

Graduations begin for high school seniors

By Laura Isensee

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Tens of thousands of South Florida students will don caps and gowns over the next week as the class of 2012 receives high school diplomas.

Ceremonies begin Friday and run through June 8 in Miami-Dade and Broward.

On Monday, Vice President Joe Biden will address the graduates of Cypress Bay High School at Marlins Park in Little Havana.

“It’s a tremendous honor for all of us,” said Charles Neely, who has been principal of the school since it opened in Weston a decade ago.

The school has won athletic and academic honors, including ranking first in the nation for the number of Hispanic students who pass college-level Advanced Placement exams.

Cypress Bay’s graduation was set for Sunday at the University of Miami’s BankUnited Center, but Biden couldn’t make it that day and the facility was not available Monday.

So Broward County’s largest high school booked the stadium.

A private donor made up the \$6,000 difference in cost. Officials say about 7,500 people are expected to attend.

In Miami-Dade, nearly 20,000 diplomas have been ordered.

Some students have already earned associate degrees from Miami Dade College and racked up college credits.

At Miami Dade’s School for Advanced Studies, where juniors and seniors take high school courses and attend Miami Dade College, 192 seniors among 238 graduates — almost 80 percent — have earned their associate in arts degrees.

Andrew Davis, 18, is among them. He’s graduating from SAS’s Wolfson Campus with 70 college credits.

“I am proud,” said Davis, who lives in Miami Shores.

He has already attended freshman orientation at the University of Alabama, which has awarded him a merit scholarship and a free iPad. He hopes to become a doctor.

At Mater Academy, a high-performing charter school in Hialeah Gardens, more than 30 of the 365 seniors have also earned associate’s degrees.

Principal Judith Marty said the school, which serves sixth through 12th grades, encourages students early on to prepare for and take AP classes and dual-enrollment courses in order to gain college credits.

Her message for seniors: "They're just at the beginning of their journey. Now they have to continue their success. They need to learn not to be discouraged, to always go ahead, and continue to be themselves."

Stephanie Fiddy, who attends Mater East Academy in Little Havana, will give the valedictory address Monday to her graduating class of 60 students. Many of them have known each other since elementary school. Fiddy knows them all by name.

"It's bittersweet," said Fiddy, who will be the first in her family to attend college.

She's headed to Duke University, far from home in Little Havana, where her parents live. Her mom is an accounting clerk; her dad a truck driver.

"I'm going to be leaving behind my childhood friends. I feel very accomplished that all of us have finished high school. But now that we're all here, we want to start all over again. It's an amazing feeling."

Material from The Associated Press was used in this report.

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