

PATHWAY TO SUCCESS:

DECA prepares students for rigors of college,
realities of life

By Ellen Belcher





The Thomas B. Fordham Institute is the nation's leader in advancing educational excellence for every child through quality research, analysis, and commentary, as well as on-the-ground action and advocacy in Ohio. It is affiliated with the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, and this publication is a joint project of the Foundation and the Institute. For further information, please visit our website at www.edexcellence.net or write to the Institute at 100 E. Broad Street, Suite 2430, Columbus, OH 43215. The Institute is neither connected with nor sponsored by Fordham University.

Ellen Belcher is a freelance writer and consultant based in Dayton. Formerly an award-winning journalist, Ellen was Editorial Page Editor of the Dayton Daily News for more than a decade. During her 30-year journalism career, she wrote extensively about education. Her previous writing for Fordham includes a 2014 report profiling five of Ohio's voucher-accepting private schools, as well as profiles of school leaders at high-performing charter schools.

INTRODUCTION

Too much of what we hear about urban public schools in America is disheartening. A student's zip code—whether she comes from poverty or economic privilege—often predicts her likelihood of educational (and later-life) success. Motivated by this unacceptable reality, some schools have worked relentlessly against the odds to deliver excellent educational opportunities to students no matter their background. Charter schools in particular have played a role in creating high-quality choices for urban students. Many are led and staffed by incredible visionaries who hold high expectations for all students and have made it their mission to ensure that more inner-city kids make it to (and through) college. When we hear about these schools, it behooves us to pay attention—to celebrate them, study them, and do our damndest to support them. While there's no silver bullet for fixing what ails urban public education, there are common undercurrents of success worth observing and learning from. Just as important, we should hear from students themselves. There's no more compelling case for high-quality school choice than hearing about the life-changing impact it has had on students and their families.

In this instance, that choice comes in the form of a charter high school: the Dayton Early College Academy (DECA), an island of excellence in one of Ohio's poorest and most academically challenged districts. Ninety-five percent of its students are non-white, and three out of four are economically disadvantaged; yet 98 percent of DECA's students were proficient on the reading portion of the Ohio Graduation Test, and 100 percent were in math, compared to 67 percent and 57 percent for Dayton Public. The college attendance and completion rates further set it apart as a model of urban high school success. The unique opportunities and supports it provides to students—both academic and personal—are showcased briefly through the story of Khadidja, an inspiring young woman whose future is so bright, it nearly blinds. Her experience in an excellent charter school has helped forge a very different future than the one facing many of her urban peers. We hope that her story reminds readers that student voices are vital in day-to-day reform conversations and that expectation-shattering, odds-defying charter schools like hers are worth fighting for.

— JAMIE DAVIES O'LEARY
Senior Ohio Policy Analyst
Thomas B. Fordham Institute



PATHWAY TO SUCCESS:

DECA prepares students for rigors of college, realities of life

Judy Hennessey drives students home from events all the time. It comes with her job as superintendent and CEO of the Dayton Early College Academy, a public charter school that was the first early college high school in Ohio and the tenth in the country when it opened in 2003.

Late one winter evening after she had dropped off Khadidja Diouf, Hennessey's cell phone rang. Khadidja wanted to be sure Hennessey had gotten home safely from a retirement party for a federal judge that they had attended together.

"The first time I took her home—it's a confusing neighborhood," Hennessey said. "She was worried that I'd get lost on my way out. I told her, 'Khadidja, this is the first time in my whole career that anyone has ever done that.' What high schooler does that?"

Khadidja (pronounced Hah-DEE-shah), who has a 3.37 GPA and scored a 25 on the ACT, will enroll in West Virginia University this fall. She joins the ranks of nearly four hundred DECA grads, almost 80 percent of whom have earned a college degree or a technical certificate, enlisted in the military, or are still in college.

DECA's mantra, "We're going to college," is reinforced everywhere at the school, with students' college acceptance letters and college swag wallpapering the hallways.

Khadidja—the first in her family to attend college—plans to major in supply chain management and logistics, a field she was introduced to at a DECA career fair by Bruce Pilbeam of WinSupply Inc.

Required by DECA to do three job shadows before graduation, Khadidja asked Pilbeam for his business card and then scheduled a visit to WinSupply's distribution center.

