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## **Lt. Gov. Simon touts FastStart college credit program**

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EAST PEORIA — Liz Koehler of Sparland had plans to be a doctor, then a teacher.

But thanks to a dual credit program with Illinois Central College the Midland High School senior said not only was she able to decide on a different career in agriculture communications, she didn't spend a lot of time and money in college to figure it out. She's also got a head start on other classmates toward her future career.

The now four-year-old education program between ICC and Midland, called FastStart, allows high school students the opportunity to take college courses while simultaneously earning credit toward a high school degree. It was highlighted Tuesday by college officials and Illinois Lt. Gov. Sheila Simon, who made a stop in East Peoria to promote college completion.

"We need to have a much more educated workforce to be competitive on a global level," said Simon, who is touring community colleges across the state. She said FastStart is an example to build on and be followed.

About two-thirds of future jobs will require some sort of college degree or certificate, said Simon, adding currently only about 40 percent of the working-age population in Illinois hold that distinction. The state's goal is to get to 60 percent by 2025, she said.

"The institutions that are going to really move us forward in that direction are community colleges," Simon continued.

ICC President John Erwin said the community college has had proven success working with area businesses to provide what employers are looking for as well as getting students to the level they need to be.

But such an initiative also comes with its challenges, the foremost being finances.

The state is currently in arrears to the college district to the tune of \$4.8 million - Simon said the state owes some \$270 million to schools, social service agencies and other providers in the Peoria-area.

Simon said she and Gov. Pat Quinn are pushing to restructure some of the state's debt to pay off its unpaid bills.

But beyond that, more students are coming to the community college not ready for college-level courses, meaning much time and resources are spent on remedial education. Colleges also are receiving less reimbursement for certain types of courses, including baccalaureate classes - which appears to contradict Simon's push.

Add to that ICC, which has seen record-level enrollments, saw a dip this spring. The number of credit hours decreased by 3.7 percent compared to last year and student enrollment this spring is down by 2 percent.

Whether lacking state funds and smaller than anticipated revenues, from tuition and flat assessed valuations, will mean further raises to tuition level is unknown.

ICC officials are expected to take up tuition discussions next month.

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