they are and who their parents are."

Assistant Principal Barrett Reese said the success of these students was a "family" effort.

"Every staff member is 100 percent dedicated to helping our students and teachers go above and beyond," said Reese. "Our families support each other and our students other students. All of that plays a role. We truly are a family, and we understand the importance of the work we do here at Early College."

Reese added that students have to "buy in" so that the faculty can support their dreams.

"Our families are so grateful for having this opportunity," said Denney. "They know how special this is and what they are accomplishing."

Senior Ivy Grinnage said that everyone at the school supported her and that her biggest motivation was not wanting to disappoint her mother. She also knows that she would be doing something for herself.

Grinnage learned about the program in ninth grade. A student at Garrett Academy, Grinnage was nervous to leave her home school that she loved so much. She was encouraged by Principal Denney, and once she enrolled, she committed to the [Teach Local](#) program to further her goal of becoming a teacher. Grinnage will come back to CCSD once she graduates from Winthrop University and teach in the very district she was educated in.

"My mom was a teacher for ten years and her word on the importance of an education meant everything to me," said Grinnage.

It was a leap of faith but on that first day of school, Grinnage saw a classmate she already knew in her homeroom who graciously introduced her to everyone. That moment made her feel like she had been welcomed into the family.

Dawn Althen, Senior Class Advisor, said it's been interesting to see so many kids work together as they navigate Early College.

"These students have been so successful because of the way they support each other," said Althen. "Having that experience and understanding what it is like to support each other will carry them through college, because best way to be successful is to ban together and support each other."

When James Carter looks back at his time as a student at Early College he credits staff, family, and friends for his success.

"A friend's mother was excited about the new school and encouraged me to apply," said Carter. "In fact, she applied for me, followed by my own mother. Over the last four years my mother reminded me constantly about how special this opportunity was."

Carter said he knew going in that the rigor would be tremendous. He began taking college courses in his sophomore year.

"I knew from the beginning had to give it my all," said Carter. "I was able to handle the load because I quickly became accustomed to the procedure and was able to learn how to balance my time," said Carter. "The teachers here have your back 100 percent and are with you every step of the way, and treat you like a family instead of just another student."

Wylen Cortez considers himself as a prototype, an original. He added that he struggled at first, but his teachers were there for him.

"You don't know what it is like until you go through it," said Cortez. "At Early College you have to put in the work."

Grinnage agreed that taking college courses on top of high school classes was difficult. She found comfort, however, in knowing that she had a voice and listening ears in the adults around her.

"I thank my teachers and principal who were there for me as I conquered challenges both academically and personally," said Grinnage. "It goes beyond teaching us the curriculum. These teachers became our school moms, our friends, and someone we will remember for the rest of our lives."

Denney said it has been amazing to see Early College become everything she knew it could be and to see the students become who she knew they could be.

"This class is so special because they have proven what some may have thought was impossible," said Denney. "They haven't shied away from their responsibility. Their legacy goes beyond these students being first generation graduates. Each student has a story of struggle of doubt, victory, and triumph. They might have faced their challenges in very different ways but they represent kids who persevered."

Althen agreed, describing the students as pioneers.

"I watched them struggle, procrastinate, and everything else normal high school students do," said Althea. "But they are good at rallying and catching up when they get behind."

Reese has been the assistant principal for only two years. He too is a first-generation college student and describes Early College as a tremendous opportunity.

"Education itself is part of social change," said Reese. "Early College has the tremendous power to direct that social change."

"I know this program is the best thing that can happen to a student," said Cortez. "No other experience can replace it."

"I am so proud of this first graduating class," said Reese. "It's bittersweet. I've gotten to know them all really well and to see them graduate is sad. But I know they are going on to start another chapter of their life and will always be a part of Early College as the first graduating class.

For more information about the application process, visit the school [website](#) or call Principal Denney at (843) 720-5701.

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About the Charleston County School District

Charleston County School District (CCSD) is a nationally-accredited school district that is committed to providing equitable and quality educational opportunities for all of its students. CCSD is the second-largest school system in South Carolina and represents a unique blend of urban, suburban, and rural schools spanning 1,300 square miles along the coast. CCSD serves more than 50,000 students in 87 schools and specialized programs.

CCSD offers a diverse, expanding portfolio of options and specialized programs, delivered through neighborhood, magnet, IB (international baccalaureate), Montessori, and charter schools. Options include programs in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM); music and other creative and performing arts; career and technical preparation programs; and military.