Though Pilbeam hasn't kept in touch with Khadidja and wasn't aware of her career plans, he vividly recalls her visit of three years ago. "I took her through a

day-in-the-life of what our purchasing department does and why it's important," he said. "I introduced her to my team and how they were integral to the supply chain."

Pilbeam said he was so taken by Khadidja's maturity that he wrote a letter to the school.

"I said I was impressed with her and her acumen, and that she was a testament to the work they do," he said.

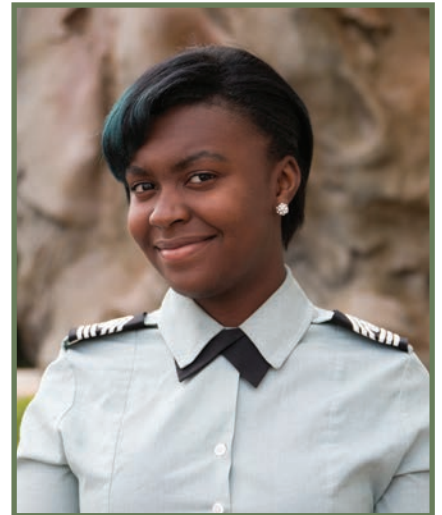
Khadidja, whose Senegalese father was deported when she was a toddler, is named after the Islamic Prophet Muhammad's business-savvy first wife. Showing off a bulging wallet that she reserves for business cards, Khadidja still has Pilbeam's card.

"You never know when you're going to need someone," she said.

Khadidja performed another job shadow at the law firm of Sebalby Shillito + Dyer. One of the company's lawyers, Matthew Bruce, helped coach the DECA mock trial team to a second-place finish in this year's High School Mock Trial State Competition.

More than 350 teams from across Ohio competed to get to Columbus, where regional winners were eliminated over two-and-a-half days of courtroom theater. At the end, DECA and suburban Cleveland's Orange High School faced off before nine evaluators, including an Ohio Supreme Court justice.

Bruce said of Khadidja, "Last year, what I saw was that she had a passion to learn. She had a natural ability to think on her feet. This year, what I saw was someone who took everything she learned last year and really excelled."



Khadidja Diouf

Chosen “best attorney” in multiple rounds at both the state and regional competitions, Khadidja “was constantly working on mock trial,” Bruce said. “I could give her constructive criticism, and the next week when I would come back, she would have improved. You can’t understand her if she talks too fast. She listens to my input. She doesn’t argue with me. She incorporates the advice.”

Bruce recalled that between rounds at the state competition, DECA students played “Heads Up”—a guessing game popularized by Ellen DeGeneres—while most other teams were “cramming or practicing.” Khadidja, in particular, kept everyone loose. “She has such a great personality,” Bruce said. “She makes everybody laugh, and it bleeds out on the rest of the team. They all want to be good because she is.”

When the moment came to compete in the semifinals, Bruce said that Khadidja’s physical demeanor changed and that she had intensity and focus written all over her face. “She and her partner showed up to win,” Bruce said. Though Khadidja did not compete in the final round (participants are determined by draws) Bruce said that she and her co-counsel were responsible for leading the team to the last match. “They got us through all of Friday,” he said.

The DECA students, some outfitted in suits they had bought at a second-hand store, knew they were competing against others from more privileged backgrounds. That fact was never lost on the kids, least of all Khadidja, whose single mother said she works part-time at a dollar store because she wants to be available to get her two teenage daughters to and from school and to extracurricular activities.



Khadidja Diouf and Tirez Jamison

“The more arrogant they (the other teams) acted,” Hennessey said, “the more she dug in. I saw a judge come down from the bench and tell her, ‘It was hard for me not to think that you have already graduated from law school.’ ”



Khadidja and Retired Army Major Odell Graves

Retired Army Major Odell Graves, 76, who directs the DECA Knights, a leadership development unit modeled on Junior ROTC, said that he also sees Khadidja’s fierce drive. He and DECA Operations Director Danya Berry said that when the program was at risk of being disbanded for lack of funding, Khadidja almost “single-handedly” saved it. She led a group of friends in writing a proposal to turn the class into an extracurricular activity, Berry said.

Though DECA is too small for a Junior ROTC charter, Graves’ unit competes successfully in statewide Junior ROTC competitions and is frequently invited to perform at events. Graves, a former Special Forces officer, said that he has been involved with ROTC at several schools and that working with the DECA students has “eclipsed everything I’ve ever done.”

“These kids want to know,” he said, referring to mapping, military protocol, geography, and other subjects they study. “I can’t teach them fast enough.”

