

INITIAL APPLICATION

Valdosta Early College Academy

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Program Description

Valdosta is a city of 50,000 people located in rural south central Georgia. The Valdosta City School System (VCS) contains 74% Black students and 17% White (remainder Asian or Hispanic) with 70% of all students eligible for free or reduced lunches. The graduation rate of Black students is 50% while that of White students is nearly 90%. In response to these data, Valdosta State University and the Valdosta City Schools partnered in 2008 to form the Valdosta Early College Academy (VECA). The school was initiated that year by accepting 36 sixth-grade students. In the 2012-13 school year, VECA is a 6-10 grade school with over 200 students, 12 teachers and a principal located within a vacated elementary school across the street from the Dewar College of Education & Human Services (COE) at Valdosta State University (VSU). A new 6th grade class of 50 students is added each year so that by 2014 VECA will be a 6-12 grade school with nearly 350 students. The school epitomizes the early college concept of admitting underperforming students with multiple risk factors for dropping out of school (e.g., low socioeconomic status, minority, first generation high school or college) and providing college level dual enrollment courses for them by the 11th grade.

The mission of VECA is to ensure that every child reaches their academic potential. This simple yet fundamental mission drives goal setting and allows us to establish key components that contribute to achieving the mission. The goals reflect the fact that VECA is a true partnership among Valdosta State University (especially the COE), Valdosta City Schools, and the local business community. The goals of VECA are to 1) reduce the dropout rate to 0%, 2) eliminate the achievement gap between Black and White students, 3) integrate technology as a seamless aspect of every subject, and 4) promote a school environment focused on mutual respect and high achievement.

Key components to achieve these goals are found in the foundation of VECA. That is, the partnership between VCS and VSU. Teacher candidates from the Department of Middle Grades, Secondary, Reading, & Deaf Education are in VECA classrooms approximately 75% of the time. These teacher candidates are actively engaged in the classes and assist the teachers and students by providing individual, small group, and large group instruction. The instruction may be remediation, acceleration, or simply presenting new, grade appropriate content. VSU teacher candidates are also placed in VECA for their student teaching semester. Most of the current VECA teachers are VSU graduates. Another key component of the relationship between VECA and VSU lies in the professional development of VECA teachers. This professional development has taken place since VECA started in 2008 and has been on two different levels. One level is specific and targeted teacher enrichment that focuses on specific subjects, such as science and mathematics. The second level targets general teaching skills, such as using technology effectively as a one-to-one iPad initiative was implemented.

A key event occurred for the COE as a result of this partnership – several COE classes were moved in 2010 from the college campus to VECA. Our teacher candidates were now taking two courses; Introduction to Education, and Middle Grades Science and Math Methods; within a public school building. Following activities in the courses with the VSU faculty, the teacher candidates filtered in the rooms with students to observe, assist teachers, help student's one on one or small group, or lead lessons. It was the beginning of transforming a traditional field experience model in the Middle Grades Department to a clinically based experience in multiple school locations. However, prior to making substantial changes to the teacher preparation program, we needed to know whether VECA was having a positive academic impact on the middle school students in the program.

Evidence of Impact

The Valdosta Early College Academy was born out of the need to improve the educational condition of students at risk for dropping out of school. VECA provides its students a vision of the future that includes higher education. The parents of students selected for VECA never had the opportunity to attend college and many never finished high school. It is through this lens that VECA students view the world and establish expectations for them simply because it mirrors those of the adults raising them. Changing their perspective to see that college is an important part of a productive future could break cycles of low education and poverty within our local community. Could we change the entire culture within a group of students by removing them from their current school environment, and placing them in a different location within the same school district and with a dedicated group of teachers and extensive support from Valdosta State University students? Could a group of 5th grade students that are currently unsuccessful in school and expecting to fail or drop out be transformed into an academically talented group of students ready for college by the 11th grade? These lofty aspirations would require a matched comparison group of students to determine what would have most likely happened to the students chosen for VECA had they not been selected and their school environment changed.

