



**Jobs for
the Future**

Improve Today, Invent Tomorrow

A Call to Reboot Dual Enrollment

AT A GLANCE

Dual enrollment and early college increase the number of high schoolers who succeed in college. Over the past two decades, they've grown from boutique opportunities to widespread college success strategies; research confirms effectiveness. This 20-year history charts innovations in dual enrollment leading to today's urgent equity priority. What bold action now will remove implementation barriers and evolve new educational institutions to make the 2020s the equity decade?

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About JFF

Jobs for the Future (JFF) drives transformation of the U.S. education and workforce systems to achieve equitable economic advancement for all. www.jff.org.

About JFF's Language Choices

JFF is committed to using language that promotes equity and human dignity, rooted in the strengths of the people and communities we serve. We develop our content with the awareness that language can perpetuate privilege but also can educate, empower, and drive positive change to create a more equitable society. We routinely reevaluate our efforts as usage evolves. info.jff.org/language-matters

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Executive Summary

Education innovations—or any innovations for that matter—don’t catch and scale quickly. Many innovations don’t even stick. This report examines the history of two interrelated innovations—dual enrollment and early college. From an obscure start in the 2000s, both have persisted, scaled, and produced a body of positive impact research that has grown each decade. These two innovations have also garnered increasing investments of public funds. Today, both are go-to strategies for education reformers concerned with accelerating degree attainment, particularly for Black and Latine learners, and learners from low-income backgrounds. Because of this success, dual enrollment and early college are at a pivotal moment. As they are promoted as the best strategy available to further equity of outcomes, big questions emerge. Can dual enrollment and early college, as now designed and implemented, actually do the work they are being set up for? Or do they need a reboot if they are truly going to be the power tool the field needs to better serve all students who would benefit? The history of the last two decades of invention and reinvention suggests the latter.

JFF is undertaking a reassessment of early college and dual enrollment from multiple perspectives. The decision to begin with their history is born from the following observations: successful interactions between research, policy, and practice are all too rare. In this case, policymakers did take heed of research and called on state and local governing entities to embrace dual enrollment in practice. Over two decades, the purpose of dual enrollment and early college shifted from a privilege for the gifted to an entitlement for all.¹ The progress—decade by decade—is instructive and leads to the conclusion that to fully realize equity, the field must refine and reboot dual enrollment and early college. JFF advocates taking on two major shifts simultaneously: First, remove practical barriers to implementation so programs can efficiently scale further, and second, invent new educational institutions and practices that better serve the needs of 16- to 22-year-olds.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **It's time to shift in mindset regarding the value of dual enrollment and early college programs.** These programs must be designed as equitable pathways to postsecondary education and workforce success, particularly for students underserved by the current systems. This includes outreach efforts, alignment with career goals, early exploration and advising, wraparound supports, and high-quality instruction.
- **Despite the popularity and impact of dual enrollment, challenges and inefficiencies in implementation persist.** Practitioners are solving the same problems and addressing the same costly inefficiencies with each replication, as nothing works smoothly. Implementers struggle with funding streams, calendars, credit hours, Carnegie Units, course alignment, curriculum repetition, and student workplace experience. On the policy front, issues may include incentives, accountability, staffing, and other rules and regulations that, if not barriers, aren't enablers, either.
- **There needs to be a radical reboot of existing approaches to dual enrollment and early college programs.** They must embrace innovation, collaboration, and alignment with workforce needs. By reimagining current practices and adopting transformative solutions, stakeholders can create more inclusive pathways to postsecondary success, empowering all students to thrive in the evolving landscape of higher education and the workforce.





01.

Introduction

“
We need to improve today and invent tomorrow, and we need both approaches to attain better outcomes for all young people.