Khadidja recently took the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery, scoring an 85 out of 99. “It a remarkable score,” Graves said. “The highest score I’ve ever seen is 90.”

Graves recognizes a common thread in Khadidja’s interests—a focus on organization, rules, and structure. Regimentation, he said, is something DECA students learn to accept and even relish.

Not everyone, though, thrives under the routines and high expectations of an early college high school. Khadidja said that she and three other students were encouraged by a staff member at their Dayton Public elementary school to apply to DECA when they were



Khadidja and her classmates

leaving for middle school. Khadidja and fellow senior Kevin Gilbert said that the other two students enrolled at DECA but withdrew before high school.

“Once we were in high school, we were the only ones left,” said Kevin, who has known Khadidja since kindergarten and credits her for his decision to choose DECA. “We want to be something.”

Khadidja explained that one of the students she and Kevin started with “refused to do her work” and that the second struggled to meet the school’s expectations while also helping care for siblings at home.

“Each year, your class dwindles,” said Khadidja, who is one of fifty-four to graduate this year. “Each year, you lose people. A majority can’t handle it because of peers outside of DECA. Some people don’t know how to say no.”

Stacie McCoy, a favorite teacher of Khadidja’s and her middle-school adviser, said that Khadidja always notices if someone is struggling. She still remembers how Khadidja helped other students in advisory period organize their binders to keep track of due dates and homework that seemed mountainous to seventh graders.

Even after Khadidja moved on to high school, McCoy has kept up with her. Every DECA student is assigned an adviser, first in middle school and then in high school. Advisers help ensure that each of their eighteen or so advisees is on track academically and has someone they always can turn to with problems.

Though it was six long years ago, Khadidja said that DECA’s required summer initiation to the middle school program acclimated her to the school and set the tone for what would be expected in the fall. “We went to August academy,” she said, noting that homework was mandatory and due dates were strictly enforced.

At the time, Khadidja said that she didn’t see the point of some of DECA’s requirements and its emphasis on independent study and homework.

“At first, I thought it was to keep us busy,” she said. “But now I see everything had a purpose.”

She also appreciates how she has learned to puzzle through challenges. Pointing to her physics teacher Andrew Miller, she said, “He doesn’t help you. He lets you struggle.”

Miller admires Khadidja’s work ethic and willingness to confront authority. Once he required her to take a pop quiz, he said, even though she had legitimately missed the previous day’s class.

“My policy is that an absence doesn’t matter,” Miller said. “Everything is on the web site. [The students] have access to everything we do in class, even if they’re not there. That’s the way I run class. She let me know that she disagreed—not in a disrespectful manner—(but) she realizes this is for a purpose and she moves on.”

Sixteen-year-old Samar Diouf said that she considered enrolling with her sister at DECA but instead went to Stivers School for the Arts, consistently one of Dayton Public Schools’ few high-performing schools.

“Sometimes I regret not going to DECA,” Samar said. “It offers a lot of opportunities to get a good career. Khadidja was given the opportunity to take math courses over the summer. That’s something I wish I could do.”

Samar said she was amazed that when a DECA teacher was visiting Spelman College “she sent Khadidja voicemail messages about everything” because Khadidja was unable to make the college visit.

“She has a really strong connection with all of her teachers,” Samar said. “They all want her to get ahead. They always put their students first.”

Nina Diouf, whose parents moved to Dayton from Kentucky when she was a child and who have helped her rear her two daughters, had never heard about DECA until the Dayton Public School staff member promised that the school would challenge her daughter.

“I took their word,” said, Nina, 50, volunteering that she didn’t fully understand the scope of DECA’s expectations at the time.

“I love how they push them and make them work,” she said.

Did she ever doubt that Khadidja would succeed at the school?

Nina shakes her head and beams. “No. She has in her mind that she can do anything.”

Dayton Early College Academy (DECA)

Home district: Dayton

Enrollment: 469

Grades served: 7-12

School Director: Katy Jo Brown

Operations Director: Danya Berry

Mission: The Dayton Early College Academy is an early college high school that is singularly focused on preparing urban learners to go to college and graduate.