VECA is currently a 6-10 grade school and a new 6th grade class is added each year. In 2008 the first class of 6th grade students was selected for the school. Data on this class of 36 students was collected and used to determine a matched comparison set of students that were not chosen for VECA but remained within the Valdosta City School District. For every one student selected for VECA, three “similar” students were selected to be part of the matched comparison group. Each set of three matched comparison students were selected specifically for a particular VECA student. Matched comparison students were chosen based upon race, ethnicity, gender, school they would be attending when moving to middle school, socioeconomic class, parental factors, and 5th grade standardized test scores (CRCT – Criterion Referenced Competency Test). The thought was this – had the students not been selected for VECA, they would be expected to perform in a similar way as the matched comparison set of students.

This same process was replicated for every new class of VECA students. However, only the legacy class that was first accepted into VECA in 2008 is shown here because of a lack of space. This group also provides the most longitudinal view of student achievement. Even so, the achievement results shown here are representative of all other grades of VECA students as well.

Below are figures for 3 major content subject areas (science, math, and ELA). They are presented to show the similarities in 5th grade academic achievement of the matched comparison group of students and those selected for VECA. This allows us to examine how comparable the two groups were prior to the VECA students starting their journey into the early college. These data are shown in the left side of the figure. The right side of the figure shows the achievement on their standardized tests following the 9th grade (even though students are currently in the 10th grade, these standardized test scores are not yet available).

Figure 1 below shows data for science. It demonstrates how poorly the students accepted into VECA performed prior to starting in the school with 39% scoring “below standard” on the science CRCT in 5th grade. After four years and as 9th graders in high school at VECA, a significant improvement has occurred when examining scores on the science assessment all Georgia students must take – the End of Course Test (EOCT). Only 4% of VECA students scored “below standard” while 43% of the students originally selected in the matched comparison group 4 years ago scored “below standard” on the Biology EOCT.

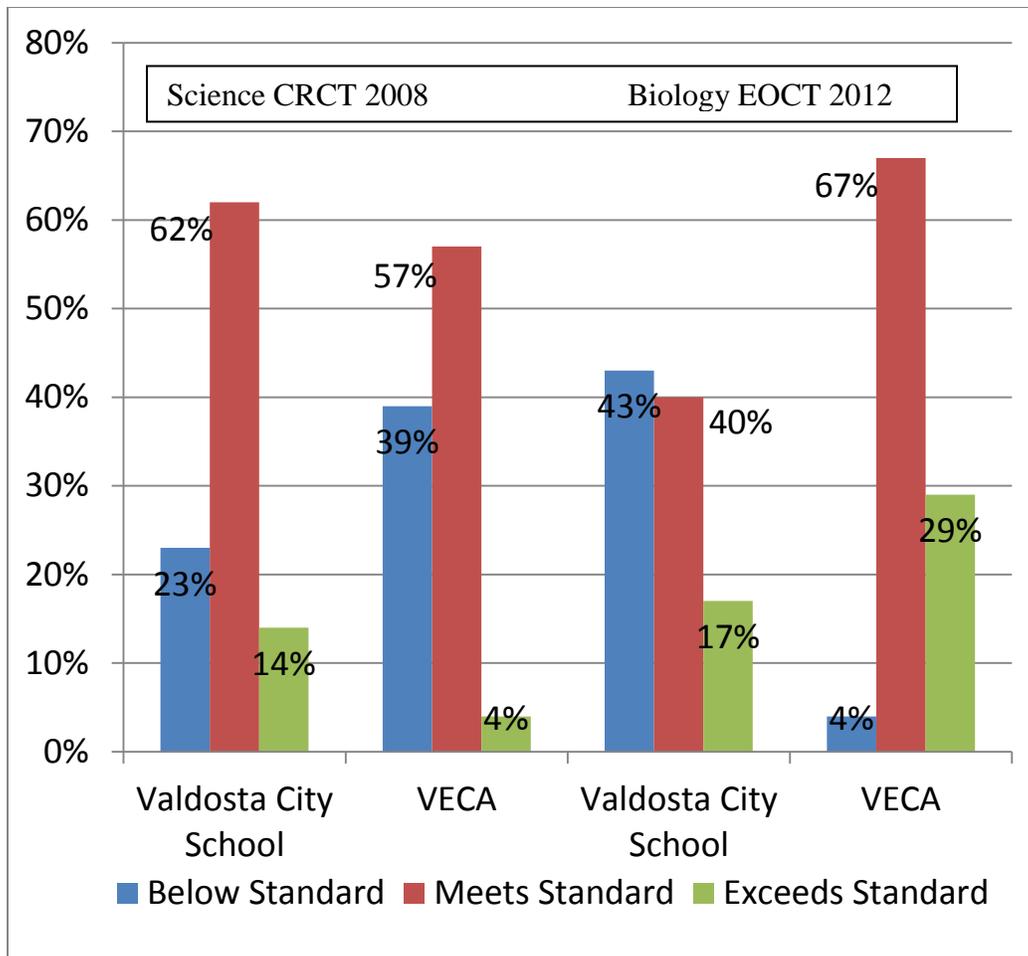


Figure 1. Science standardized test scores in 5th grade (CRCT 2008) for matched comparison set of students (labeled Valdosta City School) and those selected for VECA (labeled VECA). This is compared to achievement 4 years later by the same students on the Biology EOCT taken in 2012.

Figure 2 below shows achievement in math. The students selected for VECA were very similar to their matched comparison group. Four years later the matched comparison group of students still struggled with 38% of students scoring “below standard” on the Math 1 EOCT assessment. This compared with only 9% of the VECA 9th graders scoring “below standard” and 91% combined in the “meets” or “exceeds” category.