”

In 2022, JFF launched the Big Blur, a call for a radical reboot of college in high school approaches with equity as the focus. Influenced by the Swiss vocational education system that serves 16- to 20-year-olds, the Big Blur calls for new learning institutions that streamline grades 11 through 14 and make employers collaborators in preparing the young talent pipeline. Along with asserting that work-integrated learning best serves the developmental needs of young adults, a second factor motivating the Big Blur was the cost and challenge of putting dual enrollment, early colleges, and similar successful evidence-based practices in place. A third motivating factor was the urgency to increase the rate of progress for degree attainment and with it, labor market preparation, choice, and success.

The recent release of Lumina Foundation’s *Stronger Nation* report declares progress on degree attainment remarkable across states, but in the last decade, even with short-term certifications and certificates counted, the numbers have gone up under 1% a year.² Yes, we see progress, but it is too slow.

The indisputable news is that the more intensive forms of dual enrollment that include student supports, planned sequence of courses, career pathways, and career exploration and experience are effective, proven equity strategies.³ So, it makes great sense to move from opening the opportunity for students to take a college course or two to proactively preparing them for and inviting them into a carefully designed college-in-high-school program.

Still, despite these successes, dual enrollment in its varied forms is inefficient. Practitioners are solving the same problems and addressing the same costly inefficiencies with each replication. Implementers struggle with funding streams, with calendars, with credit hours versus Carnegie Units, course alignment, curriculum repetition, and student workplace experience.

On the policy front, issues may include incentives, accountability, staffing, and other rules and regulations that, if not barriers, aren't enablers. The list could go on, and the categories range from trivial and annoying (college and high school calendars do not align, making scheduling a nightmare) to daunting (accountability tied to degree completion instead of career outcomes). Couple these difficulties with the scenario playing out before us—increasing numbers of high school students deciding to get a head start on college in high school for free when they are aware of the option—and increasing numbers of community colleges in which one-third or more of their enrollment is high school students.

The need to shape dual enrollment to address persistent inequities in education and labor market outcomes is a common theme among the most recent substantial papers about college-in-high-school programs. Both Columbia University's [Community College Research Center's \(CCRC\) Dual Enrollment Equity Pathways \(DEEP\) framework](#), perhaps the most comprehensive research and action agenda emerging on equitable dual enrollment today, and its companion publication, the [Aspen Institute's Dual Enrollment Playbook](#), call for a new mindset about dual enrollment, defining it as “an equitable ramp to postsecondary programs that can lead to good-paying, family- and self-sustaining careers for learners who might not have otherwise pursued education after high school.”



The framework centers around four areas of practice which echo the original early college principles that shaped the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation-funded national movement starting in 2002-2003.⁴

A second call for [a different mindset](#) comes from the [College in High School Alliance](#). This one is focused on state and federal policy and calls for a new policy vision. While the recommendations are high level, the underlying thesis can be stated as follows: States have to move from simply having a policy to activating that policy so that it becomes a powerful and deliberate equity strategy. The sections that follow provide references to research on implementation strategies that produce gains in equity.



Outreach to students and schools underserved by current K-12 systems



Alignment to college degrees and careers in fields of interest



Early career and academic exploration, advising, and planning



High-quality college instruction and academic support

Source: CCRC Dual Enrollment Equity Pathways Framework, <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/easyblog/introducing-deep-research-based-framework.html>

DEFINITIONS OF COLLEGE-IN-HIGH-SCHOOL PROGRAMS

Dual Enrollment—The Institute of Education Sciences’ [What Works Clearinghouse](#) names dual enrollment programs as those that allow high school students to take college courses and earn college credits while still attending high school. While *dual enrollment* is the most common term, some states use *dual credit* or *concurrent enrollment*, and others use more than one term to distinguish between models offered in the state.

Early College High School (ECHS)—The College in High School Alliance describes early colleges as schools designed to allow students to simultaneously work toward both a high school diploma and an associate degree or other college credential, at no cost, through an organized course of study. Federal law [specifies](#) that students at these schools, which are partnerships between a local educational agency and at least one higher education institution, earn “no less than 12 credits” that are transferrable to the college or university partner.



02.

