

FAST

TRACK Rochester students thrive on accelerated coursework

TIME TO EDUCATE

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For ninth-graders across New York, the Regents algebra exam is one of the first major hurdles toward graduation. It can be a wake-up call to students who aren't on track academically; the passage rate in the Rochester City School District is below 50 percent.

You can understand, then, why Jasmine'Ania Bush, a student at Nathaniel Rochester Community School 3 in Corn Hill, was nervous to tackle it as a seventh-grader.

She had never taken seventh- or eighth-grade math at all. What she did have in her favor, though, was a unique accelerated summer school program the school had put in place for a select group of students.

"I was so stressed out (before the test) — I was up all night studying," she said. "And then it turned out I didn't need to. It was so easy."

Jasmine'Ania was one of 16 seventh-grade students placed onto an accelerated track at School 3; all 16 passed the Regents algebra exam normally administered to eighth- or ninthgraders, and 15 passed the living environment exam as well.

About the series: The Democrat and Chronicle's Time to Educate initiative seeks to help our community

identify and take action on solutions to our public education crisis.



Jasmine'Ania Bush during an interview together with other eighth-graders at Nathaniel Rochester Community School. CARLOS ORTIZ/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

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It was not a case of stacking the class with the district's highest achievers. School 3's students are 92 percent economically nomenclally disadvantaged and the school is on the state's priority list for needed academic improvement. Only one of the 16 seventh-graders had gotten the highest

greater confidence.

Academic studies back up the wisdom of offering advanced coursework to all students. One 2015 study of Chicago students, for example, showed that increased early enrollment in algebra led to "substantial positive

score on the sixth-grade state math test; most of them had failed to get a proficient score.

They and their teachers credited the extra five weeks in the summer as well as the additional time to build relationships. Perhaps most important, though, was the message from teachers that they were smart enough to aim for something higher.

“I was not a good leader or student before,” Jasmine’Ania said. “But then Mr. Moore and all these teachers came and told me they believed in me, and it made me feel I could become better.”

She was referring to Rodney Moore, until recently principal at School 3 (he is now at School 44). It was his idea to take advantage of the district’s offer for schools to create their own summer school settings rather than sending their students to district-wide programs.

“It’s a smaller setting, and they’re our kids — we already know them,” English teacher Kimberly Brown said. “We already have those relationships.”

The other innovation was to use the additional classroom time for acceleration rather than remediation, which is the traditional model. Science teacher Christopher Haller said he stretched a three-week unit out to five weeks and spent more time on experiments and hands-on activities, with the goal of getting used to “the expectations of a higher level of thinking.”

Acceleration versus remediation

The district spends a great deal of time and energy on remedial work in math and reading, and for good reason — only a small minority of students in grades K-8 rate as proficient on state tests.

Some of its most promising results, though, have come in schools where students are pushed to tackle course work above their grade level, whether or not they’ve fully demonstrated a capacity for it in advance.

Several of the School 3 eighth-graders said they hope to attend Early College International High School next year. A founding principle of that school is that students should take college courses while still in high school; the school is co-located in part at the downtown Monroe Community College campus, and about half of the upperclassmen are

impacts ... on credits earned, test scores, high school graduation and college enrollment rates.”

Students taking Advanced Placement or college courses can earn college credits for free and save themselves money later on. But Nelms said those credits are, in a sense, “an added bonus.”

Giving kids rigorous coursework and having them think through challenging work — even if they get Cs in the course, just (understanding) the level of rigor that will be expected of them in college is important,” Nelms said.

Part of the change in mindset, he said, is ensuring that students are able to advocate for themselves and ask for help when they need it.

In the second year of its summer program, School 3 added classes for rising third-, fourth- and eighth-graders. The additional cost for the district is marginal since many of those students might have attended summer school somewhere else anyway.

The students in Jasmine’Ania’s cohort are now taking geometry, earth science and U.S. history; if they pass those Regents exams along with Spanish, they’ll have six credits going into ninth grade. For reference, the district’s cherished desire is for students to accumulate five credits going into 10th grade.

“What we’ve demonstrated is that all of our kids can learn with the right supports and interventions and with the right attitude,” Pamela Rutland, the new School 3 principal, said.

One prerequisite for wider implementation, Nelms said, is a well-aligned curriculum across the district so that all students arrive in middle school prepared to take on academic challenges.

After two years of summer school and one round of Regents exams under their belts, the School 3 students are approaching their advanced work with more confidence this year.

At the beginning of last year, Abdul Aden begged administrators to let him drop out of algebra; he thought it was too far beyond him. They would not relent, and his mother agreed with them. Nine months later, he passed the exam.

enrolled in MCC classes. The school’s 81 percent graduation rate in June 2017 was the third-highest in the district.

Wilson Foundation Academy, a K-8 school that shares space with Early College’s younger students on Genesee Street, had 22 students take the U.S. history Regents exam in June, something only three other middle school students did in all of Monroe County.

East Lower School, the middle school at East, saw two-thirds of its eighthgraders end the year with at least one Regents credit, the second-highest mark in the district, and 21 percent of them had three credits or more.

“Maybe it’s not even acceleration,” East Superintendent Shaun Nelms said. “Giving kids those exams in middle school is common practice in the suburbs. Now the city is really trying to challenge kids academically in ways that mirror academic expectations of their suburban peers.”

While it is common to take certain Regents exams in eighth grade, taking them in seventh grade is unusual. Only five suburban districts — Brighton, Hilton, Victor, Webster and Pittsford — reported having any seventh-graders sit for Regents exams in 2018; Pittsford had 23, the most of any district.

Remarkably, the seventh-graders at School 3 did better than the eighthgraders. Math teacher Andrea Ingham attributed it to their

“I thought it was going to be stressful,” he said. “It came out being easy.”

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Eighth-grader Tiketa Thomas pulls out a binder during English class at Nathaniel Rochester Community School. CARLOS ORTIZ/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

Eighth-grader Kaliyha Gantt in English class at Nathaniel Rochester Community School. CARLOS ORTIZ/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE