

It is Bard High School Early College Baltimore's tenth anniversary since its founding in 2015 at a previous location nicknamed "The Mod". The school opened its doors to about 200 ninth and eleventh graders, who were eager to embark on their journey through the early college program.

Now with 430 students, BHSEC Baltimore remains at its core as it did a decade prior, characterized by its commitment to preparing young people for higher education, embracing a diverse and vibrant student body, and fostering collaborative environments through the work of its exemplary teachers. Though over the course of a decade, this school has undergone some changes.

To get a closer look inside, let's take a deep dive with an integral member of the BHSEC Baltimore faculty: Dr. Richard Kurker, who has taught biology to every class of Year 1's for the past eight years.

*The following interview has been lightly edited and condensed for clarity.*

**Can you tell me about your educational journey? What was your plan after high school, and how did that shift or take shape?**

After high school, I knew I wanted to go into science or English. So, I did both during college and leaned more toward the science route because of financial reasons and the likelihood of getting a job. As I went through college, I thought I wanted to teach college. I ended up getting a high school job first and liked it, so I stuck with it from there.

**What led you to working in secondary education?**

I was a teaching assistant in college and in grad school. I also did part-time college teaching, so I already knew I liked helping people and working with students. Research is basically what science grad school is. Four years of that, and I'm like, "It's great, but also I'm not doing this forever." Research is great on the side.

And that's actually a benefit of teaching at a high school: If you do research, it's minimal. It's not a lengthened thing. Whereas in a college, most of your time is spent researching and teaching is sort of a sidetrack. I got two job offers at the same time: Teaching at Bard High School Early College Baltimore and a video journal editing thing. I ended up going this way because I like the teaching side.

**What was important to you about teaching in public education rather than private?**

I've only gone to public school, so that was my only experience. We don't have to follow exactly what the city says at BHSEC Baltimore, meaning that teachers can make the curriculum what they want. In private schools, it seems like there's a lot less guidance. In public schools, teachers have to get through certain topics because students will have to take standardized tests. There is a little more order to it. It's also nice to get a greater diversity of students rather than just the kids who can afford to go to private schools.

**As a STEM professor, why a liberal arts education?**

I have only been to liberal schools for college and grad school. My minor was in writing, so it's always been a thing I've been into. Even if you're going into science and you think it's just one thing, liberal arts school skills come in all the time. Whether it's debating someone about the beginning of the world and evolutionary creationism, or just knowing how to write when you have to turn your work into a finished product. It's helpful to have a more well rounded background no matter what you end up doing.

**Can you tell me about your experience teaching at BHSEC Baltimore?**

When I first started here, I didn't really know what I was doing because I hadn't taught high school before. I was coming in, treating it like a legit college class: Lots of lecturing without a lot of hands-on stuff. So I quickly adapted to make it more interactive, still with some lectures because it is an essential part of being an early college. It was sort of a learning curve but a fast one. I came in thinking one thing, then learned how to do it not so by the book. But as far as the experiences, I'm still here. I'm assuming that means it's been good since I haven't run for the hills just yet.

**What are some changes you have witnessed such as adaptations in the early college structure or school culture, and what are some changes you would like to see?**

At our school in particular, we have decreased student freedom a little bit. We used to have a learning commons/study hall where students could go into a room for a period and do their work. There was always a teacher in there, so they could get extra help during that time. It was a good idea, but we had to shut it down. A small minority of individuals took advantage of it, whether it was like damage to the building or not being able to keep track of who was and wasn't supposed to be there. Reestablishing a study period would be great if we build up the school culture to handle it.

The idea was to simulate more of a college experience. One of the downsides to being also tied into the public school system is you have to also follow their rules. At college, you could go to a class, go out to lunch, take a break, and come back. Because we are tied into Baltimore City,

we're not allowed to permit that. With our school e being an early college, it would be great to find more ways of mirroring the freedom and autonomy present in the culture of a college.

**After reflecting on the last eight years, what do you hope to see for BHSEC Baltimore in the next decade?**

The biggest thing is building a culture where more students are actually invested. Most of our issues come from there being enough students to throw things off because they just aren't here for the right reasons and are trying to slip by. The ideal goal would be having a larger proportion of students that are driven to try and aim for the associate's degree.

It's not really a matter of who we let in, but a matter of nipping it in the bud earlier on and setting expectations during ninth and tenth grade. Once students get to the later grades where the associates degree is more prevalent, they would be used to the way of conducting themselves.

One day a week during social studies classes for ninth and tenth grade we used to have Bard 101. The counselors would come in and discuss study skills, how to choose classes, organization skills, and similar topics. Bringing it back in some capacity would be a helpful way to sort of nip it in the bud nice and early.

**What has made you stay?**

As much as we complain about the headaches of the day [...] and that one period is driving you crazy, there are a lot of folks here who are motivated and are enjoying their time here. The majority of folks who care and are here for the right reason, that makes it worth it.

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