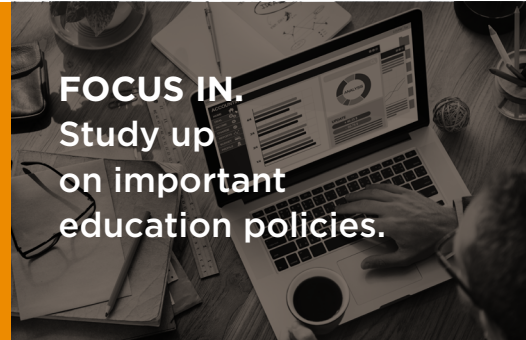




POLICY ANALYSIS



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Early College High Schools: Model policy components

JENNIFER ZINTH

An alarming convergence of factors – diminishing percentages of high school graduates enrolling immediately in postsecondary

FROM 2008 TO 2013, THE PERCENTAGE OF LOW-INCOME STUDENTS ENROLLING IN COLLEGE DIRECTLY AFTER HIGH SCHOOL DROPPED MORE THAN 10 PERCENT, COMPARED TO MUCH SMALLER DECLINES AMONG MIDDLE- AND HIGH-INCOME STUDENTS.

education, traditionally underserved students comprising a growing proportion of the overall U.S. school population, and projections that more occupations in the future will need education beyond high school – suggest that states will need to adopt new approaches to increase the number of American adults ready to enter tomorrow's workforce.

Early college high schools are one increasingly popular approach to raise the high school completion and postsecondary participation rates of traditionally underserved students and meet projected workforce needs. This policy brief:

- Defines early college high schools.
- Clarifies how they differ from traditional dual enrollment programs.
- Provides recent research on the positive impact of early college high school participation on academic outcomes for traditionally underserved students.
- Sets forth the model state policy components that provide the necessary supports to ensure program access, quality and transferability of credit.

Research suggests early college high school participants are **significantly more likely than other disadvantaged students to graduate high school**, enroll in college immediately after high school and earn a degree.

States with **comprehensive early college policies** addressing access and support, program quality, finance and facilities, and credit transfer may **increase the scalability of early colleges statewide** while ensuring quality and fidelity to the early college mission.



Introduction

The Bureau of Labor Statistics **projects** that 11 of the 15 occupations with the fastest growth between 2014 and 2024 will require education beyond secondary school.¹ Six of the 15 jobs anticipated to experience the **greatest growth** will demand a credential beyond a high school diploma.² To address these needs, and to respond to a national call for America to once again have the highest percentage of adults with a postsecondary credential, numerous states have adopted ambitious postsecondary attainment goals.

Yet in fall 2015, postsecondary enrollments decreased 1.7 percent from fall 2014, continuing a trend in declining postsecondary participation rates.³ And in fact, U.S. Census Bureau data indicate that while the percentage of all recent high school graduates going directly to college dropped from 69 to 66 percent from 2008 to 2013, the percentage of low-income graduates going straight to college saw a much greater decrease, from 55.9 percent to 45.5 percent, during the same time.⁴

As Melinda Mechur Karp of Columbia University cogently argues in a **report** for the state of Tennessee,

... completion goals can only be achieved if all students are part of the postsecondary pipeline. Ensuring that students who might not have gone to college in the past—low-income students, first-generation college-goers, students who are interested in career and technical education—enter and succeed in postsecondary education is essential to increasing the overall percentage of college completers within the state. This means that dual enrollment programs cannot be limited to only the most academically proficient students, most economically advantaged families, or the largest schools.

Research suggests that early college high schools - a more structured dual enrollment strategy specifically targeted at traditionally underserved students - are one effective state approach to increase postsecondary participation and attainment rates.

What's an Early College High School?

While various early college models exist, for purposes of this report, early college high schools are defined as programs intended to serve at-risk and traditionally underrepresented students, including low-income, first-generation college-goers, students of color and English language learners. Starting in ninth grade, students embark on a curriculum of high school and, increasingly, postsecondary coursework. Five years later, students will have concurrently earned a high school diploma and an associate degree, technical credential or 60 credit hours of postsecondary coursework, allowing them to enter a four-year postsecondary institution as a junior.