Opened: 2003

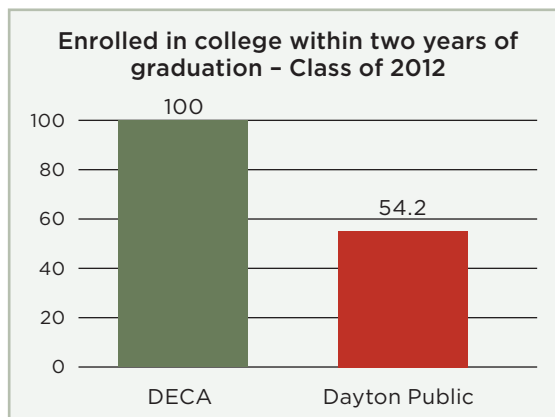
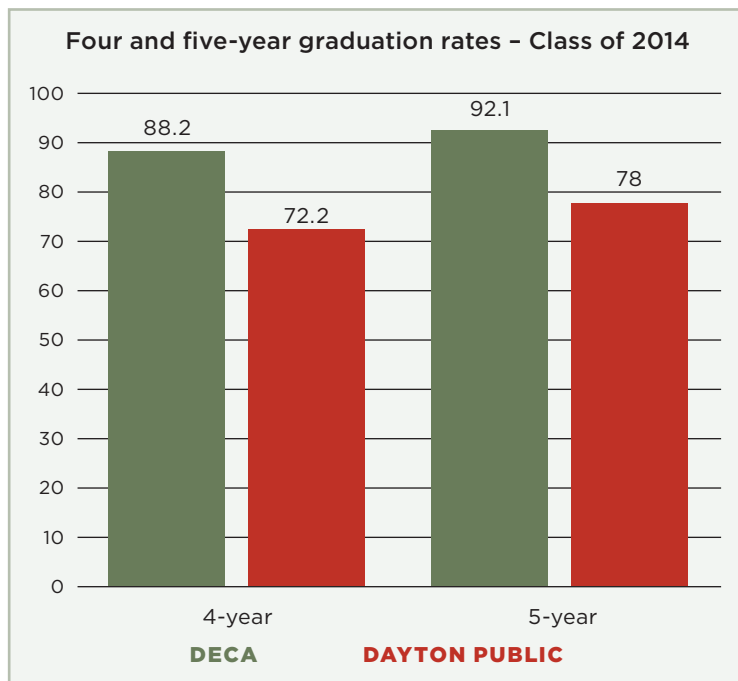
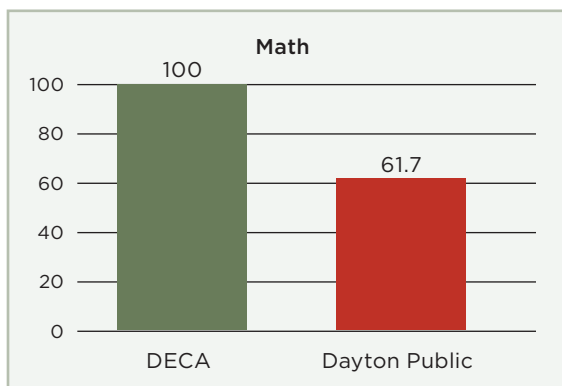
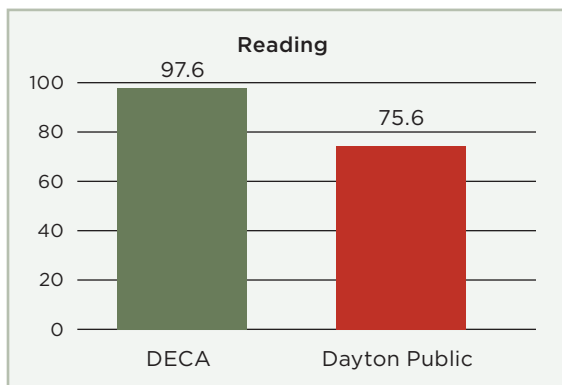
Percent economically disadvantaged: 72%

Percent non-white: 95%

Performance Index Grade*: B

Value Added Grade*: A

Percent of 10th graders proficient or higher on Ohio Graduation Test*



Other highlights

- Named a School of Promise by the Ohio Department of Education in 2011
- Named one of America's top high schools by Newsweek in 2014
- Selected by U.S. News and World Report as a bronze medalist on its 2009, 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2015 lists of America's best high schools

Source: Performance data comes from Ohio's 2013-14 and 2014-15 interactive Local Report Cards (*in some instances, 2013-14 data was the most recent year for which performance data was publicly available). Enrollment and demographic information was provided by DECA.

