

Students at alternative school start college early

By DIANA DILLABER MURRAY
 Of The Oakland Press

TROY — Joseph Ham and James Leduc found just what they needed at the 150-student Niles Community High School in the Troy School District — a second chance to earn a high school degree and the opportunity to take college classes at the same time.

Niles is the first alternative school in Oakland County to start up a formal program where students can be dually enrolled in high school and college at the same time. The program started in 2010, just in time for Ham and Leduc to take advantage of it before they graduated Niles.

Ham, 19, of Southfield, is now a student at University of Detroit Mercy with plans to leave for Marine basic training camp in June.

And Leduc, formerly of Commerce Township and now living in Shelby Township, is enrolled at both Walsh College and Oakland Community College. Stephanie Kato, of Sterling Heights, took classes at Niles and OCC and is now a student at Macomb Community college while she works as a pharmacy technician.

College emphasized

The three are among 40 Niles students who have taken advantage of the free college classes while attending high school since

the program started two years ago, said Patrick Dawood, dual enrollment teacher. Students don't have to pay tuition if they take the college courses while in high school as the district covers the cost.

Dawood said, the dual enrollment program has helped transition "at risk," non-traditional education students, who may not have gone to college otherwise. Now, because of the program, they are working on a two-or four-year degree.

It is not unusual in today's world for traditional Oakland County high schools to offer their top students the chance to attend college while at high school.

But such a program is unexpected at an alternative school where the majority of students did not find success at regular high school.

Niles students, like those at many alternative schools, have walked away from traditional high school for myriad reasons; such as dissatisfaction with the school, being uncomfortable in a large school, being bullied, lack of motivation, poor attendance or tardiness; or because behavioral problems got them suspended or even expelled.

Language arts teachers Pat Blachford and Jeff Rainwater said the school is small enough that teachers know every student and they don't fall through the cracks.

Kato, Ham and Leduc agree.

They also praise the requirement that every student take what they called a "note-taking class" before they can take a college course through the Niles program. The credited what they learned in that class for helping them make a successful transition to college.

Besides taking notes, they also learn organization, class preparation, test-taking strategies, how to register for classes and find scholarships.

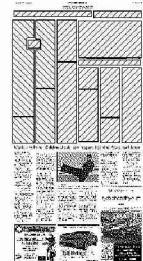
Why at Niles?

A former Lakeland High School student, Leduc stopped going to school. His mother had died so his aunt and uncle took him under their wing and suggested he go to Niles.

"My aunt was mad I stopped going to school. She said she found a school where I could make up my credits. It sounded good," said Leduc, who was won over after he met Niles director Deb MacDonald when his uncle took him to visit the school in 2008.

Leduc moved in with his aunt and uncle who lived closer to the school until he finished the program.

Unlike at many alternative programs where most courses are taken online with teacher support, Niles continues to offer a classroom-taught program, said Sue Flewelling, Niles' spokeswoman. Students must meet Troy district's curriculum requirements,



she said.

One of the top Niles' students in the Class of 2010, Leduc, who also took college classes during summers before high school graduation, gave the commencement speech in 2010.

Leduc is now working as a manager at a Choice Independence Home Health Care for people with developmental disabilities and closed head injuries.

Ham came to Niles in his senior year after leaving Southfield Lathrup High School.

"One of my dad's friends told him about Niles. And one morning he said 'get in the car' and we came here and met with Deb MacDonald and she said she liked me and I could come anytime I wanted."

Ham said the teachers made him feel like it really mattered if he was in school each day.

Students have to take at least four classes a day in a six-hour day. When he finished his credits at 17, Blachford told him about the new dual enrollment program and suggested he take advantage of it.

Meanwhile, Ham is looking forward to his five years in the Marines, where he plans to be in an air crew, either as a navigator or gunner after boot camp in Parris Island, South Carolina and a year of air crew training in Pensacola. He will follow a family tradition of military service.

