

Prioritizing Equity in Dual Enrollment

Amy Williams and Alex Perry

Dual enrollment programs are popular among both students and policymakers. The National Student Clearinghouse recently reported that the number of students in dual enrollment courses has grown at an [unprecedented rate](#) over the previous year. Meanwhile, in 2019, [23 states passed new laws](#) designed to expand access to dual enrollment opportunities for students.

Months into the COVID-19 pandemic, school districts and colleges reported a [surge in interest](#) in dual enrollment, and they see an increased interest heading into fall of 2020. [Based on prior experience](#) during the financial crisis of 2009-10, interest in dual enrollment may continue to grow as economic conditions worsen and students focus on options that can help provide accelerated — and lower-cost — opportunities to advance postsecondary attainment and entry into the workforce.

However, despite [significant research](#) demonstrating the power of dual enrollment to increase college access and completion, access to dual enrollment is [not equitable](#). National data show that, as a result of disparities in student access, Black and Latinx students participate in dual enrollment programs at much lower levels than their white peers by share of the high school population, and that [students coming from a home with college-educated parents](#) are overrepresented in these programs. Data from the High School Longitudinal Study, released in 2019, indicated that 38% of white students and 38% of Asian students took at least one dual enrollment course, but 27% of Black students and 30% of Latinx students participated.

EQUITABLE TRANSITIONS THROUGH PANDEMIC DISRUPTIONS

This Policy Brief is one of six dedicated to various facets of the transition from secondary to postsecondary education, now complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic. It focuses on the populations already underserved in our nation's education system. The series — which builds upon "[A State Policymaker's Guide to Equitable Transitions in the COVID-19 Era](#)" — provides actionable steps and examples for state policymakers to consider as they address the transition from high school to college and the workforce. The other Policy Briefs in the series are:

- "[Expanding High-Quality Work-Based Learning](#)"
- "[Boosting FAFSA Completion to Increase Student Success](#)"
- "[Policy Solutions That Foster Competency-Based Learning](#)"
- "[Modernizing Math Pathways to Support Student Transitions](#)"
- "[Establishing a State-Level Postsecondary Advising Network](#)"

The COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to exacerbate these inequities at a time when more students stand to benefit from the advantages that dual enrollment provides. These programs can play a strong role in ensuring that states are poised for post-pandemic economic recovery with an educated, technically skilled workforce.

Policymakers' responses to the challenges created by the pandemic — particularly on state budgets and any state mechanism funding dual enrollment — will have an impact on opportunities for students to enroll, as will families' economic circumstances in those states where students must pay some or all costs of participating. In addition to managing these challenges, there is also an opportunity to continue to make progress on expanding dual enrollment access to make it more equitable and to bring the benefits of dual enrollment to more students from low-income families, and to more Black, Latinx and Native American students.

Dual Enrollment's Potential and Its Challenges

Numerous [national](#) and state-level studies (including examples from [North Carolina](#) focused on early-college high school and [Texas](#) focused on dual credit) demonstrate that dual enrollment has a strong positive impact on students' access to college, degree attainment, high school graduation and academic achievement. Additionally, several studies, including a multiyear look at the effectiveness of early-college high school by the [American Institutes for Research](#), also show that these programs can have outsized benefits for students from [low-income families](#) and those [who are underrepresented in postsecondary education](#).

Yet like postsecondary education as a whole, [participation in dual enrollment is not representative](#) of the racial, socioeconomic and

What Is Dual Enrollment?