Programs may be located on a high school campus (in a school-within-a-school), on a two-or four-year postsecondary campus, or at a third-party location. Early college high schools are typically small (fewer than 100 students per grade), and “engage all students in a comprehensive support system that develops academic and social skills as well as the behaviors and mindsets necessary for college completion.”⁵

Questions have been raised on whether students who enter high school behind grade level or disengaged from school are truly capable of completing coursework equal in rigor to traditional entry-level postsecondary courses. Schoolwide literacy and contextualization (teaching using real-world examples and experiences) help ready early college students for postsecondary-level content.

Although early college high schools in a number of states operate under waivers from traditional high school (or dual enrollment) requirements, a small number of states have enacted policies specific to early college high schools. These state policies identify dedicated state funding streams and institutionalize practice, so that programs are not fueled solely under the impetus of an extraordinary leader or, alternatively, disappear if and when external funding streams dry up.

How do early colleges differ from traditional dual enrollment programs?

The following chart compares the defining characteristics of dual enrollment programs and early college high schools.

Program Characteristics	Dual Enrollment	Early College High School
LOCATION	High school or college classroom, online, two-way videoconferencing or hybrid in-person and remotely delivered.	School-within-a school, small stand-alone school or school located on college campus.
STUDENT GRADE LEVEL	In some states, programs are limited to students in grades 11-12 or 10-12.	Students typically begin in ninth grade.
ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA	Students must demonstrate academic potential by state- or locally-set means, which may include high school grade point average, teacher recommendation, etc.	Students are typically not required to meet academic eligibility criteria to participate.
TARGET POPULATION	Mid- to high-achieving students.	Students from backgrounds underrepresented in higher education, irrespective of academic achievement.
CURRICULUM/COURSE SELECTION	Students select individual courses that potentially allow them to earn both high school and postsecondary credit.	Cohesive curriculum integrating high school and college-level coursework into a single program.

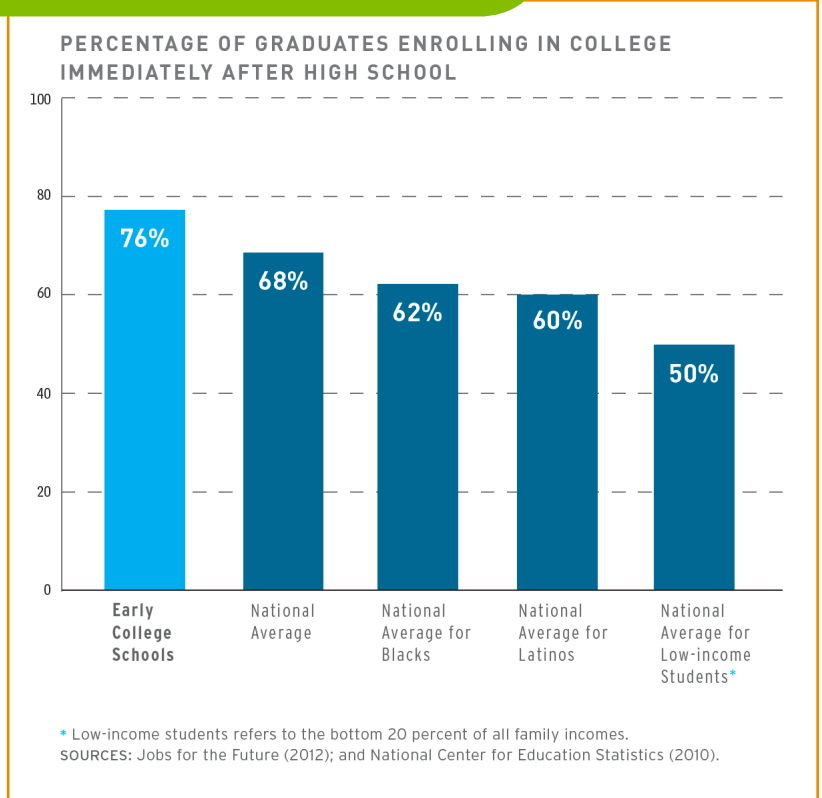


Program Characteristics	Dual Enrollment	Early College High School
CREDIT ACCUMULATION	May vary considerably, depending on the student and state policies. Some states set a cap on the number of postsecondary credits a student may earn.	Students are expected to complete an associate degree or industry-recognized credential, or enough credits to enter a four-year institution as a junior.
AREA OF PROGRAM FOCUS	Students may take courses in core academic subjects or in career-technical education. Some states allow students to take courses in elective subject areas.	Postsecondary courses may be focused on a specific subject area, such as health sciences.
GUIDANCE/ADVISING	Students may receive little to no guidance from the high school or postsecondary institution.	All students receive guidance and support.

