
Dual Enrollment/Early College High Schools

National High School Center

A strategy designed to address the challenge of improving student access to and success in college is the expansion of dual enrollment opportunities, where high school students simultaneously earn high school *and* postsecondary credit for the same course while being exposed to the demands of college-level work (Bailey, Hughes, & Karp, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2003; 2004). These courses can be taken on a high school campus, the campus of a postsecondary institution, and sometimes through distance learning. Research has documented the effectiveness of dual enrollment efforts in aiding high school students not only in their transition to college, but also in graduating from college (Bailey et al., 2002; Anderson, 2001; Wechsler, 2001; Crossland, 1999).

It is becoming more common for high schools to give students some level of access to college courses. According to an Education Commission of the States database, in 2008 forty-six states had statewide policies governing at least one aspect of dual enrollment. State policies vary widely on a number of dimensions, including state oversight, target population, admissions requirements, course locations, tuition, and funding. According to an NCES study that surveyed U.S. high schools, 71% of high schools reported offering dual credit courses in 2002-03. However, dual enrollment was less available to the student populations traditionally underrepresented in postsecondary institutions. Of the high schools with more than a 50% minority student population, only 58% reported offering dual credit or college-level classes (Waits, Setzer, & Lewis, 2005). Studies indicate that despite the relatively wide availability of college courses to high school students, the number of students taking advantage of the opportunity is fairly small (Kleiner & Lewis, 2005).

One specific effort to expand opportunities for student participation in dual credit options is the Early College High School Initiative. There are over 200 Early College Schools (ECSs) in 24 states and the District of Columbia serving a population of over 30,000 students. ECSs are designed to ensure that underrepresented, first generation college-goers can earn a high school diploma and up to two years of college credit tuition-free. While other dual enrollment options provide students with a taste of college, the goals of ECSs are to provide students with a blended and more integrated academic and social experience.

The specific designs of ECSs vary, but all agree to adhere to the initiative's core principles that include: a commitment to serving students underrepresented in higher education; a partnership between a local education agency, a higher education institution, and the community, all of whom accept joint responsibility for student success; a jointly developed, integrated academic program that allows students to earn one to two years of transferable college credit; a comprehensive student support system that develops the academic and social skills necessary for college success; and a commitment to advocate for supportive policies that advance the early college movement. A series of reports (AIR & SRI, 2006; 2007; 2008) have examined ECSs and their characteristics, and the National High School Center summarized early findings in one of its publications (National High School Center, 2007).

Action Principles

For State

1. Consider including dual enrollment as part of a larger statewide P-20 alignment effort.
2. Consider adopting statewide articulation agreements that address credit transfer for dual credit classes in both 2- and 4-year institutions of higher education.
3. Consider identifying funding streams that would help make dual credit options affordable for all students, not just those with the ability to pay for tuition, books, and other materials.
4. Consider aligning standards, assessments, and graduation requirements with postsecondary expectations.
5. Create the longitudinal data systems that can track student progress pre-K-12 through postsecondary and workplace.

6. Consider the implications for tuition assistance and campus housing for recent high school graduates transitioning to postsecondary institutions with one or two years of college credit.
7. Consider the impact that preparation for end-of-course exams might have for students who want to enroll in dual credit options.
8. Consider incentives for collaboration and communication across the educational system.

For District

1. Promote partnerships with postsecondary institutions.
2. Provide information/resources to support program design options across multiple schools and postsecondary institutions.
3. Serve as policy advisors on program implementation.
4. Help find instructors who could teach college level courses and assist with administrative planning.

For School

1. Ensure that school staff members (administrators and guidance counselors) fully understand the state's graduation and dual enrollment policies.
2. Design clear course pathways that provide students with opportunities for dual credit options, particularly for students traditionally underrepresented in postsecondary institutions.
3. Provide course-selection guidance for students interested in and eligible for dual credit options.
4. Balance student interests with the transferability of credits when advising students on course selection.
5. Provide adequate academic and social support for student success in college-level classes.
6. Build time and incentives for cross-institutional collaboration between high schools and postsecondary institutions.

References and Resources

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