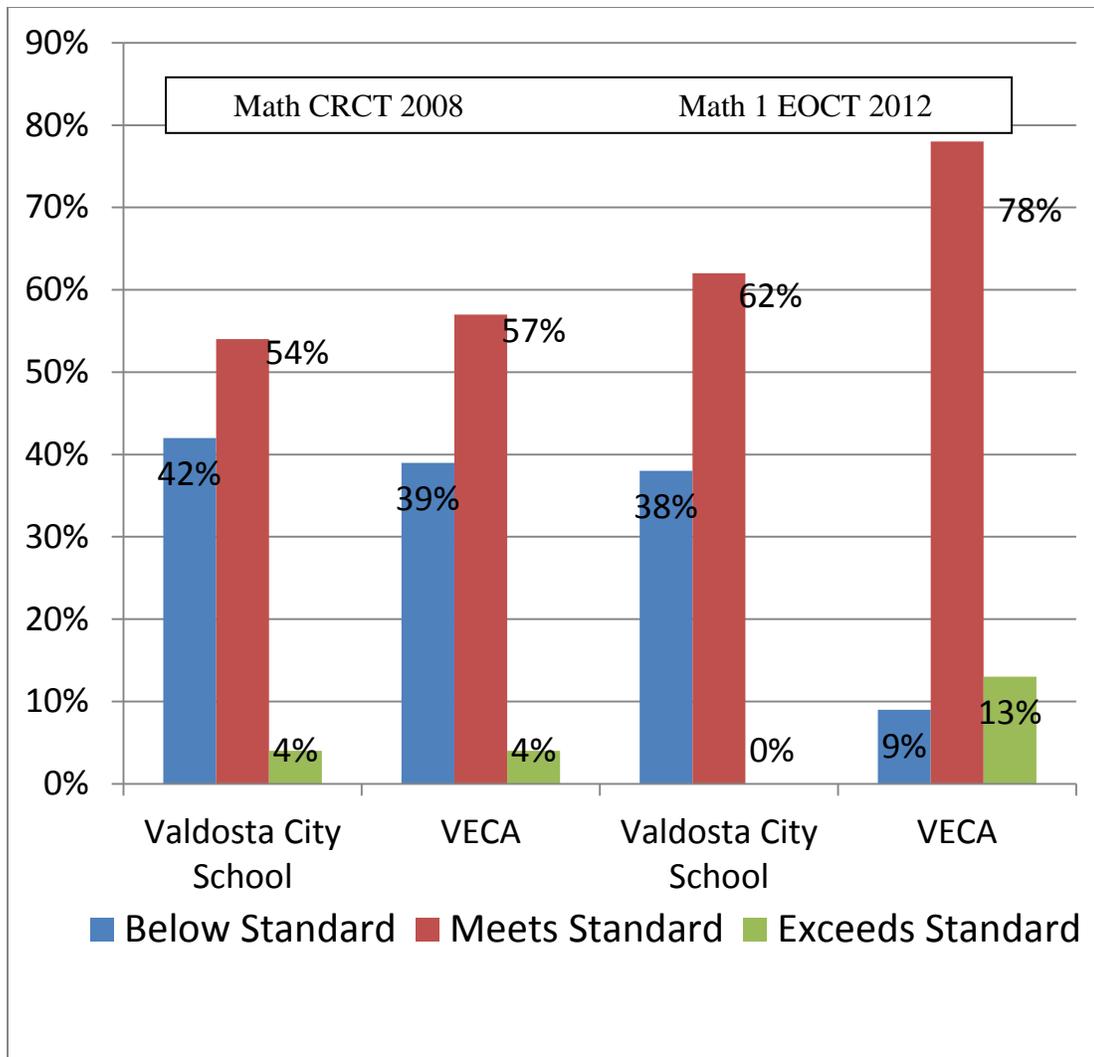


Figure 2. Math standardized test scores.

Figure 3 below shows again how similar the two groups were academically in English Language Arts prior to the intervention of placing students into VECA. The comparison group saw 94% of students either “meeting” or “exceeding” on their 5th grade CRCT. This compares to 91% of students in those same categories that were selected for VECA. After 4 years, these numbers changed significantly with only 73% of the matched comparison group “meeting” or “exceeding” and 27% “below standard” on their 9th grade Literature and Composition EOCT. This compared to 96% within the same class at VECA “meeting” or “exceeding” and only 4% “below standard” on the assessment.

