

# POLICIES PAVED THE WAY: EARLY COLLEGE INNOVATION IN NORTH CAROLINA

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 2004, the state of North Carolina has started over 100 innovative high schools, including 70 early college high schools. Although the schools are young, they show early outcomes that are better than those of other high schools in the state: lower grade-to-grade dropout rates and higher scores on end-of-course exams than those at schools with comparable student compositions. A substantial number of early college students are also completing college courses before high school graduation.

This brief describes how North Carolina has spurred and supported this successful educational innovation. It is told from the perspective of leaders of early college schools who were asked about the state policies that have supported their success. It provides a model to other states for creating effective, financially sustainable pathways from high school through the first critical years of postsecondary education.

School leaders said that formal state processes and policies—such as waivers for early college schools and similar efforts—have helped them. But even more emphatically, they believed the foundation for innovation is laid in the strong signals that state leaders sent to local superintendents, school boards, and college leaders encouraging innovation in cooperative programs between high schools and colleges.

By taking at least three key steps, state leaders cultivated a climate for colleges and schools to work together creatively:

- > Enacting the Innovative Education Initiatives Act;
- > Supporting the North Carolina New Schools Project; and
- > Granting start-up funds to early-colleges that supported the costs of high school-college coordination among other important activities.

Several preexisting state policies also paved the way for the creation of early college schools. These policies and processes, combined with a supportive climate for innovation, helped forge a “can do” attitude among local education leaders in creating North Carolina’s early college schools.

However, early college leaders cited remaining barriers to innovation that are indicative of larger misalignments between the expectations of high school and college in North Carolina. This suggests that North Carolina must bridge such fissures in order to sustain and expand the innovative practices that early college schools have demonstrated can improve college readiness and completion for all students.

To do so, the state could consider two future directions that build on the success of the early college innovation:

- > Take what is best about the early college innovation to seed the development of similar school designs and strengthen other secondary-postsecondary connections; and
- > Identify how policies affect early college, and use this understanding to improve policies that affect the transition of all students from high school through college.

Continued commitment by North Carolina leaders to sustain innovations like early college schools and to remove remaining obstacles can pave the way for making successful innovation the norm.



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