How We Got To This Place—Two Decades+ of Work

In 2003, I told *Change* magazine that “an explosion of options for students to earn college credit in high school” equated to “progress in creating a seamless education system from kindergarten through college.” While *explosion* was an exaggeration, the issue noted that dual enrollment, the foundation for early college or what the piece called *blended institutions*, was growing, and that it was increasingly being recognized as the access- or success-focused end of a continuum that included Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), and credit for prior learning. The occasion for the piece was JFF’s leadership of the national early college high school initiative, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation along with Carnegie Corporation and W.K. Kellogg Foundation, then in its second year.

The *Change* piece set out some challenges and opportunities facing college credit in high school:

- 1 Collect data on student demographics in relation to the impact on college retention and completion
- 2 Address equity of access
- 3 Remove policy barriers that impinge on a smooth transition between high school and college

4 Create entirely new institutions serving students between grades 9 and 14

5 Consider whether there should be an entitlement to two years of college credit or the associate's degree to meet labor market demands

Now, fast forward 21 years. Some of these ideas are familiar, and others are under consideration, such as two years of free college credit. Creating entirely new grades 9-14 institutions is still a radical proposition. Those engaged in advancing dual enrollment and early college as access and equity strategies would likely agree that the original agenda is still a work in progress. Indeed, the research and programmatic modifications of the last several years have focused squarely on discrepancies in dual enrollment opportunities and uptake based on income, demographics, and setting.

What has grown impressively are the numbers of programs and participants, the database, and the research it has enabled. According to 2019 data collected by Columbia University's CCRC, today, of "roughly 15 million students enrolled in public high schools each year, about 1.5 million high school students enroll in some type of dual enrollment course, including about 125,000 Black high school students and 267,000 Latine high school students." That's up from about 800,000 students in fall 2009. Between 2019 and 2023, the numbers have increased by about 10% yearly. And that's a big story.

This steady progress is remarkable. Unlike the many trends in education that have come and gone to promote equity of access and success in college, dual enrollment has steadily gained traction and improved along the way. As a result, most states now have dual enrollment policies, practices, and funding. The dual enrollment of the early 2000s responded to the same factors that motivate participation now: families save money, students get a head start on college while supported by their high school teachers, and the challenge is one that teens are

Lessons Learned

- Courses, grades, and completion matter.
- High school and college partnerships require significant and expensive attention, more than an MOU would indicate.
- Guided career pathways can and should reach back to high school.
- At least 15 credits in high school are the best assurance of college retention and completion including math, composition, and two career-related courses.
- Tracking can exist within dual enrollment programs.

Questions Raised

- If one-third of a community college's enrollment are high school students, what influence should this have on the college?
- Is there a more cost-effective way to achieve results similar to ECHS?
- Is the Big Blur's call for new grades 11-14 institutions feasible?
- At what point does dual enrollment have enough students to influence college-going culture of the high school?



developmentally ready to meet. Whether a single college course, a guided career pathway, a program, or a full immersion stand-alone school, the field must ask what next.

Do we just keep scaling despite the costs and inefficiencies? Or do we simultaneously ask how what we've learned translates into bold innovations in classrooms and education institutions, workplaces, and systems and policies?

We need to use dual enrollment more powerfully to improve what dual enrollment enables—to improve today—and to show how the models and approaches it enables can be enabled to invent tomorrow.⁵ Twenty years ago, there were no Pathways in Technology Early Colleges (PTECHs), no early college career pathways, no whole district early colleges, and no community colleges serving thousands of high school students. So, what comes next?

Major Themes in Dual Enrollment Research

The 2003 *Change* magazine article referenced earlier recommended that proponents of dual enrollment make a variety of improvements. In a successful interaction between research, policy, and practice, the field is now acting on the policy front—taking heed of research that called for state and local governing entities to embrace dual enrollment as an access strategy by increasing funding and altering purpose from privilege for the gifted to entitlement for all.⁶ This progress, decade by decade, is instructive.