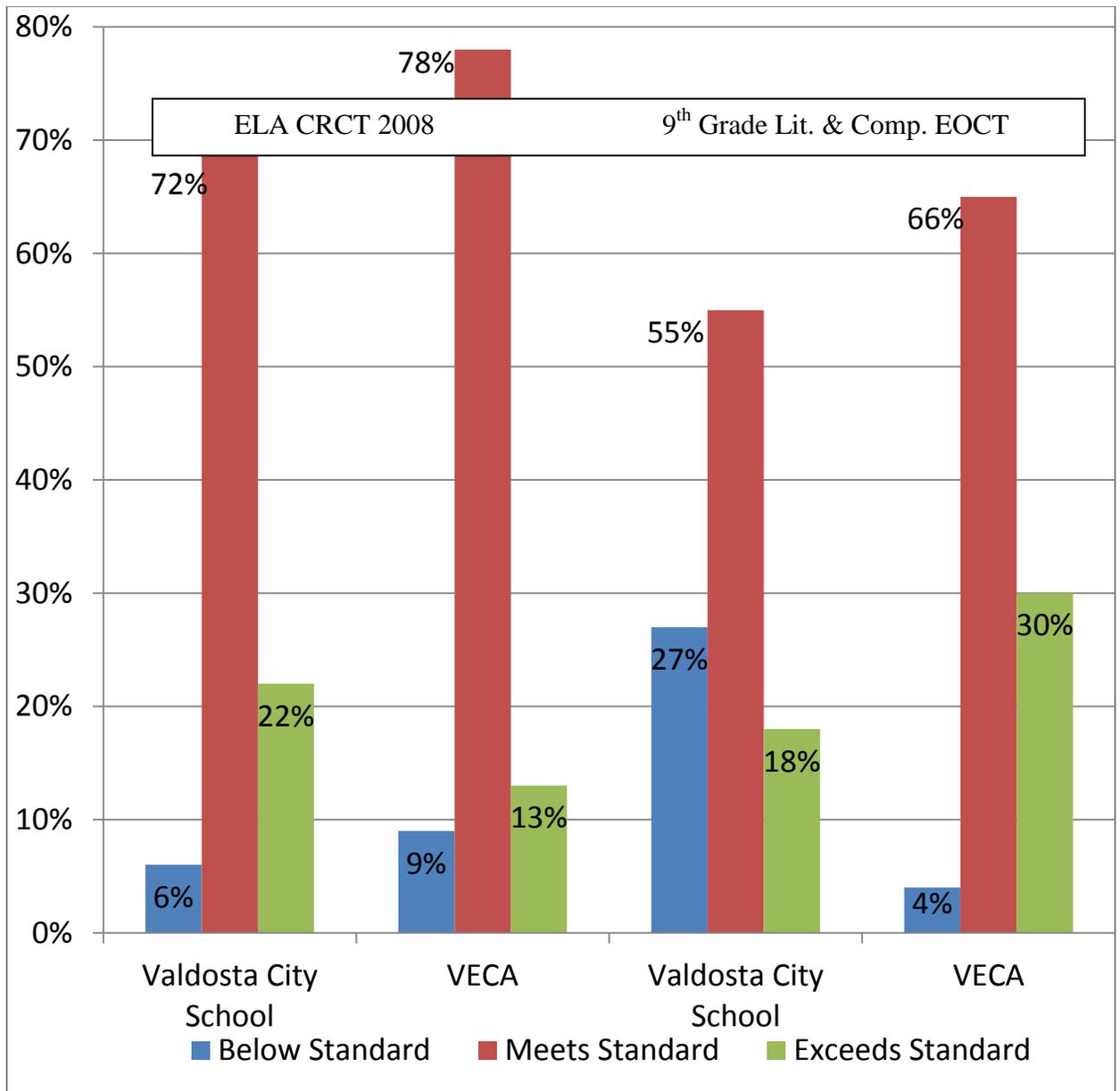


Figure 3. English Language Arts standardized test scores.

The results are unmistakable. The Valdosta Early College Academy is having a positive impact on the academic achievement of their students. This is clearly evident when looking at the scores of standardized assessments and examining them against a matched comparison group of students with similar achievement levels and background factors prior to the intervention of starting the students in VECA. While there are many attributes of VECA that make it different, a significant factor is that the Valdosta State University College of Education & Human Services teaches classes within the VECA school building and has a near constant presence of teacher candidates within the VECA classrooms working with students. This occurs nearly every day and in nearly every classroom. Armed with this impressive data reflecting a positive impact on student learning, it was time to use this information to make teacher preparation program improvements in the Middle Grades Department.

Program Adaptation

Structures are in place at VECA to support student achievement. One of the most obvious and intensive has been the infusion of VSU teacher candidates from the College of Education & Human Services into VECA classrooms. This has resulted in extensive interactions between teacher candidates and VECA students. The positive results of these interactions, as described above, have led the department to make substantial adaptations to the Middle Grades Education B.S.Ed. Program. Since the program contains a much greater number of teacher candidates (currently 109) than could be absorbed by one school, such as VECA, further school partnerships were developed that provided space for VSU classes to be taught and more middle school students available for interaction with VSU teacher candidates.

The strong evidence of impact our teacher candidates have had on VECA student achievement has led to substantial changes to the Middle Grades Education curriculum. The chart below demonstrates how we have modified the program to provide our candidates the instruction and experiences necessary to enter the profession ready to meet the demands of the middle school classrooms of today.

Currently	Fall 2013	Explanations
MGED 3110 (2 hours)	MGED 3110 (2 hours)	Technology course. No changes are planned at this time.
MGED 3220 (3 hours)	MGED 3220 (3 hours)	Reading and Writing in the Content Areas for Middle Grades. All candidates need this experience and it is required by the Professional Standards Commission for certification. Currently, candidates go to Valdosta Middle School (VMS) once a week for six weeks and conduct Literature Circles with small groups of students. This course will change in Spring 2014 and include at least 20 hours of supervised practicum experience at VMS.
MGED 3990 (4 hours)	MGED 3990 (3 hours)	Development and Education of the Middle Grades Student. Candidates have “observed” for 20 hours (10 in elementary and 10 in middle school). This course will change in Spring 2014 to 30 hours of practicum and candidates will engage with only middle school students. The course will be taught in a room at the Valdosta Early College Academy which will allow for better alignment between course content and practicum experience.
MGED 3991 (4 hours)	MGED 3991 (3 hours)	Differentiated Classroom for Middle Grades. Candidates have had the freedom to “observe” for 40 hours in middle schools of their choice. Beginning Spring 2014, this course will have a 30 hour supervised practicum and candidates will work with 4 th and 5 th graders providing differentiated instruction. This change will allow for the necessary 4 th /5 th grade experience. Moving the differentiation course to the 4 th /5 th grade allows for better alignment between course content and practicum experience. Additionally, the structure of an elementary school offers ample opportunity to focus on differentiation.

