High school gets real college atmosphere

By Karen Kucher

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SAN DIEGO — In the same San Diego City College auto bays where future mechanics once learned to fix engines, students attend an atypical high school where they are being prepared to pursue higher education and succeed in college.

The 151 students at San Diego Early/Middle College go to school on the downtown campus, where they take a full slate of regular high school courses and learn practical lessons on how to crash courses, manage their time and be prepared for college instructors’ expectations.

In their junior and senior years, students are encouraged to take up to two college courses per semester although budget cutbacks have made classes more difficult to get into.

“The instruction is sort of embedded in the culture of the school,” said Principal Liz Larkin. “The teachers weave that college readiness, the cognitive strategies, what is expected of freshman in college, through the curriculum.”
The high school opened in 2008 with the help of a $400,000 grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. It offers students the chance to earn up to a year’s worth of college credit at the same time as they earn their high school diploma. San Diego Unified also operates another middle college on the Mesa College campus called the Met School, where professional internships are emphasized and students also take college courses. Other district schools also offer opportunities for students to take college courses.

All the students at the school on the City College campus take advanced courses including AP World History and Advanced English. “All the kids in our minds are smart and advanced. They just need different supports,” Larkin said.

The school’s state Academic Performance Index scores the past two years topped 800, the state goal. A school motto is “attempt difficult things.”

Larkin was recruited to start the school by former Unified Superintendent Terry Grier and she drafted its initial batch of teachers and students. Students have to apply to the school and submit to personal interviews. A big draw, Larkin said, is its location on a college campus.

“It’s the power of place — being on the college campus is pretty powerful,” she said.

The school has no sports teams, no homecoming football game. It started out with just two classrooms — the former auto bays where English and science classes meet — and now has a total of six.

Students say they get used to taking classes in a garage. On warm days, the auto bay doors are rolled up to let in fresh air and sunlight. On cold mornings, a school secretary greets students with hot chocolate and offers throw blankets. Portable heaters also combat the chill.

“At first I kind of made fun of it — like this is all we’ve got?” said April Feltner, 17. “It’s good. It just gets kind of cold.”

She decided to attend the school even though she had to forgo the chance to play soccer and field hockey at Mission Bay High School, but she said she thinks she made the right choice. She’s been successful in crashing crowded college classes including health and psychology courses and hopes to continue her education at City College before transferring to San Diego State University, where she plans to study nursing.

Senior Jennifer Correa has taken college courses in Spanish, art and engineering. She, too, is happy with the school. “I like it. I think I would have gotten lost in another school,” said Correa, 17.

She said she appreciates the responsibility that students are given at the school.

“They trust you to go take class and do your homework by yourself,” she said.
Deputy Superintendent Nellie Meyer said research shows that students who take even one college course have a better chance of graduating from college later on.

“The greatest strengths I see when visiting include the college atmosphere (including a flexible schedule) and increased student responsibility for their time. They also possess a supportive skilled staff. The supportive adults on this campus are amazing,” Meyer said in an email.

A key part of the school is having teachers collaborate with City College professors to create curriculum for a summer enrichment program and a “bridge” program that helps prepare students for college coursework. The collaboration started with the Gates startup grant and is continuing with funding provided by Jobs for the Future, a Boston-based nonprofit.

Budget cuts have made it more difficult for students to get the college courses they want because they are the last group allowed to enroll for the limited sections that are available, Larkin said.

San Diego Unified also is facing its own tough budget decisions ahead, meaning staff or program cuts are a possibility.

“The struggles are heightened by the increasingly shrinking resources. Both the community college and our district are facing tough decisions that we would not have considered if our resources were greater,” Meyer said.

Larkin said she’s proud of the gains the school has made.

“Because we are small the teachers all know the students very well and part of why they are successful is all the individual attention they get,” she said. “All these kids are at risk of dropping out if you look at their backgrounds... We are getting results.”