The Startup Decade: 2000 to 2010

Between 2000 and 2010, dual enrollment was emerging as a strategy to add to the list of college access interventions. It joined a whole industry of programs that prepared young people for college—from public sector approaches like Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) to the many local and regional nonprofits, community-based organizations (CBOs), and faith-based programs specializing in preparing young people for college by providing counseling, mentoring, academic tutoring, and financial support among other features. The distinct difference between these traditional access approaches (tutoring, campus visits, information sessions, application help) and dual enrollment was and remains that colleges must provide *real* college credit. They matriculate high school students and stand by the results. As a result, the stakes in such partnerships are high. Especially early on, skeptics asserted that colleges must be giving away cheap credits, as some students began to graduate with a year of college credit, not just a course or two, and some with a full associate's degree. The National Association of Concurrent Enrollment Programs (NACEP), founded in 1999, created standards for concurrent enrollment in 2002 to address and to lower the volume of such criticism.

The research of the decade raised an equity question from the start whether explicit or not. Researchers were interested in whether state policies supported dual enrollment for students experiencing poverty, not just advanced ones. As a 2004 CCRC report noted, dual enrollment was beginning to attract legislative attention. CCRC was an early contributor to what became the province of the Education Commission of the States (ECS)—summarizing the status of dual enrollment in all 50 states. CCRC tracked 10 policy indicators—among them whether a policy exists at all, if the target population is specified, and how or if dual enrollment is funded. A quick look at CCRC's state-by-state chart shows many boxes blank. For example, fewer than half of all states had a specific funding mechanism for dual enrollment.⁷

Early Colleges

Early colleges are partnerships of school districts, charter management organizations, or high schools, and two- or four-year colleges or universities. A type of dual enrollment program, early colleges offer students the opportunity to earn an associate's degree or up to two years of college credits toward a bachelor's degree while in high school—at no or low cost to students. Early colleges also provide supports to students as they plan for their college education, helping them select college courses, transfer to a four-year college, and identify sources of financial aid.

—[The Lasting Benefits of Early College High Schools, AIR definition, 2020.](#)



Later in the same decade, data was beginning to emerge on outcomes of dual enrollment from early adopters such as the states of California, Florida, and Ohio, and New York City's College Now, a college in high school model that began operating in 1983. CCRC, the main research organization funded to follow dual enrollment trends, gathered data on College Now and Florida's dual enrollment programs. Caveats on the quality of earlier research turned up concerns: little data on effectiveness, no evidence of impact, databases that didn't follow students from high school to college, methods not sufficiently rigorous, and no control for "preexisting student characteristics." But the CCRC conclusion—echoed over and over in the decade of the 2000s through today—is that dual enrollment course taking positively impacts students who otherwise might not have access to college courses, especially males and students experiencing poverty. At the same time, researchers noted that advanced students were the primary beneficiaries of dual enrollment, raising controversial questions—the questions the field faces today—about how to broaden access.⁸

One intervention that grew the interest and visibility of dual enrollment and influenced policy was the Gates Foundation's funding of a \$29.6 million investment in early college high schools in 2002. This was an explicit equity strategy. In fact, families raised questions about whether affluent students would be admitted. Early college high schools were initially designed as small, autonomous schools on or near postsecondary campuses. Starting in grade 9, students could prepare for and take up to two years of college coursework, or an associate's degree, free of charge while being supported by their high school and college teachers. JFF led the national initiative with 13 nonprofit partners, launching 70 entirely new schools in the first several years.⁹

The Gates Foundation's work in education had only just begun, and attention to their investments from observers and commentators was a constant source of interest. Positive impact began to almost immediately show that students at risk of not completing either high school or college could rise to the

challenge of college course taking. Students were motivated in part by the fact that courses were free and set them on an accelerated path to a degree.

In a lesson to change agents to be bold, the funders drew courage to innovate from an earlier experiment decades earlier that had gotten modest traction: The Middle College National Consortium opened what they called a middle college high school on the campus of LaGuardia Community College CUNY in NYC in 1974 and built six other middle colleges through the 1980s.^x Bard opened a second model of ECHS in New York City in 2001.^{xi} The lesson of the 2000s then was that yes, the small experiment was working better than skeptics expected.