Positive student outcomes

A growing body of research demonstrates that early college high school participants achieve greater academic success than their underserved peers in other high schools. For example, a multi-year, multi-state study by the American Institutes for Research found early college students were substantially more likely than similar students in comparison high schools to enroll in college (81 percent versus 72 percent) and earn a college degree (25 percent versus 5 percent).⁶ An analysis of North Carolina programs found ninth graders in early college high schools, compared to their peers in traditional high schools, were enrolling in and successfully completing Algebra I and English I at higher rates, narrowing the minority/nonminority performance gap in those courses, attending school more often and with fewer suspensions, demonstrating enhanced academic engagement, and more likely to report positive school experiences.⁷ National data from Jobs for the Future likewise show that early college high school students are significantly more likely to graduate high school and 8 percent more likely to enroll in college directly after high school.⁸

SPOTLIGHT: JOBS FOR THE FUTURE



Model State Policy Components

In consideration of early college high schools' unique goals, target student population and curricular model, states leaders should keep in mind the following four policy components as they develop or enhance supports for early college high schools:

- **Access and support.**
- **Program quality, including workforce alignment.**
- **Finance and facilities.**
- **Transferability of credit.**

Experience bears out that having these model policy components in place may increase the scalability of early colleges throughout a state while ensuring quality and fidelity to the early college mission of enhancing high school and postsecondary outcomes for traditionally underrepresented students. For example, North Carolina passed legislation in 2003 to support “cooperative innovative high school programs,” which may include early college high schools. By the 2015-16 academic year, 109 cooperative innovative high schools were operating in North Carolina, with 13 additional proposed programs awaiting funding approval.⁹

■ Access and support

A body of research suggests underserved students and their families are typically less connected in their local school community and, consequently, less likely to be aware of beneficial opportunities. College students from underserved populations are more likely to be first-generation, with parents who are unable to draw from personal experience to guide them academically and emotionally through college options. In addition, parents of early college high school students who wish to be more involved in their child's education may be unsure of how to become more engaged.

Policies undergirding access and support to early college high school students and their families include the following elements.

Outreach and early notification to all students

To ensure all students are aware of beneficial opportunities, **Texas** requires school districts to notify the parent of each student enrolled in ninth grade or above of the availability of programs in the district under which a student may earn college credit.¹⁰

In addition, because students typically start early college high school programs as early as ninth grade, students and parents need to be informed of the availability of such programs and the benefits of program participation, while students are still in the middle grades. North Carolina and Tennessee require early college high schools to develop methods for early identification of potential participating students in the middle grades, and continue identification processes through high school.¹¹

Counseling/advising to students and parents before and during program participation

Since underserved students are more likely to be first-generation college-goers, their parents may be less prepared to provide the guidance and support students need to complete college-level courses, including steering students toward the college services that may be available to them. To address this need, some states require early college high school programs to provide students with counseling/advising.

For example, North Carolina and Tennessee require early college high schools to provide consistent counseling, advising and parent conferencing so that parents and students can make responsible decisions regarding course taking and track the students' academic progress and success.¹² Texas requires early college programs to provide academic mentoring.¹³ To be eligible for specified state funds, **Michigan** Career and Technical Education (CTE) early/middle college programs must offer highly integrated student support services that include teachers as academic advisors, supervised course selection and monitoring of student progress and completion.¹⁴

Parental involvement

When developing early college high school programs, states should consider that parents of many participating students will want to support their child's college aspirations, but may not have the experience, tools or encouragement from the school system to effectively do so. North Carolina and Tennessee require early college programs to emphasize parental involvement and provide consistent parent conferencing.¹⁵ The application in North Carolina for a local school board and postsecondary partner to open an early college high school must identify the process the school will follow to ensure parental involvement.¹⁶

Program quality, including workforce alignment

States need to make sure that early college high schools provide high-quality instruction and that coursework designated as college-level truly mirrors the rigor and pacing of these same courses when they are delivered to regular college students. States should also ensure that programs are strategically focused on preparing students for high-demand, high-skill occupations.

