

# College looks to clear Running Start hurdle

## Clark officials, legislator seek program reforms

By **HOWARD BUCK**  
*Columbian staff writer*

Last week, Clark College hosted the second of two January Running Start information sessions for local high school sophomores and juniors who want to attend classes at Clark and earn tuition-free college credits.

A capacity crowd jammed the Clark gym. Hundreds of teens have signed up for new slots next fall.

Already this year, more than 1,300 high-schoolers are enrolled in Running Start at Clark.

That's 10 percent of Clark's 13,000-plus students. And five out of six of those students take a full load of courses, at least 15 credits per quarter.

Offered at community colleges across Washington, the jump-start program for the college-bound has proven wildly successful since Clark took it up in 1990.

But here's the rub: Clark says it loses \$3,300 for every Running Start full-time equivalent student.

The state reimburses com-

munity colleges at 93 percent of the FTE rate for a kindergarten-through-12th grade student, a much lower amount than college FTEs earn for a campus. (The high school that registers the student keeps the other 7 percent).

That's nearly a \$3 million hit for Clark each year, just as Gov. Chris Gregoire plans to cut community college funding by 6 percent for the next two years. And state legislators could be forced to cut deeper yet.

"To the extent that Running Start fills unused capacity, it is an advantage," said Phil Sheehan, Clark's interim vice presi-

dent of administrative services.

"When you start having to add sections, then it starts eroding services. There's a point when it starts to hurt," Sheehan said. "It's difficult to find where that pain threshold is, but we're probably coming up against it."

## Wildly popular

It's a troubling turn for a program that began as a win-win creation — to help fill up classrooms that once had plenty of empty seats. Instead, Clark has opened new class sections to handle a Running Start stampede, even while overall Clark

enrollment soars.

And so, more than 100 class sections were added last fall: everything from English 101 and 102 and American Literature, to Business Administration, Introduction to Economics, and history, economics and math courses that are Running Start magnets.

Clark has never capped total Running Start slots, and doesn't intend to. The new class sections came after the state legal counsel suggested its previous 25 percent cap on Running Start students in any single class

## 'RUNNING' A DEFICIT:

**Clark College (adult) tuition student:**

- State pays Clark \$4,900 for a calendar-year full-time equivalent student
- Student pays \$2,962 total tuition for 45 credits
- Total: \$7,862

**Running Start nontuition student:**

- State pays 93 percent of K-12 full-time-equivalent rate of \$4,914
- Total: \$4,570
- Net loss to Clark College: \$3,292

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would likely be found unlawful.

Now, several classrooms hold nothing but Running Start students.

"I fully support Running Start ... (but) something's got to give," said Bob Knight, Clark president. "I hate to go there, but that's the reality of things if we're going to maintain a viable mission here."

## No immediate fix

Could Running Start fall victim to its own success? Not likely.

But how to stem the budget losses? College leaders and local state legislator, Rep. Deb Wallace, D-Vancouver, are working to find answers.

Clark has joined other community colleges in urging Olympia to change how it accounts for the teen students. Knight pressed the point when the state college board met at the Clark campus in early December.

Counting the students as college FTEs would help raise college enrollment figures to better reflect reality. It also would increase that school's chances to win new construction money for expansion and other future state funding.

That's the premise behind new legislation Wallace will soon introduce in Olympia. As chairwoman of the House Higher Education Committee, she's talked with her Senate counterpart to lay the tracks for someday upping the Running Start reimbursement.

"Right now, we don't have money for that. But we should count the work you're doing," Wallace said on Tuesday. "The state is investing money (in Running Start), we're just not taking credit for it. I just want to put in 'subject to future funding'" at the least, she said.

## Dual-credit options

The measure is one prong of Wallace's push to overhaul and expand so-called "dual-credit" programs for high

school students: Running Start, Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate and other programs that allow teens to earn college credits early.

She also wants to write major expansion of the College in High School program, which can fill holes where Running Start can't by flipping locations: At the high school campus, either a high school teacher with a master's degree in their subject or a local community college instructor would teach college-level courses.

"Some students can't get to community colleges" due to transportation or high fuel costs, Wallace said. "Some parents don't want their kids to go to community college" for any number of reasons, she said.

Since state money would cover class costs, College in High School could prove attractive to parents now forced to shell out hundreds of dollars for the AP final exams required to earn college credits. Steven Webb, Vancouver Public Schools superintendent, has indicated interest in adding the option locally, she said.

The tough part would be oversight, including making sure that college rigor applies where high school teachers lead courses.

"We need to be very careful how we do this" so as not to hurt K-12 education, said Rassoul Dastmozd, Clark vice president of instruction, cautious proponent of the College in High School model. "We're not going to get into the business of telling high schools what to do."

"Certainly it requires a lot of groundwork. It's a delicate balance, and it's a lot of work in terms of mentoring the teacher," Dastmozd said. "It's not going to happen overnight, and it's not a panacea to all these problems."

But he's hopeful high school students and their parents could benefit from fresh alternatives.

"That's a balancing act that a parent has to make. On the surface, it sounds like a good option," Dastmozd said.

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