N/A	MGED 3020 (2 hours)	Introduction to Standards, Planning, and Assessment. Two credit gain from reduction in 3990/3991. The focus will be on the Common Core Standards and Webb's Depth of Knowledge as candidates learn how to design instruction. This course will be taught in VECA starting Fall 2014.
MGED 4000	MGED 4000 (3 hours)	Assessment in Middle Grades. Beginning Fall 2013, candidates will learn how to assess learning and use performance data to inform instructional practices. This course will be taught on the campuses of Lowndes Middle School and Hahira Middle School and alternate weekly. Students will go to Lowndes on Week A and Hahira Week B. They will sit with middle school faculty weekly and join in their data team meetings. Our candidates will learn how to analyze data at the school level, team or content area level, classroom level, and student level. They will learn how to make informed decisions and plan curriculum and instruction based on data.
MGED 4030	N/A	This was the language arts and social studies blended methods course that all Middle Grades Education candidates took regardless of their concentration area. It will not be on the program of study beginning Fall 2013.
MGED 4050	N/A	This was the math and science blended methods course that all Middle Grades Education candidates took regardless of their concentration area. It will not be on the program of study beginning Fall 2013.
N/A	MGED 4100 Math	These are specific content methods courses (3 hours each). Candidates will now take methods courses in their two concentration areas only. Having methods courses that are content specific will allow instructors to teach appropriate methods while also teaching more content in depth. Candidates do not always have the content knowledge necessary of middle grades educators. This change will allow us to address weaknesses in content knowledge that we have identified based on certification assessment data. Each methods course will be taught on a middle school campus and candidates will be engaged in meaningful learning from 8:00am-3:30pm each day their class meets. The professor will work closely with identified teachers at the middle school. Candidates will have methods instruction with their professor in a classroom setting, then move into the middle school classrooms on the campus and apply their learning with students while the professor facilitates, monitors, and provides immediate feedback. The candidates will come back together with the professor for a debrief session, however, they will remain on the campus and engaged with middle school faculty, students, and administrators for the entire school day.
	MGED 4200 Science	
	MGED 4300 Soc. Stud.	
	MGED 4400 LA	
	MGED 4500 Reading	

MGED 4620 (2 hours)	MGED 4620 (2 hours)	Apprenticeship course. All Block A courses are suspended for four weeks while candidates are in a practicum full time, Monday through Friday. No changes are planned yet; however, we are looking at various configurations given the new Block A design (see below).
MGED 4790 (10 hours)	MGED 4790 (10 hours)	Internship. Candidates complete their internship during this semester (usually in the same placement as their Apprenticeship experience). We are piloting a two supervisor rotation this semester (Spring 2013) to identify the benefits and obstacles of having two supervisors observe the same students (odd week/even week set-up).
MGED 4800 (2 hours)	MGED 4800 (2 hours)	Professional Practices Seminar. Candidates reflect on educational practices and concepts emanating from their student teaching experience. No changes are planned at this time.

Our teacher candidates have 11 MGED courses (one is Apprenticeship and one is Internship) necessary in the department to receive their degree. Eight of these courses are being modified to meet our candidates' needs. We plan to make changes in phases so that we can focus our attention and create meaningful, sustainable change. This coming fall, we will roll out Phase 1.

Phase 1 – Fall 2013

All Block A courses (except MGED 3110 – technology) will take place on local middle school campuses. On days that candidates have class, they will be on a middle school campus from 8am-3:30pm. All partner schools (Lowndes County Middle School and Hahira Middle School) have both designated a classroom on their campus as a VSU classroom. Professors will be on the middle school campus to teach, facilitate, monitor, and give feedback to candidates for 4 hours of the 8-3:30 day.

MGED 4000 - Assessment: Thursdays. Two sites. Week A – Lowndes MS.
Week B Hahira MS

MGED 4100 - Math: Tuesdays. Lowndes MS.

MGED 4200 - Science: Mondays. Hahira MS.

MGED 4300 – Social Studies: Fridays. Lowndes MS

MGED 4400 – Language Arts: Wednesdays. Hahira MS

MGED 4500 – Reading: Wednesdays. Hahira MS

MGED 4620 – Apprenticeship. M-F (7:30-3:30). Variety of middle schools across several counties.

MGED 3110 – Technology. This is the only Block A course that will be taught on VSU's campus.