The Career Pathways Decade: 2010 to 2020

As the 2010s began, new themes emerged in publications about dual enrollment and early college. A 2009 piece I authored in *EdWeek* asked whether early college was a “modest experiment or a national movement.” The increasing number of ECHSs and the policies to support them pointed to a college in the high school field in the making. The challenge and the theme of much of the 2010 to 2020 research was to prove, not just assert, that ECHS was effective and to convert skeptics. Questions about effectiveness were answered in studies using rigorous quantitative data which established at some scale that, as the *EdWeek* piece noted, “low-income students, students of color, and first-generation college-goers not only can do college-level work, but can also do it early and earn substantial transferable college credits just like suburban and private school kids with access to Advanced Placement and dual enrollment programs.” By then, there were “more than 200 early college high schools serving 42,000 students in 24 states.” In addition, a sample of 2,258 students had completed four years in an ECHS.¹²

“*low-income students, students of color, and first-generation college-goers not only can do college-level work, but can also do it early and earn substantial transferable college credits just like suburban and private school kids with access to Advanced Placement and dual enrollment programs.*”

EdWeek



Early college arrived in the 2000s as a widely watched, counterintuitive philanthropic investment; it funded new small schools (400 to 500 students) with the sole purpose of increasing the number of low-income students, especially students of color who earned a college degree. Dual enrollment, on the other hand, widely distributed across states, was a limited under-the-radar option allowing students who were prepared and aggressive enough to seek out opportunities to take one or two college courses. Tracking the evolution from one decade to the next, the changes and innovations of the 2010s appeared steadily.

In the 2010s, a new language characterizing dual enrollment as an access strategy emerged in policy documents and rules governing higher education standards. States and education systems loosened readiness requirements to allow under prepared students to take a college course or two along with their better-prepared peers; colleges became more flexible in how they measured *prepared* and what placement tests they used. Early college publicity touting unexpected student success was at least in part responsible. (Readers should note that initial databases do not differentiate between credits earned in an early college versus individual enrollment.)

A major innovation in the model, and one that persists today, also occurred in the 2010s—the transformation of early colleges into career pathways programs within larger high schools. The focus on career was influenced by the 2008 fiscal crisis, but also by the *Pathways to Prosperity* report (2011) released by the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The report, which received substantial national attention, crystallized the problem of youth unemployment. It declared that the United States had a “forgotten half,” those young people reaching their mid-20s without a usable credential.¹³ It led to the Harvard Graduate School of Education and JFF founding the Pathways to Prosperity Network (2012), a membership organization of states committed to finding solutions to the forgotten half, including a range of options for career development, not only the bachelor’s degree.

The year 2011 marked the opening of the first PTECH sponsored by IBM and built on the ECHS model but also with a strong workforce preparation goal. A six-year program, PTECH held the promise of an associate's degree and paid IBM internships for all students.

New data on career and technical education (CTE) as attractive to young people of various backgrounds contributed to the focus on earlier career education. As researchers accessed more fine-grained data, they saw that CTE programs were producing a large group of students graduating with college credit and that these CTE students had higher rates of college enrollment than many of their academic high school peers. Along with labor market demand for technically trained job candidates, these developments hastened the modernization of CTE. Slowly, CTE was transforming from an option for those headed to the labor force immediately after high school to an attractive choice for fledgling cyber experts, nurses, and engineers headed to college. The goal was to link programs more closely to both traditional and emerging postsecondary degrees and certifications. A 2012 CCRC [piece on career-focused dual enrollment programs](#) looked at 3,000 California CTE students and noted that the benefits were to the new constituency as well as the traditional one. The study showed that “sixty percent of [CTE] participants were students of color, forty percent came from non-English speaking homes, and one-third had parents with no prior college experience.”¹⁴





