

# Abingdon-Avon CUSD #276 Students Get a Leg Up



## Earning an Associate Degree Before Graduation

**By Mike Curry**  
**Abingdon-Avon CUSD #276 Superintendent**

Last May, a pretty remarkable thing happened at Abingdon-Avon CUSD #276. Six of our students earned an associate degree before they became high school graduates.

This spring, four of our seniors are on track to earn an associate degree and 15 juniors are on track for the spring of 2020.

The students all participated in our school district's Associate of Arts Degree program, which gives students an early start on college, potentially saving them tens of thousands of dollars down the road. Getting to that point took six years of stretching the idea of what high school should be versus what it can be. It also required the help of a strong partner, like we have with Carl Sandburg College.

I share this because I believe the program we created is something superintendents across Illinois should consider as a way to prepare students for success after high school.

But first, let me share with you a little about Abingdon-Avon CUSD #276. We are a unit district of 971 students about 50

Four seniors at Abingdon-Avon High School in Abingdon, IL, will be earning an associate degree from Carl Sandburg College before they graduate from high school this Spring.

miles west of Peoria. We are in Tier I and just under half of our students qualify for free and reduced lunch.

### How Did We Do It?

It was the district-wide appreciation of forward progress that drove my interest in the open position of superintendent in 2017. Under the leadership of former high school principal Shane Gordon (who is now in his first year as superintendent of [Bluford USD #318](#)), a major transformation took place in 2016-17. The high school moved from a traditional semester schedule to a trimester schedule.

Mr. Gordon wanted to transition to a trimester schedule to provide more electives to the students and provide access to a more challenging base of learning for students who feel ready for college work. That idea quickly evolved.

As he and the high school guidance counselor began to dive deeper into creating a trimester schedule, the idea of earning an Associate of Arts Degree through Carl Sandburg

College started to take shape. With access to more electives, students would be able to enroll in additional dual credit courses. Mr. Gordon then worked with the administration and educational staff at Carl Sandburg to implement the only Associate of Arts Degree program in our area, where almost 90 percent of the work is completed on the high school campus.

## What Challenges to Expect

I want you to know there were a few obstacles to tackle before implementation. One sizeable obstacle was **designing a schedule that worked for students, staff and the college**. Flexibility on both sides is key. Therefore, it required quite a bit of time to put in place the structure of the courses. In our case, Carl Sandburg College has adjunct faculty willing to work on both trimester and semester schedules. The dual credit classes are two hours long and meet twice a week. Scheduling two-hour classes for high school students took some time and was contingent on the flexibility of the instructor to structure each class session.

Another obstacle was the **50 percent rule**. In order for a degree to be awarded, 50 percent of the courses needed to be taken on the campus of Carl Sandburg College in Galesburg. School administration and representatives from the Carl Sandburg campus worked together to create a system in which Carl Sandburg College's own professors would travel to AAHS to teach college classes. In the previous model, based on semesters, one student was able to earn an Associate of Arts Degree while at AAHS. This student required evening and summer classes to reach the 61 credit hours. The semester setup only allowed scheduling up to 30 college credit hours over two years.

However, our current trimester setup, along with the willingness of Carl Sandburg College to implement a 12-week grading period for AAHS, has improved this process. Trimesters allow our students to earn 54 college credits during their junior and senior years—all on the campus of AAHS.

Students in the Associate of Arts Degree program will take two dual credit courses with visiting professors at our high school and one online class per trimester, which equals nine credit hours per term for six terms. Students are required to take seven hours of college credit in the summer between their junior and senior years. Combine the nine trimesters with the two courses over a single summer and a student can achieve an associate degree in two years while still in high school.

An ongoing obstacle can be the cost. A dual credit scholarship that cuts the credit hour cost in half for 4 hours per trimester makes the overall cost of earning an associate's

degree lower for those in this program versus a traditional community college student and/or the cost of two years at a major university. This program can still cost over \$8,000 dollars for students to complete.

Still, when compared to area universities and colleges, the **savings can be dramatic**. As noted in an [article](#) for the local paper in 2018, the savings can range from \$9,000 to \$60,000 without even considering travel and room and board. In order to open the Associate of Arts Degree program to more families, regardless of income, Carl Sandburg College applied to pilot a [Federal program](#) that allowed high school students access to PELL grants via FAFSA. Several AAHS students have benefited from the pilot PELL grant program.

## What Do Students Think?

When asked about their experiences in the program, students noted a few common themes. Here are some of their responses.

Junior Lukas Tinkham said students do not receive as many day-to-day assignments. Rather, students learn to manage their time and work early on assignments regardless of due dates because procrastination leads to being stressed out.

Junior Drew Hecox added that students, "Really need to study because the assignments are more difficult and require more time outside of class compared to typical high school classes."

A third theme focused on getting a head start on college. Senior Morgan Patrick began the Associate of Arts Degree program because she felt it would be great to get a head start, and it would be a lot less expensive.

A fourth theme focused on the level of autonomy college professors give to their students. Junior Lacey Folger said her college professors tell her dual credit classmates that they "will not be considered high school students in class and will be treated the same as campus college students."

## In Closing

I believe Abingdon-Avon High School has created a forward-thinking relationship with Carl Sandburg College over the past six years. It is this positive relationship and shared goal of providing engaging opportunities for students that led to the creation and implementation of the Associate Degree Program.

We have found student satisfaction, coupled with growing numbers in the program, demonstrates the positive results of exposing AAHS students to the potential for deeper learning, cost savings and early acclimation to the expectation of college coursework.