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Simon sings praises of ECC Summer Bridge Program

By Larissa Chinwah

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The nationally recognized mock trial team from Elgin Community College got two thumbs-up Wednesday from Lt. Gov. Sheila Simon, as did students from the college's welding program. But it was a summer course that prepares recent high school graduates for college-level math and reading courses that piqued the Simon's interest during a campus visit.

Simon, who is aiming to visit all 48 community colleges in the state this year, said the college's Summer Bridge Program exposes where improvements are needed in the state's educational system to enable students to succeed after high school.

Part of the problem, Simon said, is the state's educational system is divided into three separate levels, each with its own governance: Kindergarten through 12th grade, community college and higher education.

"Not enough students pass through the system," Simon said. "So often there are missed connections, particularly from high school to college."

In the Summer Bridge Program, students who fall a few assessment points below what is needed to enroll in college-level courses have the opportunity to take a three-week refresher course before retaking the placement test. Since the program three summers ago, 73 percent of participants have been able to move up at least one level, reducing the number of noncredit developmental courses they need to take.

"The Summer Bridge Program is something that needs to be shouted from the mountain tops," Simon said during a round-table discussion with college leaders, faculty, board members and students.

ECC, Simon said, is a pioneer in developmental education with its Summer Bridge Program. Simon said she has not come across many summer bridge courses in her tour of community colleges, and certainly none that offer such an intensive course.

"No one has been doing this as long as they have," Simon said. "And ECC has done it long enough to know what works."

Simon also visited Harper College in Palatine, where she toured campus facilities and discussed its partnership with area high schools. The program tests high school juniors' college readiness and then aligns high school courses with the college's curriculum.

Daily Herald staff writer Kimberly Pohl contributed to this story.