



The Education Trust



ADVANCING EQUITY IN COLLEGE IN HIGH SCHOOL PROGRAMS: OPPORTUNITIES UNDER ESSA

I. The Promise of College in High School

What are college in high school programs, and why are they important?

College in high school programs are powerful vehicles for improving student success and launching students on a pathway to college degree completion. College in high school encompasses dual and concurrent enrollment programs, which are partnerships between school districts and institutions of higher education that allow high school students to enroll in college courses and earn transferrable college credit. In many states, dual and concurrent enrollment were historically used as acceleration strategies for high-achieving learners, and often served middle- or higher-income students, though these opportunities have been found to be highly beneficial for all students. College in high school programs also include early college high schools, which target students from underserved groups and are designed to provide an opportunity to earn an associate's degree or significant college credit at no cost, while also embedding comprehensive supports.

All students benefit from college in high school programs, and underserved students gain the most.

Participation in high-quality dual enrollment correlates with higher rates of high school graduation, college attendance, and persistence to a certificate or degree or transfer, according to a robust body of research studies.¹ College in high school has been found to benefit African American, Latino, and white students,² and its positive effects on college degree attainment are even stronger for low-income students.³ Early college high schools have particularly positive outcomes: over 90 percent of early college students earn transferrable college credit and approximately 30 percent earn an associate degree with their high school diploma.⁴

II. The Challenge of Access and Equity

Are there gaps in college in high school participation rates and outcomes for students from underserved groups?

States vary widely in their policies for implementing and supporting college in high school, and research suggests that the differences have an impact on access, outcomes, and gaps between different student groups.⁵ Recently, policymakers and educators have turned to college in high school programs as a strategy for improving the outcomes of a wide group of students, including vulnerable groups and populations historically underserved in higher education. However, access and equity gaps remain across and within states, districts, and schools.

According to the U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection, white students are more than twice as likely to participate in dual enrollment, compared with African American students. Only 4.1 percent of African American high school students and 5.2 percent of Latino students nationwide participated in these courses in 2015-16.⁶ English learners and students with disabilities have even lower participation rates.

What factors impact access?

Gaps in dual enrollment participation reflect broader opportunity gaps and uneven academic preparation in the schools attended by many students of color and low-income students.

Tuition and fee policies also play a role: low-income students face barriers in states and districts where students and families are responsible for paying some or all of the cost of tuition, fees, and/or textbooks for college courses. Low-income students and those in rural areas also face transportation-related barriers to accessing courses held on college campuses. However, some of the above reasons may not explain the gap in access for students of color. A lack of information about college in high school programs as well as eligibility requirements can also serve as additional barriers to participation.⁷

What is the role of program quality?

Not all college in high school programs are created equal — and differences in program quality are likely to contribute to uneven outcomes. High-quality dual enrollment programs share core design principles, including: preparing all students for postsecondary education; providing adequate support services and advising; ensuring that college courses offered to high school students are of the same rigor as courses offered to matriculated students on the college campus; and guaranteeing that dual enrollment credits are transferable to public two – and four year institutions. Upholding equivalence between dual enrollment and traditional college courses is critical for ensuring that credits earned through college in high school programs are in every way as valuable as those earned through more traditional routes.

III. The Role of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

How does ESSA promote college in high school programs?

ESSA provides states and local education agencies an opportunity to consider college in high school programs, including dual enrollment programs, as a key strategy for successfully preparing students for college by allowing states to: 1) use ESSA Title I, Part A, Title II, Part A, Title III, and Title IV, Part A to support college coursework; 2) include dual enrollment and early college to enhance their accountability systems and increase data transparency; and 3) include dual enrollment and early college in their written plans to improve achievement in the lowest-performing schools.

Why should advocates pay attention to how states are advancing college in high school programs through ESSA implementation?

College in high school programs are an important opportunity for increasing college readiness and many states are interested in expanding these programs. For example, a review of state ESSA plans shows that 47 states and the District of Columbia included college in high school programs in their state plans. A key focus was on accountability, with 37 states planning to hold schools accountable for the percentage of students who earn credit through dual enrollment courses.⁸ A majority of states also included support for these programs in other elements of their state plans.⁹ For example, Hawaii plans to use Title II, Part A funds to ensure students are college- and career-ready by providing educators with professional development opportunities to help them earn the qualifications needed to teach college courses for high school students. Mississippi intends to use its Title IV, Part A funds to create a Dual Enrollment/Dual Credit and Advanced Placement Taskforce.

Despite the inclusion of dual enrollment and early college in state plans, many accountability systems largely ignore the results of individual student groups. Moreover, the information provided in state ESSA plans only represents part of the policy work happening in states to advance college in high school programs. The way states approach this work matters. If done carelessly, dual enrollment and early college high school implementation and expansion could contribute to current educational attainment gaps, across student groups, as well as waste students' time and financial resources if the programs are of low-quality. Advocates can play an important role in making sure that these programs move forward in ways that improve outcomes for low-income students, students of color, and students with disabilities rather than widen disparities.

