



Innovative campus readies for opening

New high school will allow students to earn associate in arts degrees along with the usual diploma.

By Michael Miller

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Early College High School, the first new campus in the Newport-Mesa Unified School District in five years, is preparing to open its doors Aug. 14, with high school and college faculty joining to provide an unusual opportunity for struggling students.

A year ago, Newport-Mesa and the Coast Community College District announced plans for the campus, which combines secondary and college curricula.

"I tell you, this has been a dream come true," said Mike Murphy, Newport-Mesa's student services director who helped conceive the project.

Students on the campus will be able to graduate in five years or less with a diploma and an associate in arts degree.

So far, 96 ninth-graders have signed up for the first year, said Bob Metz, assistant superintendent of secondary education. Over the next three years, the campus will expand to include all four high school grade levels.

Kathy Slawson, a former assistant principal at Costa Mesa, Estancia and Newport Harbor high schools, has come on board as the Early College High principal. Jami Wheeland, formerly of Newport Harbor, is slated to head the counseling department.

Four Newport-Mesa teachers will serve on the faculty, with the rest provided by Coastline Community College.

For the first year, the campus will be in seven portables at the Back Bay/Monte Vista site. In the future, it may move to a more permanent location, Murphy said.

"It's like baking a cake from scratch," he said. "There's not a lot of ready-made ingredients. You have to work every single thing out."

Last August, the two districts received a five-year, \$400,000 grant through the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to help launch the school. The Gateses, who are strong proponents of redesigning American high schools, have announced plans to have 180 Early College campuses nationwide by 2008.

The Costa Mesa site is the first Early College in Orange County.

When Coastline held an orientation a few weeks back for incoming students and their families, turnout was strong. Michelle Sutliff, the public relations director for Coastline, said about 150 people attended the event, with some listening to descriptions of the school through translators.

"They really see this as a good opportunity to get their kids on the right track and get a good start for college," Sutliff said. "They're putting them in that direction early."