Phase 2 – Spring 2014

MGED 3020 – Teach course and complete practicum at VECA

MGED 3990 – Teach course and complete practicum at VECA

MGED 3991 – Move to an elementary campus (school yet to be determined)

MGED 3220 – Teach and complete practicum at Valdosta Middle School or Pine Grove Middle School. Candidates already go to Valdosta Middle School, but only for one hour, one day a week for a six week period. This will move to a school campus for the full semester – instruction and application/practicum.

In addition to all of the above changes, we now refer to our candidates as interns rather than student teachers as the wording changes the perception from a “student” to a professional. We are also moving to a co-teaching model for internship. While the mentor teacher will be the professional in charge of the classroom, the intern will use the mentor teacher in a way that allows the mentor to work one-on-one with a student or with a small group. This will allow the principals to get the most instruction out of the professionals in the building while providing the opportunity for the mentor to give the intern more feedback at the end of the day. Currently, during solo teaching, no feedback is offered as there are no “eyes” on the instruction. Our Block A students will receive the Lowndes County substitute training during the semester. While this training is not intended on using our candidates as substitutes during their course/practicum time, it will allow our students to substitute in the schools as soon as their internship ends.

Described in the pages above are substantial changes to a long established Middle Grades Education program. That is significant. The faculty and leadership in the Department of Middle Grades, Secondary, Reading & Deaf Education were astounded by the VECA student achievement data provided in the Impact section of this application. The realization of the difference that teacher candidates could make on middle school students prompted the entire department to rethink the structure of the teacher preparation model they had been employing.

What we have demonstrated and accomplished at Valdosta State University perfectly aligns with the criteria for the Christa McAuliffe Award. That is, focusing on how programs have been adapted using evidence of P-12 impact. As a result of the changes we are implementing, many more middle school students in our region will benefit from interactions with our middle school teacher candidates. Further, our candidates will be better prepared to meet the demands of their students when they graduate, become certified, and have classrooms of their own.

FINAL APPLICATION

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P-12 Learner Data

Our ability to make definitive statements concerning the impact of the Valdosta Early College Academy (VECA) on the students enrolled there hinges on student achievement data obtained on standardized assessments. As 5th graders, students with support of their parents or guardians, apply to enter VECA starting in the 6th grade. Applications are reviewed by a selection committee and students are chosen based on average or below standardized assessment scores, being a first generation high school or college attendee, low socioeconomic status, minority membership, regular school attendance, and few or no discipline referrals. Each new class of VECA students is filled with struggling learners that regularly attend school and are not disruptive. The mission of VECA is to break cycles of low education and poverty within our region.

Once a group of new VECA students is selected, a matched comparison set of students that will stay within the traditional Valdosta City School (VCS) System is identified. For every one VECA student, three children are selected for the matched comparison group to compensate for any that might move from the district or drop out of school. This matched comparison group then reflects the makeup of the VECA students (academic achievement, race, ethnicity, gender, feeder school, socioeconomic class, parental factors). These two groups for each grade, the VECA students and their matched comparison group, are followed longitudinally through their school years and comparisons are made between the two groups to determine if the intervention (putting students in VECA) has impacted VECA students' academic achievement relative to their corresponding matched comparison group. If the students had not been selected for VECA, they would be expected to perform in a similar way as their matched comparison set. This process has been completed for each new group of VECA students selected. The school is currently 6th through 11th grade with a new 6th grade class being added each year. Below are highlights from Criterion Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT) from the first class of students to enter VECA, starting in fall of 2008 as 6th graders. The longitudinal data for this class is more extensive than other classes within VECA simply because they have been in the school longer. However, the results of this class are representative of subsequent classes of students at VECA.

- Using t-test statistics after two years, 2010 data, VECA students showed significantly higher scores on the CRCT in language arts ($p < .05$) and social studies ($p < .05$) compared to their matched comparison group.
- While trending higher, VECA students did not show a significant difference in CRCT mathematics or science scores when compared to their 2010 matched comparison group.
- Two years later, using 2012 standardized test score data, VECA students demonstrated statistically significant higher academic achievement in all subject areas including math ($p < .01$) and science ($p < .05$) when examined with their matched comparison group.

Descriptive statistics further support the academic advancement VECA students made in relation to their matched comparison group of students using standardized assessment scores as the measuring stick. Shown below are longitudinal standardized test score data for the original legacy class of students that started at VECA in the fall of 2008. Data from their 5th grade assessments in the spring of 2008 were used to assist in selecting the VECA students as well as their matched comparison group.