In the later part of the decade, larger participant groups and better data enabled large-scale, methodologically sophisticated studies of dual enrollment and early college. For example, in 2021 the IES What Works Clearinghouse published, [“Effective Postsecondary Interventions: Early Colleges Combine High School and College to Benefit Students.”](#)¹⁵ a widely circulated blog post based on data gathered in 2014 and 2016. This article reviewed all previous ECHS efficacy studies and concluded that ECHS produced “lasting benefits.”¹⁵ An IES review of dual enrollment research as of 2017 found similar positive effects.¹⁶

The quantitative impact studies importantly produced qualitative studies—what was causing the ECHS success? The evidence also spawned a whole industry producing aids to implementation—practice guides to encourage new programs and scaling of existing ones. These aids to implementation included design principles, toolkits, quality audit protocols, cost analyses, case studies of single schools and entire early college districts, and stronger policy recommendations than in the previous decade. The National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships (NACEP) addressed the quality issues raised by the increasing number of high school instructors teaching college courses with standards and an accreditation mechanism.

In 2017, the policy-focused College in High School Alliance (CHSA) was founded to assert ECHS interests among DC organizations and policymakers. CHSA defines itself as “a coalition of national, state, and local organizations collaborating to positively impact national and state policies and build broad support for programs that enable high school students to enroll in authentic, affordable college pathways toward postsecondary degrees and credentials offered with appropriate support.”¹⁷

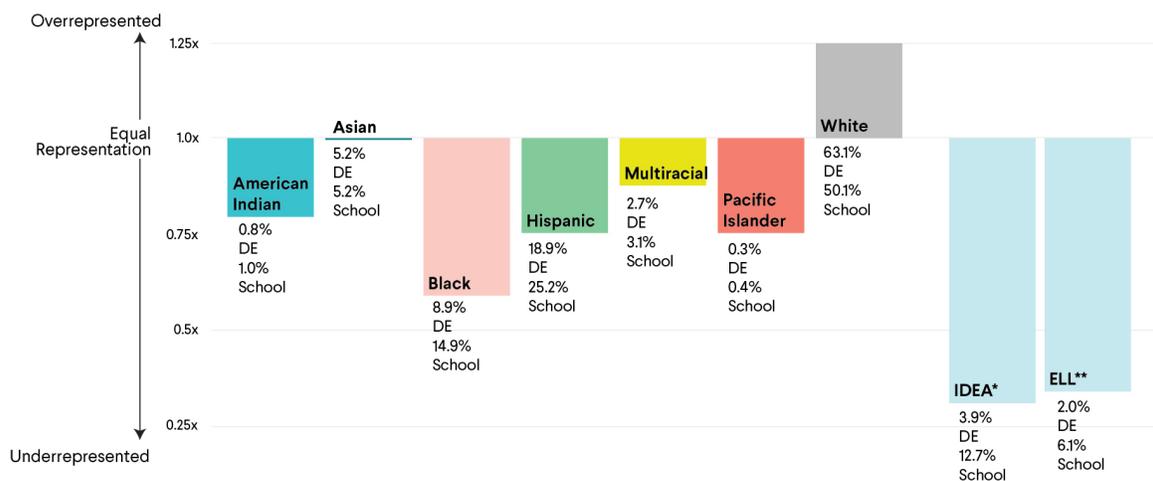
Interest in the full district early college grew in the decade as well. In the full early college district in Pharr, San Juan, Alamo (PSJA) in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, interest was so intense that the district had to establish visiting days.¹⁸

PSJA was only one of the growing number of Texas districts in which thousands of high school students were earning an associate’s degree or a year of college credit concurrent with high school graduation. At the end of this decade, one might declare that the policy, research, and practice trio each had made substantial contributions to establishing career pathways as a mainstream strategy for accelerating students from low-income backgrounds into and through postsecondary education.

