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## COMMUNITY VOICES: McFarland High is creating a model for high schools, community colleges across the nation

By Justin Derrick  
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Justin Derrick

McFarland High School and Bakersfield College are reimagining education, having established a model for high school and secondary education that will truly reform our nation's educational system.

The BC-McFarland Early College program makes a college education attainable from the doorstep — or classroom, rather — of rural high schools across our county. After our launch in fall 2019 with 303 students of McFarland's incoming ninth grade class, we see that these young students desire to earn a college education, and they have the drive and skills necessary to start pursuing it from the moment they walk through our doors.

Growing up in a small town in Pennsylvania, my friends and I were more than an hour away from the nearest university and it was up to us to pursue a college education. I settled for a state school that I never visited, and one year later, I dropped out. After experiencing the struggles of living on my own, moving to a big city for opportunities and then back to my hometown, I eventually found myself working three jobs just to get back to my educational goals. Needless to say, these efforts taught me an invaluable lesson: earning a college degree is a game changer.

Now I find myself here in McFarland, a small town like the one where I grew up, and I've been given the opportunity to be the principal that shepherds the Early College program, guiding our very first cohort to graduation with a Bakersfield College degree. I have a front row seat to the transformations underway in our district and across our entire community. From kindergarten through eighth grade, we're instilling in our students that going to high school in McFarland also means starting a college pathway with Bakersfield College as a Cougar-Renegade.

As students begin their second semester of their Early College pathways, we are excitedly responding to the strengths and needs of our students, working to ensure that each and every student earns at least 12 college credits — a full semester of college coursework — while they are in high school. Bakersfield College offers six different pathway options at McFarland so there is an opportunity for everyone to find success.

To meet the demands of the community and growing industries, we offer pathways in agricultural business, welding, business, industrial drawing, public health, education and photography. These opportunities will truly change the trajectory of our students while McFarland and Bakersfield College team up to meet the educational and workforce needs of our community.

In less than four years, our high school graduates will have college experience, and many of them will have earned an associate's degree or certificate from Bakersfield College. All students will enter college a few steps ahead because innovative leaders had the bold vision and courage to act to make college a reality for students in McFarland.

The Early College collaboration is breaking down the barriers that prevent students from rural communities from earning a college degree and a livable wage. I urge you to imagine how the success of this model could reform education across our community, our state and our country. The opportunity for a jump start toward a successful career can begin as early as ninth grade.

*Justin Derrick is the principal at McFarland High School.*