With almost two years of college under the belt, he plans to continue his college education while in the Marines, where he hopes to become an officer.

Alternative school kids can do it

MacDonald, who started the school for Troy district in 1994, said she was motivated to start the dual enrollment program because, "I thought if I could help kids with that first step to college we've done a good job.

"One of the fears is not knowing what to do." The fact that the students didn't make it at a traditional high school didn't phase her.

"I've always believed in 29 years with at risk kids that kids will live up or down to your expectations. It isn't that they don't have the capability, it is just that they don't have the direction.

"Once you get them going, there is no stopping. I have kids now who are doctors and school teachers," even before the dual enrollment program.

"I think this program allowed a lot of those kids that are still a little hesitant to take the step," MacDonald said.

Blachford, who has taught language arts for 17 years at Niles, said, "I see kids growing into adulthood, realizing there are things out there they want and didn't realize they wanted until they left traditional high school.

"We give encouragement that there is a future out there."

Every student is mentored and monitored by a teacher on a weekly basis to ensure they are making progress.

"We all have 16-17 students as mentees,"

Blachford said. "We make sure they are on track. We know everybody here," she said, in part because each teacher has each students in a class two or three times.

"It is nice that we are small and we make personal contact with them."

Jeff Rainwater, who has been teaching language arts at Niles for 12 years, said, "I think the advantage for students who come here is the relationships they build with teachers. They have the opportunity to work one on one."

However, the teachers are far from critical of the large traditional high schools that most of their students come from.

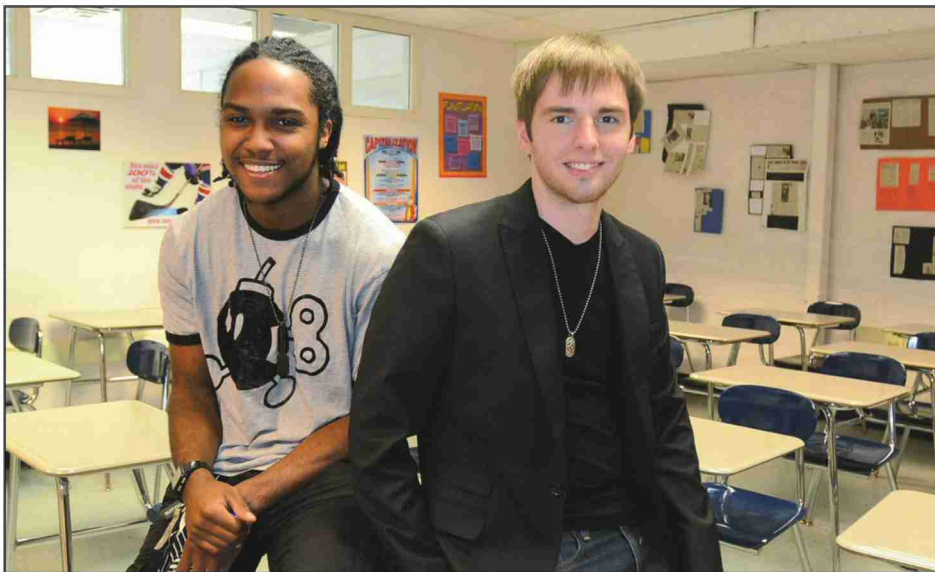
They point out that for some students smaller is more comfortable; students feel more like they belong. But just like when students are selecting a college, some students prefer the large schools.

"It is like some students choosing Michigan State University and others choosing Rochester College," Rainwater explains.

Leduc and Ham said they would recommend Niles to any student who isn't doing well at his or her regular high school.

"You won't regret it. The teachers are excellent. This is a great program with great people. You'll be doing something better with your life."

Being in the dual enrollment program "will get you started and help you out financially," said Leduc. "You achieve your goals at a faster rate than normal."



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Joey Ham (left) and James Leduc, are graduating from Niles Community High School in Troy.