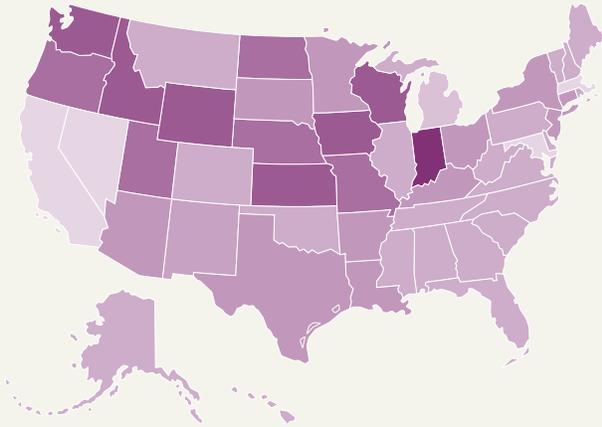
Dual enrollment is a popular umbrella term used to describe a number of programs — delivered in partnership between a school district and a postsecondary institution — that allow high school students to enroll in college courses that provide transcribed college credit.

These programs go by many names; a [2013 analysis](#) found 38 different terms used in state policies to describe college course-taking while in high school. There are also a number of variations, particularly around location of instruction (either on a college campus or at a high school) and type of instructor (either college faculty or a high school teacher credentialed as college faculty by the college partner).

For the purposes of this Policy Brief, the term *dual enrollment* will be used to encapsulate the many variations in program design that allow high school students to take college courses for credit, including more intensive models such as early college high school and P-TECH.

U.S. Dual Enrollment Participation Rate 2015-16

0%  28%



SOURCE: Community College Research Center, 2018

U.S. Dual Enrollment Participation by Student Group

All Students

 Total **8.1%**

Gender

 Male **7.2%**

 Female **9.0%**

Race/Ethnicity

 White **10.3%**

 Black **4.7%**

 Hispanic **5.7%**

 Asian **7.9%**

 Multiracial **7.8%**

SOURCE: Community College Research Center, 2018

geographic makeup of the nation. Despite gains in recent years in certain states, including [Colorado](#), significant participation gaps persist for Black, Latinx and Native American students, students from low-income families, rural students and students from families without college-educated parents.

According to an [analysis from the Community College Research Center \(CCRC\)](#), inequitable access to dual enrollment by race is “clearly predicted” by income disparity. An [ExcelinEd analysis](#) also found that many high schools with a majority Black and/or Latinx student body were not able to offer advanced coursework opportunities to their students. Driving these disparities at the district level are a [lack of resources](#) (particularly if the state requires the district to pay student tuition costs on

their behalf) and a lack of available qualified instructors.

However, the problem is not limited to schools unable to offer dual enrollment at all; CCRC’s analysis also found that districts with the highest levels of dual enrollment participation were also more likely to have the highest levels of inequitable participation. There are complex factors at work that may explain these disparities, including [student-eligibility](#) criteria and a lack of student counseling specifically targeted at encouraging underrepresented student groups to participate in dual enrollment.

The COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to exacerbate these inequities, particularly as potential funding cuts further restrict resources to districts and reduce availability of instructors and counselors.

The Role of Executive Leadership

Partnerships and collaboration between school districts and colleges [are a core feature](#) of [dual enrollment programs](#). Given that dual enrollment connects K-12 and postsecondary education and may also include the business community (particularly in dual enrollment that focuses on career and technical education), executive leadership is often an [important feature](#) of systems that effectively support and advance dual enrollment. Representatives from K-12, postsecondary education and business all need to be at the table, and sometimes it requires the governor to get them there.

Governors also have [an important role to play](#) in agenda-setting and managing separate governance structures for K-12 and postsecondary education, which can frequently have their own priorities. Particularly at this moment of crisis, when both K-12 and postsecondary education are singularly focused on questions about how to safely reopen schools in the fall, governors can ensure that postsecondary transition programs are not de-emphasized, especially since student interest in dual enrollment is increasing.

In 2019, the College in High School Alliance, of which the [National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships](#) is a founding member, and the Level Up coalition [released a six-part roadmap](#) for states to advance equity and quality in dual enrollment policy. Using that roadmap, NACEP identifies three core strategies to improve dual enrollment access and success in both the short to medium term, understanding that states are grappling with questions about reopening for the fall and face significant budget cuts in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Protect low-income students' access to dual enrollment

According to a [recent analysis](#), students in at least 27 states currently pay no tuition to access dual enrollment programs, and funding mechanisms in at least seven other states exist to reduce tuition burdens on students.

