



Tiny Syracuse high school boasts a nearly 77 percent graduation rate, far above the city's average



By **Maureen Nolan, The Post-Standard**

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Nicholas Lisi, The Post-Standard Graduates Trishanna Bennette (left) and Michelle Gaston (right) have their photos taken by family members after the Institute of Technology at Syracuse Central graduation ceremony. This was the first graduation ceremony for the school. The graduation ceremony was held in Marshall Hall at ESF. Nicholas Lisi / The Post-Standard **Graduations 2011: Institute of Technology at Syracuse Central**

Little strips of paper cover the walls in a couple of conference rooms at the Institute of Technology at Syracuse Central. Each bears the name of a junior or senior and the graduation requirements the student has yet to complete.

The information is there for the staff to consult and parents to ponder when they come in to discuss their child. It's a reality check for everybody.

"It's that war room-type mentality: This is where the kids are, this is what they have to do," Principal Matthew Williams said. "There's not this issue where we get to the end of the school year and we're like: 'Oh, what does Timmy need to do to walk across the stage?' We've known for two years what they need to do."

They have done it to a level of success that is miles beyond that of the other four Syracuse high schools and many urban high schools around the state.

Friday, tiny ITC, as the school is known, graduated its first class, which has an unofficial graduation rate of nearly 77 percent: Sixty-two of the 81 students who started ninth grade four years ago in September. Another two juniors will graduate a year early.

In June 2010, the average Syracuse district graduation rate was 46 percent. Rochester's was 46.7, and Buffalo's was 47 percent. The statewide average, which includes wealthy districts with high graduation rates, is 73.4 percent.

In fundamental ways, ITC is a different animal from the other Syracuse high schools. Even so, Williams and Brian Nolan, the district administrator in charge of high schools, say elements that work at ITC can be replicated at the other high schools if the district creates smaller schools within its large high schools.

The difference between ITC and the other city schools starts with its size. The enrollment is 370, compared with the next smallest high school, Fowler, where this year's enrollment topped 1,150.

Enrollment at the other high schools is based mostly on geography. Students come to ITC by choice. They apply and interview to get in, and there are more students than spaces. This school year, ITC had 270 applications for 116 slots.

A small school isn't a panacea for improving education, but it's a start, said Williams, 34, who worked at Corcoran (which had an official enrollment this year of nearly 1,400) and worked his way up from teacher to vice principal. He's an advocate of a staff sitting down to talk about difficult issues. That's easier to do at a small school.

"You're not in a cafeteria talking to a faculty of a hundred and twenty people about whether we're going to be in the hallway in between classes or not. You can actually sit down and all look at each other and say: 'Well, what are we all going to do together for the outcome of kids,'" he said.

The district has been working for roughly eight years to successfully create small schools within the four bigger high schools and has established academies in them.

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But the structure of the schools-within-a-school hasn't been what it should be, Nolan said. In the fall, the district will make structural changes that will, finally, create true schools-within-a-school, he said. They will have their own exclusive students, teachers and administrator.

Nolan said ITC's small size enables teachers to be accountable for the success of every student.

When you pass a student in the hall at ITC, Williams said, you know what he needs to do to pass. You remind him of that, you remind his parents.

"You have as many people as possible know where Ricky is in terms of his graduation requirements, and you can all work collectively, together, to get him through," Williams said.

ITC opened in September 2007 in the old Central Tech building, on East Adams Street. Its mission was to give Syracuse students another path to graduation. Its approach was to integrate a Regents-level academic program with technical and vocational studies. Williams became principal in 2009; since then, the school narrowed the areas of study in which students can specialize, he said.



Students decide at the end of ninth grade whether they want to be part of the school of engineering or school of human behavior science. Within the schools, students pick from a range of programs — for instance, electronic media, automotive technology, biotechnology, culinary arts and robotics.

The curriculum is project-based, and students take college-level classes. They spend a lot of time on college campuses, in particular at the State University College of Environmental Science and Forestry.

Graduations 2011: Institute of Technology at Syracuse Central Institute of Technology at Syracuse Central graduates its first class Friday June 24, 2011 in Marshall Hall at ESF. [Watch video](#)

Most small-school initiatives push up the graduation rate, but ITC's success is dramatic, said Kenneth Strike, a Cornell University professor emeritus whose field is the philosophy of education and who has written books about small schools. He also taught part-time in the Syracuse University School of Education.

The results at ITC are "highly encouraging," said Strike, whose work has influenced Williams and helped shape ITC's approach.

Strike said small schools per se don't guarantee success, but being small helps the principal and staff build what he says is a critical element: a shared purpose for a well articulated academic mission. He refers to that as a sense of community.

"One of the things that characterizes, often, good, strong schools is that they know what they are about," Strike said. "They are themed, for example, as Matt's is. And the teachers who are there are there because they resonate to that theme. Kids often show up, for the most part, because that's the kind of education they want to receive, and so you have a kind of leg up on shared purpose in the school."

ITC's high graduation rates suggests that its students may have been selected to enroll there, he said.

ITC has a slightly lower percentage of special education students than the district at large, but its students' racial and other demographic make-up is in line with the district at large, Williams said.

The school does not skim the best students, but there is a "small gate" students must get through, which is to apply and show up for an interview, Williams said.

The main thing the school looks for when it is enrolling a student is the student's level of interest in one the school's focus areas, he said. In this particular senior class, everyone who applied got into the school, he said.

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He said he spoke personally to every eighth-grade class in the district during the school year to tell students about ITC and every parent of an eight-grade student gets a letter about the school.

“We’re really trying to make sure that everybody in the city of Syracuse knows that this is an option,” Williams said.

ITC has students who struggled at their previous schools, students who had behavior problems and even students Williams thinks would have dropped out if they hadn’t found their way to ITC.

He’s pleased with the school’s graduation rate, which is tantalizingly close to the state standard of 80 percent. But Williams said he gets frustrated with numbers.

“I want everybody to get through,” he said. “And I think if we don’t focus on kids and where they are, we’re kind of missing the point,” he said.

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