The Equity Decade: The 2020s

One debate of the 2010s that has died away is competition and confusion between dual enrollment and AP course taking. A 2012 research paper noted that “perceptions of AP’s superiority have arisen from its popularity in top-ranked suburban high schools....”¹⁹ While AP is certainly still popular as a marker of success on a high-stakes test of college knowledge in a specific field, today, it is clearly differentiated from dual enrollment. Students and families recognize that dual enrollment provides college credit on a college transcript and often matriculates to the institution offering credit, while AP does not. In addition, the career focus and wraparound supports of dual enrollment and early college options make it particularly attractive to young people eager for career preparation that will enable them to get a job quickly rather than after a four-year degree. This practical consideration, coupled with evidence that college in high school programs eliminate achievement gaps, makes urgent the need to address the inequitable availability of such options to the very student groups the Gates Foundation targeted in their early college investments of 20 years ago.

Representation in Dual Enrollment



Reproduced from Fink and Jenkins (2023),

<https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/revamping-dual-enrollment-equitable-college-degree-paths.html>

Note. 2017-18 school year data. Each bar ratio showing each demographic group’s proportion in DE coursework (the top percentage shown underneath each bar) divided by that group’s proportion in secondary school coursework (the bottom percentage shown underneath each bar).

*IDEA = Students provided with services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

**ELL = English language learners



Impact studies using data from both dual enrollment and early college continue to emerge as the country and educators in their own spheres come to terms with past failures in mitigating inequities in the education system. Since a bachelor's degree continues to be strongly associated with a good job and economic mobility, a major improvement in degree attainment among Black and Latine students would be an indicator of progress on equity.²⁰ A 2024 CCRC study found that “students entering community college with prior dual enrollment (PDE) transfer and complete a bachelor's degree at a rate (35%) that is nearly twice that of students without PDE (16%).” And the impact among Black and Latine students is even greater: “Black and Hispanic students with PDE transfer and complete bachelor's degrees at three times the rate as students without PDE (28% and 31% versus 10% and 13%, respectively).”²¹ The urgent question, then, is why this proven strategy is so inequitably available. The bars that fall below the line for equal representation in dual enrollment—all the bars except the one representing white students—show groups that are underrepresented for their percentage in the population.

Some states have taken up the cause of expanding the representation of non-white students in dual credit programs. In a recent study, the U.S. Department of Education called “for immediate attention to closing equity gaps” in dual enrollment. The study showcases states that have had success “with intentional policies and practices, as demonstrated by [loan education agencies] LEAs that have begun to close these gaps.”²² Other evidence that states are stepping up is the spate of new dual enrollment legislation. All 50 states introduced a collective total of 527 bills related to dual enrollment in 2023.

Along with policy recommendations, a number of studies urge educators to step up practices that mitigate inequities. A prime example is [Research Priorities for Advancing Equitable Dual Enrollment Policy and Practice](#). This extensive literature review was guided by an advisory committee of nationally recognized dual enrollment and early college leaders who sorted out

strategies to advance equity. The Research Priorities paper notes the qualities that distinguish early college and career pathways approaches such as: “college readiness (how to prepare students for college courses) as well as how to support students who are taking dual enrollment courses.”²³ Also important in erasing achievement gaps is aggressively recruiting students of color and providing them with support, work exploration, and career navigation skills along with college courses. A contributing factor to heightened interest in career-focused dual enrollment and early college is the recognition that all students need earlier introductions to the world of work—in courses, in after school experiences, in paid internships and apprenticeships—and not only because learning about work is a personal ‘good,’ but because the mismatch between graduates’ skills and competencies and labor market requirements is a threat to the competitiveness of the United States.

Whether the 2020s will continue to be the *equity* decade, it is too soon to say. But for now, no other scaled strategy to boost college-going and completion has had as robust evidence of wide success nor has been shown to save money for families, accelerate student completion, and promote transfer from two- to four-year institutions as early college and its adaptations. Nor has any other strategy been shown to close equity gaps in college access, retention, and degree completion.