Instructional quality and faculty qualifications

While no state appears to require high school or postsecondary instructors in early college high school programs to meet additional certification or professional development requirements, Tennessee does require early college programs to encourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods and provide a flexible, customized program of instruction.¹⁷ North Carolina calls for program applications to describe the qualifications required for individuals employed in the school.¹⁸

Texas directs the partnering college or university to select all instructors offering courses for college credit at an early college high school. These instructors must be regularly employed faculty members of the postsecondary institution or meet the same standards, including minimal regional accreditation requirements, and be supervised and evaluated using the same or comparable procedures used for faculty at the postsecondary institution.¹⁹ Similarly, Indiana requires an institution participating in an early college program to set the criteria for faculty members teaching dual credit courses.²⁰

Curricular quality

To maximize their potential, high school-level courses provided in early college settings should be aligned with state standards and prepare students for postsecondary course expectations. College-level courses should be equivalent to those offered in traditional postsecondary courses. Likewise, programs should strive to integrate academic and technical instruction.

- ✓ **Alignment to state standards:** Tennessee requires all early college programs to be centered on the state's core academic standards.²¹
- ✓ **Preparation for future learning:** North Carolina and Tennessee early college high schools are expected to prepare students adequately for future learning in the workforce or in an institution of higher education.²²
- ✓ **College courses mirror those delivered to high school graduates:** Texas postsecondary partners must make sure that college-level courses delivered by early college high schools use the same curriculum, materials, instructional activity and method/rigor of evaluation of student performance.²³ Indiana postsecondary partners must ensure that the content and rigor of an early college course is adequate to warrant providing college credit to a student as if the student took the course as a student at the eligible institution, including determining prerequisites, if any, for enrollment in a dual credit course and standards for assessment.²⁴

Program location and design

It may be easier for high school students, particularly those whose parents did not attend college, to view themselves as college students and commit to an early college program if early colleges are located on a college campus and are small enough to make students truly feel like members of a learning community. North Carolina requires early college high schools to be located on the partnering institution's campus, unless the institutional board specifically waives the requirement through adoption of a formal resolution.²⁵ North Carolina also limits early colleges to no more than 100 students per grade level.²⁶

High-demand, career-wage focus

In addition to readying students to enter the workforce, either upon program completion or after completing a four-year or advanced degree, programs should also prepare students for jobs in high-demand occupations allowing them to earn a family-sustaining wage. Tennessee requires that early college high schools provide studies in a career or technical field that will lead to advanced programs or employment opportunities in engineering, health sciences or teaching.²⁷ In North Carolina, applications to establish an early college high school must include a statement of how the early college relates to the Economic Vision Plan adopted for the economic development region in which the program is to be located.²⁸

Michigan policies also make clear that CTE early/middle college programs must be aligned to regional workforce needs. Specifically, intermediate school districts wishing to serve as a fiscal agent for a CTE early/middle college must partner with the local talent district career council on a regional strategic



plan that aligns CTE programs and services into an efficient and effective delivery system for high school students. An eligible program must be identified in the highest five career cluster rankings in any of the 10 regional strategic plans jointly approved by the Michigan talent investment agency and the department of education.²⁹

Business partnerships may help ensure programs align to and prepare students for in-demand jobs in a region. North Carolina and Tennessee allow a private business or organization and/or the county board of commissioners (in Tennessee: county legislative body) in the county in which the program is to be located to serve as a partner in developing an early college high school.³⁰ Early colleges in both states may be operated in a facility owned or leased by the private partner or county board of commissioners.³¹

Meanwhile, Texas directs the commissioner of education to collaborate with the Texas Workforce Commission to develop and implement a strategic plan to enhance private industry participation in early college high schools. The strategic plan must include strategies to increase private industry participation and incentives for businesses and nonprofit organizations that choose to make donations and work with high schools that participate in an early college program to maximize job placement opportunities for program graduates.³²

Career planning is also an important consideration. Michigan requires a CTE early/middle college program seeking state funds to include career planning services provided by a local one-stop service center or by a high school counselor or advisor in its existing highly integrated student support services.³³

Accountability and evaluation

Programs should be held accountable for performance, and such accountability must be shared by secondary and postsecondary partners. Tennessee requires that an early college high school be held accountable for meeting measurable student achievement results as established by the state board of education, the University of Tennessee system and the Tennessee board of regents. Early college high schools in Tennessee must also establish joint institutional responsibility and accountability for support of students and their success.³⁴