IV. Considerations and Opportunities for Advancing Equity

As states promote college in high school programs through ESSA implementation, what are key considerations for equity?

In order to fully meet ESSA's promise of equity and educational success for all, states and districts must examine whether their policies and systems contribute to equitable or inequitable access and success for college in high school programs.

Stakeholders should be aware of the below equity issues as they continue to refine and improve high quality college in high school systems.

- **Eligibility requirements** — In some cases, states or colleges place even higher requirements on high school students wishing to take dual enrollment courses than what is typically required of other college students, such as adding a GPA or class rank requirement or additional admission test score. Such requirements can disproportionately impact students from underserved groups. High school students should be held to the same college-readiness standards that the institution uses for traditional students—and they should be provided with support to help them reach these standards.
- **Tuition, fees, and transportation** — out-of-pocket tuition and fees remain a barrier for low-income students. States should ensure sustainable funding to allow programs to offer college courses for free or significantly reduced cost for low- and middle-income students. States and districts should also consider providing transportation for courses taught on college campuses or offering other delivery models—such as courses taught on the high school campus—to eliminate transportation barriers.

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What key questions should equity-minded advocates be asking?

- How will states collect and publicly report data on participation in college in high school programs, disaggregated by student group?
- How will states and districts monitor participation rates and outcomes in college in high school programs in high versus low-poverty schools?
- How will states, districts and colleges remove financial barriers to participation for low- and middle-income students?
- How will dual enrollment partnerships address gaps in college readiness, and ensure that students enrolled in college in high school courses receive counseling and support services to promote their success?
- How will states ensure that all dual enrollment programs share high-quality design principles?

- **Support Services** — should be tailored to support all students, particularly those from low-income and underserved backgrounds, and help students navigate dual enrollment programs and build the skills necessary for college success. Some states require local dual enrollment partnership agreements to include a plan for providing student advisement and support services.
- **Access to information** — students and families, particularly those from low-income backgrounds and limited English-speaking households, need access to information on college in high school programs. Some states require that all high school students and their parents receive information on college in high school opportunities — and, in some cases, this information must be made available in the family’s primary language. Stakeholders must have access to high quality, disaggregated data on the students accessing and succeeding in college in high school programs.
- **Program quality** — college and high school programs serving underserved students must be held to the same standards of rigor as traditional college courses for matriculated students. Several states require all dual enrollment partnerships to adhere to a rigorous set of quality standards, such as the accreditation standards developed by the National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships.

As states and districts continue to implement ESSA, they must consider the role dual enrollment programs play in closing or contributing to opportunity gaps for today’s most consistently underserved secondary students.

¹ Data represent the combined results of five studies of dual enrollment that met the highly rigorous design standards of the Institute for Education Science’s What Works Clearinghouse. Institute for Education Sciences, WWC Intervention Report: Transition to College, Dual Enrollment Programs (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

² Ben Struhl and Joel Vargas, Taking College Courses in High School: A Strategy for College Readiness. The Outcomes of Dual Enrollment in Texas (Boston: Jobs for the Future, 2012).

³ Brian P. An, The Impact of Dual Enrollment on College Performance and Attainment (Doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin—Madison, 2009).

⁴ Andrea Berger et al., Early College, Early Success: Early College High School Initiative Impact Study (Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research, 2013).

⁵ John Fink, Davis Jenkins, and Takeshi Yanagiura, What Happens to Students Who Take Community College ‘Dual Enrollment’ Courses in High School? (New York: Community College Research Center, 2017).

⁶ John Fink, Participation in Dual Enrollment and AP Courses by Race and Gender, Analysis of Data from U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights Data Collection, 2015-16 School Year (New York: August 2018), Accessed October 23, 2018, <https://public.tableau.com/profile/john.fink#!/vizhome/ParticipationinDualEnrollmentandAPCourses/Dashboard1>.

⁷ Ashley Pierson, Michelle Hodora, and Jonathan Luke, Earning College Credits in High School: Options, Participation, and Outcomes for Oregon Students, Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest, March 2017 https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/northwest/pdf/REL_2017216.pdf

⁸ ESSA: State-by-State Analysis: Strategies for Incorporating College in High School Programs into the Every Student Succeeds Act, College in High School Alliance, September 2018, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/589d0f90ff7c507ac483988e/t/5b9fce410e2e729e48794945/1537199681976/CHSA+ESSA+State-by-State+Analysis.pdf>

⁹ ESSA: State-by-State Analysis: Strategies for Incorporating College in High School Programs into the Every Student Succeeds Act, College in High School Alliance, September 2018, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/589d0f90ff7c507ac483988e/t/5b9fce410e2e729e48794945/1537199681976/CHSA+ESSA+State-by-State+Analysis.pdf>

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