Of the states that are supporting the full tuition cost for students, the funding mechanisms break down into three primary categories: The state pays, usually through an appropriation; the state and districts share payments, normally through state supplemental funding and district support for student tuition; and the district covers tuition expenses with its revenue.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the [significant costs](#) anticipated to reopen schools in the fall, many states are likely to scrutinize budgets for possible savings. Of the models described above, [funding that relies upon a state appropriation](#) is more vulnerable to cuts. However, funding models that require districts to cover the tuition costs are also likely to be impacted, as declining tax revenues and increased costs put a strain on district budgets.

These difficult budget scenarios may cause policymakers and district officials to look toward limiting student access to tuition-free dual enrollment. However, such actions can further impede access to dual enrollment for students who are already underrepresented in the programs. Strategic program changes, such as income-based thresholds and special funding for targeted districts, could decrease program costs while maintaining robust fiscal support for students and districts who need them the most.

States may also consider launching funding specifically for low-income students, such as [Nebraska's Access College Early Scholarship Program](#) or [Washington's Dual Enrollment Scholarship Pilot Program](#). However, it is important when developing and implementing these programs to be sensitive to the need, and additional burden placed on counselors in particular, to ensure that students know about and take advantage of scholarship opportunities when they require a sign-up process.

In instances where the school district pays the tuition on behalf of students, district leadership may consider limiting the number of courses or increasing the requirements for students to get into the courses, as a means of cost savings. This approach creates blanket limitations for all students that may disproportionately impact those who are the most cost-sensitive.

In order to avoid difficult conversations about dual enrollment funding changes in the short term, some governors have turned to federal COVID-19 stimulus funds. According to an analysis by the National Governors Association, four governors indicated plans to support dual enrollment using Governor's Emergency Education Relief (GEER) funding in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act.

Notably, [Montana](#) is planning to use \$6.5 million of its \$8.7 million in GEER funding to support the Montana University System in, among other things, providing funding for the state's [One-Two-Free Program](#) that provides free dual enrollment courses to high school students. In addition, [Alaska](#) will use a portion of its GEER funding to expand online dual enrollment. As Congress debates additional stimulus funding to support education through the pandemic, additional opportunities may become available

for governors to use federal stimulus funds to support dual enrollment access.

Policymakers will face tough budget decisions in the coming months. Governors must keep equity in focus to ensure that budget cuts do not exacerbate persistent equity gaps in dual enrollment, postsecondary education and, ultimately, the workforce. Targeted changes to programs can help states cut costs while maintaining a focus on growing equitable access and participation in dual enrollment.

Re-examine student eligibility policies

According to a 2018 report by [Education Commission of the States](#), “by and large, state-set eligibility requirements limit dual enrollment access to only the most academically advanced students, who are likely to pursue college after high school regardless.” The report highlights research demonstrating that middle-achieving students — those students whose grades fall just short of typical college-readiness measures — can be successful participants in dual enrollment and can derive significant benefits from it. In addition, students who have [struggled in high school or even dropped out](#) can, when provided adequate supports, achieve success in dual enrollment.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created challenges for states and programs in administering their dual enrollment partnerships. One of the primary challenges facing programs for the coming academic year is assessing student eligibility for participating in dual enrollment when eligibility has historically been [based on performance on a standardized test](#). Because of the pandemic, many states have canceled the tests that students would previously have relied upon to access dual enrollment opportunities.

Policymakers have an opportunity to address challenges created by the pandemic and to expand equitable access to dual enrollment by encouraging or requiring dual enrollment programs to adopt multiple measures to determine student eligibility. Several states have already made moves in this direction, including **Florida** and **Louisiana**, both of which have issued emergency regulations to change eligibility for the next academic year to include additional criteria.

