



## **NEWS RELEASE**

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## **Schools, Students Achieve More with A+ Program**

This month, thousands of college students are starting classes with tuition money from the state they earned through a program unique to Missouri.

High school students who complete the state's A+ Schools Program earn two years of paid tuition at a public community college or an eligible career or technical school. Many of the students who take advantage of the A+ schools program say they would not foresee higher education in their futures without it.

"It's not just the money," said Jocelyn Strand, director of A+ Schools at the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. "A lot of these kids are first-generation college students. We often hear that never before had someone told them that they could go to college or succeed in college. Every A+ high school has an A+ coordinator who works with students and encourages them."

As high school students return to school this month, Strand wants to encourage them and their parents to check out the A+ schools program. She especially wants to alert ninth graders to the advantages of signing up sooner rather than later.

"The earlier students sign up for the program, the easier it will be for them to meet the state requirements and avoid the missteps that might make them ineligible," Strand said. "All four years of high school matter in determining eligibility."

Drake Bradshaw, a spring graduate of Kirksville High School who is using his A+ award to attend North Central Missouri College in Trenton, is one A+ graduate who credits the program and his coordinator with his decision to attend college.

"School has never been my No. 1 priority," said Bradshaw, who is majoring in agriculture. "The A+ program is what motivated me to go. I thought, 'It's free, so why not go; and maybe it will help me down the road.'"

In the past four years, nearly 50,000 high school students graduated with A+ eligibility. The vast majority of students entering college through the A+ program are first-time, full-time degree-seeking students. The state legislature appropriates about \$25 million to the program each year.

"The A+ Program is a Missouri success story," said Chris L. Nicastro, Commissioner of Education. "Overall, schools that participate have lower dropout rates, higher GPAs, lower remediation rates, higher college entrance test scores, and a higher percentage of students continuing to postsecondary education."

The first thing interested high school students and parents should check is whether their high schools are A+ designated. Much more than a scholarship program, the A+ Schools Program is about school improvement, and high schools must meet requirements

to receive the A+ designation. These requirements aim to improve coursework rigor, to support at-risk students to lower dropout rates and to involve community stakeholders in the education process. The program also requires schools to track objectives for each student, which generates data schools can use to keep improving.

Established by state law in 1993, the A+ program is open to all public schools. Currently, 274 of Missouri's 570 high schools are participating, and more than 100 other schools are in the process of seeking state approval.

Many schools seek designation because parents and students push for it. Communities see an A+ school just down the road and don't understand why their students shouldn't have the same opportunities.

That's what's happened at Pilot Grove High School, said Principal Randy Glenn.

"Especially with the current economic situation, more and more parents are looking for ways to help students continue their educations past high school," he said.

Students who take part in the A+ program must meet requirements for GPA (2.5 points or higher on a 4-point scale), attendance (an overall rate of at least 95 percent for grades 9 through 12) and good citizenship (standards are set by schools and so vary). Students must also spend 50 hours doing district-supervised unpaid mentoring or tutoring (in many A+ schools, tutoring is offered as a course). Once students earn the A+ award, they have up to four years after high school graduation to use the benefit; that means graduates who do not go straight to college still have time to use their A+ award.

Katie Evans, a 2003 graduate of Nixa High School, is another A+ success story. In high school, she attended a career fair that sparked her interest in becoming a dental hygienist. With the help of her school's A+ coordinator, she began making plans and taking classes to prepare her for a career in that field. Upon graduation, she used her A+ award to attend Ozarks Technical Community College for a year and then went on to Missouri Southern State University to earn her associate of science. Now a registered dental hygienist, Evans has returned to Nixa High School the last couple of years to be a presenter at the annual career fair.

"Being a presenter makes me feel like I'm giving back to what and who helped me become who I am today," she says. "It's a great feeling to give back."

"This program is really about empowering students, to set goals, to build skills, to be the best person that they can be," said Roxanna Mechem, A+ director for the Rockwood School District. "It allows us to interact with them in ways that give them ownership and voice in their own development and career aspirations."

More information on the A+ Schools Program, including a list of A+ designated high schools, is available on the Missouri Department of Elementary and Education Web site at [www.dese.mo.gov/divimprove/aplus](http://www.dese.mo.gov/divimprove/aplus).

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More information is available at [http://dese.mo.gov/divcareered/missouri\\_connections\\_news\\_room.htm](http://dese.mo.gov/divcareered/missouri_connections_news_room.htm).

*The Missouri Connections Public Outreach Partnership workgroup represents a collaboration of state agencies concerned with education and workforce development who are helping inform and build awareness among the public, particularly students and potential students, of targeted careers, educational and industry trends, and workforce development priorities. Workgroup members represent the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education; Department of Higher Education; Department of Economic Development, Division of Workforce Development and Missouri Economic Research & Information Center; Missouri Center for Career Education; and Missouri Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Freelance writer is Anita Neal Harrison.*