Improve Today and Invent Tomorrow

To return to *Improve Today and Invent Tomorrow*, we need no more data than the graph above to see the urgency of the work ahead. With equity as the unwavering ambition, there’s lots of room for creativity and hard work and ample guidance available to increase the representation of Black and Latine students in dual enrollment and early colleges. As this brief history of the last 20-plus years shows, incremental improvements—*improve today*—have co-existed with and enabled major shifts in policy and practice that *invent tomorrow*. The initial shifts were in





the improvement category as the first research findings made their way to practitioners. For example, in the startup decade, the early college model had a certain rigidity—small schools designed so that students could earn up to an associate’s degree. However, as practitioners began to experiment, research showed that programs and pathways within comprehensive high schools offering varied numbers of credits also had a positive impact and worked best for their needs. So, a variety of approaches proliferated.

In the career pathways decade, major shifts could be placed in the invent tomorrow category. The transformation from early college and dual enrollment to career pathways was prompted by major forces external to education—a fiscal crisis, youth unemployment, and the Pathways to Prosperity report.

In the equity decade—that is—today, both incremental improvements and reinvention must be underway. The field must act to mitigate the costly inefficiencies and practical barriers of aligning high school and college and scaling programs so that greater numbers of students can gain access and be served. Changes that would make a difference: standardize high school and postsecondary credits and competencies; align schedules of high schools and community colleges (including semester and daily calendars); make a passing score on statewide high school assessments a trigger for admission to public community college; and design guided career pathways to start in grade 11 and go through a certification or associate’s degree.

To fill gaps of note in current pathways programs and systems, readers might look to JFF’s blogs outlining experiments to improve dual enrollment funded through the U.S. Department of Education’s Education Innovation and Research (EIR) grants program. [One blog](#) describes a set of courses that combine dual enrollment credit and work-based learning and are designed and delivered in partnership with employers. A forthcoming blog describes other EIR innovations; among these is a project in Minnesota infusing social and emotional learning (SEL) into online dual enrollment courses. And finally, the implementation of dual

enrollment hubs at community colleges in Arizona, Illinois, and Texas.

Another series of JFF blogs highlight institutions and policies that are almost blurring the lines between high school, postsecondary, and work-based learning and point the way forward. One example is the Sturm Collaborative Campus of Arapahoe Community College which unites under one roof programs from Arapahoe Community College (ACC), Douglas County Schools District, and Colorado State University (CSU Fort Collins, CSU Global, and CSU Pueblo). Two additional JFF [blogs](#) propose that we already have hybrid high school colleges. At these community colleges—and they are growing in number—one-third or more of the enrollment are high school students taking college courses.

The Big Blur sets an ambition for transformation just beyond reach. The challenge is for educators and policymakers to become bold and collaborative enough to bring the Blur into being. What would it take to build a new kind of institution that would eliminate the transition from high school to college, and create new free integrated work-based learning grades 11-14 institutions? Would such institutions be the powerhouses that educators need to advance equity?



Endnotes

¹The observations below draw on the extensive bibliographies in several papers. The 2022 paper, “Research priorities for advancing equitable dual enrollment policy and practice” from a group of researchers led by University of Utah, Jason Taylor, has a 19 page bibliography. For details of trajectory and themes of research from 2000 to 2010, a CCRC paper commissioned by the Irvine Foundation, *Broadening the Benefits of Dual Enrollment: Reaching Underachieving and Underrepresented Students with Career-Focused Programs* points in detail to research from the period.

² Matthew Jenkins, “College Degrees Grow. See for Yourself in Our User-friendly Tool,” Lumina Foundation, February 13, 2024, <https://www.luminafoundation.org/news-and-views/college-degrees-grow-see-for-yourself-in-our-user-friendly-tool/>.

³ “Evaluating the Impact of Early College High Schools,” American Institutes for Research, March 18, 2024, <https://www.air.org/project/evaluating-impact-early-college-high-schools>.

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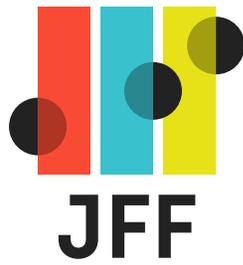
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