Alternative criteria that could be used to predict a student's success in dual enrollment classes include:

- Grade level.
- Regular high school attendance.
- Near-proficient writing performance in an essay assessment.
- Projects, portfolios and performance assessments.
- Interviews and personal statements.
- Comprehensive review of a student's academic record.
- Sophomore ACT Plan score within two to three points of benchmarks.
- Recent assessment results that indicate that a student is reading at or within one grade level.
- GPA performance over time (demonstrating improvement).
- Nomination from a teacher.
- Student self-recommendation.

Delaware, **Illinois** and **Ohio** are among several states that already have multiple measures for eligibility written into state law. As states look to improve access, it is important for policymakers to ensure that program implementation meets their vision for the desired outcome of advancing equitable participation in dual enrollment.

Governors looking to prioritize equitable access to dual enrollment can direct state agencies to either re-examine existing eligibility criteria and adopt multiple measures or, where the authority to set eligibility requirements rests with the program, direct state agencies to encourage programs to adopt multiple measures. Given the pandemic, a number of states will have no choice but to make additional changes to student-eligibility criteria in order to preserve access to postsecondary education in the short term.

Encourage greater collaboration between K-12 and postsecondary education

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of strong partnerships between K-12 and postsecondary education. As colleges and schools around the country closed earlier this spring, dual enrollment students learned to navigate both the policies of their local district and the college partner.

Many states **issued guidance** to dual enrollment programs in the wake of the pandemic, but in many cases these pointed to the importance of students following instructions from both K-12 and college partners. In many states, the responsibility to adapt and adjust was pushed to the local, institutional level. Strong partnership and collaboration were essential features of easing communication between partners, allowing for rapid responses to changes and better results for students. As schools and colleges look to reopen for the fall, but with the prospect that local or regional spikes in infections could lead some schools and colleges to close back down, continued coordination between K-12 and postsecondary education is essential.

Partnership is a critical element in building and maintaining successful, impactful dual enrollment programs and a [cornerstone of national program quality standards](#). Programs with strong partnerships at the local and system level have better weathered the rapid changes in education caused by the pandemic. They are also better positioned to have data-driven conversations about equitable program participation and enact thoughtful changes to address equity gaps. Strong partnership and collaboration can be encouraged at both the local level (i.e., between the school and college,) but also at the policymaker level (i.e., between governing bodies for K-12 and postsecondary education) to ensure statewide and systemwide expectations for communication and collaboration.

Governors are uniquely placed to create forums through which collaboration, at both the agency and the program level, can be improved. The state of **Colorado** manages a [Concurrent Enrollment Advisory Board](#), which includes members from K-12, postsecondary education and a representative sample of students, parents and counselors. Recent advisory councils or task forces for dual enrollment have also been established in [Indiana](#) and [Louisiana](#). These collaborations do not need to be authorized by law in order to be effective; in **Washington**, [COVID-19 messaging and response](#) for students and programs have been coordinated jointly among the various agencies and associations at both the secondary and postsecondary levels.

Addressing Other Challenges

The three strategies outlined in this Policy Brief are high-impact ones, but they are not the only areas where policymakers and governors may be able to support dual enrollment.

The pandemic may require or create opportunities for K-12 and postsecondary education to pool resources to address common constraints, including access to technology and training, availability of qualified instructors and student-support services. In addition, as states implement new policies impacting dual enrollment in the wake of the pandemic, ensuring that they have a data-collection and reporting mechanism for dual enrollment access and success will be essential for understanding the impact of those policy changes.

Final Thoughts

The COVID-19 pandemic threatens to widen equity gaps [already present](#) in dual enrollment access. Because student interest in dual enrollment [is expected to rise](#) due to the pandemic, policymakers have a role in determining how the pandemic affects student participation.

The pandemic has changed neither the underlying fundamentals of our economy nor the need for students to graduate with a postsecondary degree or credential. As the economy recovers and reconfigures, states will be looking to ensure that they have a strong, robust talent pipeline to address their current, evolving and future workforce needs. States that have invested in strong connections between secondary and postsecondary education already understand the value of these programs in driving the state economy. These relationships and a willingness to partner with industry will yield dividends as states emerge from this crisis.



About the Authors

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