Standardized Assessment Results

2008 (as 5th graders) 2012 (as 10th graders)

		<u>% of students</u>			<u>% of students</u>		
		below standard	meets standard	exceeds standard	below standard	meets standard	exceeds standard
Language Arts	MC*	6	72	22	27	55	18
	VECA**	9	78	13	4	66	30
Social Studies	MC	7	70	23	18	66	16
	VECA	0	91	9	0	48	52
Science	MC	23	63	14	43	40	17
	VECA	39	57	4	4	67	29
Mathematics	MC	42	54	4	38	62	0
	VECA	39	57	4	9	78	13

*MC = matched comparison group of students that remained in the traditional school (n = 108)

**VECA = students selected to attend the Valdosta Early College Academy (n = 36)

Using P-12 Impact Data to Make Specific Program Changes in the Early College Academy

When the first class was welcomed to VECA in the fall of 2008 we had envisioned a very different public school than those surrounding us. Some of these unique attributes included, wearing uniforms to eliminate potential conflicts; using only tables and chairs (no individual desks) to promote cooperative learning and communication; during the first two years all classes were held in the College of Education (COE) building on the Valdosta State University campus (VECA has since been moved to a vacated elementary school directly across the street due to space limitations within the COE); audiobooks were placed on iPods for struggling readers during the summer months; and every 8th grade class participates in a CloseUp Foundation educational week in Washington DC to learn how the government operates and what it means to live in a democracy. These innovations in the school continue today. However, what might be noticed, and in retrospect became obvious because of the previously mentioned data, was the fact that these innovations centered on language arts and social studies. There were no strong innovations incorporated into the science and mathematics instructional areas. This became evident when after only two years the VECA students had demonstrated significantly higher achievement on their standardized tests in language arts and social studies but not in science and mathematics. The evidence indicated that changes needed to be implemented based on these impact data. The steps we took included:

- Convening an Advisory Board that included representation from local business members (owners, bank managers, hospital director, etc.), Valdosta City School administration (Superintendent, Asst. Superintendent, and Dir. of Curriculum), VSU College of Education & Human Services faculty and administration (math and science education faculty, Middle Grades Education Dept. Head, Dean), and parents of VECA students. This group met every other month two years and continues to meet quarterly to examine results and monitor progress as a continuous improvement model was put into place.

The changes that came out of these meetings were specifically focused on improving science and mathematics student achievement. All have been implemented over the past two years.

- The Middle Grades Math and Science Methods course (MGED 4050), a requirement for VSU middle grades teacher candidates, was moved from the VSU campus to a VECA classroom. Additionally, the course was restructured so that our teacher candidates received instructional modeling for part of the class and then spent the remaining time in science and mathematics VECA classrooms delivering lessons and assisting students and teachers. The culminating activity for our university students was to work with a group of 3 VECA students on a topic with a strong science/math relationship and then make sure the students understood the topic well enough to have an open house in the COE building where they could explain to VSU faculty and students their science/math concepts. Examples have included the physics and mathematics of roller coasters (VECA students built models out of simple materials), or series and parallel circuits (students constructed a replica of a house and talked about energy efficiencies and electrical circuitry).
- Changed from a traditional 50 minute schedule to a 90 minute block to allow students more time to be deeply engaged in their subject areas.
- Started a one-to-one iPad initiative for the entire school in order to extend the learning day using preloaded science and mathematics learning apps that were researched as age appropriate and effective.
- Lengthened the school day by 45 minutes in 2012 to add extra time primarily for mathematics. All students now receive their regular mathematics period with those requiring additional assistance receiving another period where they work with teachers or VSU volunteers from the Honors College, sororities, or fraternities to further develop their mathematics understanding. This is an especially noteworthy change because since 2008, 122 of the 181 school districts in the state of Georgia have decreased their school days thus reducing the time students spend in school. We lengthened our school day while keeping the same number of school days.

Had we made program improvements based on the student achievement data that were bold enough to get the desired results? The data would suggest this was the case. As mentioned in the previous section – in 2010 the VECA students did not demonstrate significantly higher achievement in science or mathematics on their standardized assessment in relation to their matched comparison group. However, two years later following extensive program changes based on student impact data, VECA students scored significantly higher than their matched comparison group in all subject area standardized assessments.