Texas districts must seek re-approval of each early college high school each year. Administrative code sets forth criteria for which the commissioner of education may deny renewal or revoke an early college high school's authorization, including a lack of program success as evidenced by progress reports and program data.³⁵

With regards to evaluation, North Carolina and Tennessee require state-level entities to evaluate early college high school program success by:

- ✓ High school retention, completion and dropout rates.
- ✓ Certification and associate degree completion (in Tennessee, also baccalaureate degree completion).
- ✓ Admission to four-year institutions.
- ✓ Postgraduation employment in career or study-related fields.

- ✓ Employer satisfaction with employees who participated in and graduated from the schools.³⁶

Texas regulation takes a more local-control approach to evaluation of early college high schools. Each early college high school and its sponsoring postsecondary institution are responsible for developing and implementing an evaluation process to determine the program's effectiveness. Effectiveness measures must include, but are not limited to, student results on the K-12 accountability assessments and success indicators of graduates at Texas public institutions of higher education (e.g., participation rates, grade point average, retention rates and graduation rates).³⁷

Finance and facilities

Finance and facilities are important considerations for early college high schools if states wish to scale programs statewide, while maintaining access for underserved populations and ensuring quality and fidelity of implementation.

State funding distribution

Lower funding amounts to districts or postsecondary institutions for serving early college students may disincentivize program participation. Texas and North Carolina, for example, appear to provide the same levels of funding to high schools/school districts and postsecondary institutions for early college high school students as they do for traditional students.³⁸

Tuition costs

States that do not cover early college high school students' postsecondary tuition costs could deter student participation, especially among the low-income population many early colleges are intended to serve. States including North Carolina and Texas prohibit early college high school students from being charged tuition.³⁹ Tennessee provides that if a program is funded through local, state or federal funds appropriated to a local education agency (LEA), no fee may be charged by the LEA or a public postsecondary institution to any participating student.⁴⁰

Cooperative use

Policies in some states make clear that K-12 and postsecondary partners should strive to share existing facilities and resources. North Carolina and Tennessee direct early college high schools to encourage the cooperative or shared use of resources, personnel and facilities between public schools and postsecondary institutions.⁴¹

Seeking nontraditional funding sources

Some state policies also encourage early college high schools to seek funding sources in addition to the traditional local, state and federal revenue streams. For example, early college high schools in North Carolina and Tennessee may be operated in a facility owned or leased by a private business or organization, or the county board of commissioners, if one or more of these is included as a partner in a written early college agreement.⁴² Both states provide that if an education partner is a public body, the



program may use local, state and federal funds allocated to that body.⁴³ Both states also permit the local county board of commissioners (in Tennessee: county governing body) to appropriate funds to an early college high school even if the county board of commissioners/governing body was not an education partner in the early college application process.⁴⁴

Laws in both states also strongly encourage districts and postsecondary partners to seek funds from sources other than local, state and federal appropriations.⁴⁵

■ Transferability of credit

States should seek to ensure that postsecondary credits earned through early college high school programs transfer to other public two- and four-year institutions in the state. This not only has the potential to be the best return on investment in early college high school programs (and best use of everyone's time and resources), but also addresses the fact that underserved students are less likely to be able to afford to re-take postsecondary credits that do not transfer to another public postsecondary institution. In one example, North Carolina's [Comprehensive Articulation Agreement](#) assures transfer of community college courses, including those completed through early college high schools, across public two- and four-year institutions in the state. It also allows community college students who have earned a two-year Associate in Arts or Associate in Science degree and who are admitted to University of North Carolina institutions to matriculate with junior status.⁴⁶

Final Thought

Research suggests that early college high schools are a viable means to improve postsecondary completion rates, particularly among traditionally underrepresented youth, by maximizing efficiencies through reducing postsecondary remediation and sharing existing resources, while also meeting emerging workforce needs.



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AUTHOR

Jennifer Dounay Zinth is Director, High School Institute and STEM Center at Education Commission of the States. When she's not trying to save the world through education policy, Jennifer loves cooking, yoga, Mel Brooks movies and spending time with her husband and son. Contact Jennifer at jzinth@ecs.org or 303.299.3689.

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