Jobs for the Future

State and Institutional Pillars That Support Dual Enrollment Innovation

Lessons From the Increasing College Access Network Project in Minnesota

AT A GLANCE

Launched in 2023, JFF's Increasing College Access Network (ICAN) project has identified strong state and institutional policies and practices that can advance innovation in dual enrollment courses.

AUTHORS

Leah Eggers
Director, **JFF**

Anna O' Connor
Senior Director, **JFF**

Acknowledgments

About Jobs for the Future

Jobs for the Future (JFF) transforms U.S. education and workforce systems to drive economic success for people, businesses, and communities. www.jff.org

About the Increasing College Access Network

Launched in 2023, ICAN integrates social-emotional learning (SEL) into the instruction of online math and English dual enrollment courses to improve educational outcomes for high school students. This strategy improves student engagement with instructors and peers and helps young people develop a stronger sense of belonging and navigate challenges with greater confidence.

Instructors embed a set of SEL-related activities, routines, and structures into their coursework to give students opportunities to build a growth mindset and develop problem-solving, relationship-building, and self-management skills. Implementing SEL instruction into online dual enrollment courses helps students strengthen the skills they need to persevere and succeed in online course-taking and build meaningful connections with peers and instructors—all of which help them develop strong academic and collegiate identities.

Instructors and leaders from Alexandria Technical and Community College and Minnesota West Community and Technical College received training and resources to deliver ICAN courses. To date, more than 750 students from 58 high schools across Minnesota have participated in ICAN courses. Enrolling students from multiple schools into each course section enabled students from small rural high schools without dual enrollment course offerings to access the coursework and benefit from engagement with students from outside their school.

Funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Education Innovation and Research (EIR) program, ICAN is spearheaded by Jobs for the Future (JFF) in partnership with Greater Twin Cities United Way (GTCUW) and The Learning Accelerator (TLA). The American Institutes for Research (AIR) is evaluating the implementation and impact of this dual enrollment model.

Introduction

Dual enrollment has proved to be a powerful strategy for expanding college opportunity for all students, especially those who facing barriers that limit their access to postsecondary education. Extensive evidence shows that dual enrollment has [wide-ranging benefits](#) for students, high schools, colleges, and states. The model helps save time and money, and it accelerates degree completion and preparation for the workforce. JFF's [Pathways to Prosperity framework](#) includes dual enrollment as a core element of high-quality pathways.

Yet, challenges remain. Long distances between K-12 schools and their higher education partners, limited access to flexible and engaging learning environments, and the complexities of navigating college systems, funding sources, and related structures hinder the full impact of dual enrollment programs. The [Increasing College Access Network](#) (ICAN), launched in Minnesota in 2023, is a new dual enrollment course innovation that seeks to address these persistent challenges. It's an example of the type of evidence-based frameworks that state and institutional leaders need to support course delivery innovation and achieve high standards for quality and accessibility.

This brief outlines essential pillars of strong state and institutional dual enrollment policies and practices to advance innovation, with a focus on strategies that improve instructional approaches for virtual learning environments and deepen student connections and support. Drawing on lessons from Minnesota's more than 35-year history of dual enrollment leadership and its more recent implementation of ICAN, the brief highlights

how to address some of these challenges by adopting course design innovations and offering strategic supports for students and institutions. Specifically, ICAN focused on innovating the online dual enrollment experience by incorporating social-emotional learning (SEL) strategies into course design to address challenges students encounter in online learning environments. In the two years since it was first implemented, this approach has generated valuable lessons that inform the recommendations in this brief.

ICAN is an especially promising model for leaders in the education-to-career pathways field who seek to design pathways with no dead ends that multiply options for young people. Pathways with no dead ends are designed to enable young people to earn a variety of credentials and degrees—in any order—rather than requiring students to choose a single educational destination. It's an approach that maximizes choice and flexibility because it's based on an understanding of the value of having a range of learning options.

By integrating SEL into online math and English dual enrollment courses, ICAN advances the development of pathways with no dead ends in two key ways. First, it expands access to dual enrollment in "door opener" academic courses that are part of the core curricula of a wide range of postsecondary programs of study at both the associate's and bachelor's degree levels.[1] Second, integrating SEL into the coursework enables students to develop durable skills, such as problem-solving and relationship-building capabilities, that are increasingly critical to young people's success in the labor market and their ability to launch meaningful careers.[2]

Pillars

Grouped into four categories—Student Access and Awareness, Course Design Innovation, Instructor and Institutional Capacity, and Student Success—the pillars offer actionable guidance for community college and K–12 leaders, dual enrollment staff, and state education systems leaders. Each of the pillars embodies principles focused on improving student experiences and outcomes and removing barriers to access for students and families. The pillars promote stronger alignment between secondary and postsecondary education systems, reenvision the structures to support and train educators, and inspire ideas for the types of resources and incentives needed to advance this model. The pillars also minimize policies or funding models that result in negative consequences or impacts (such as disincentives to collaboration, for example) for secondary and postsecondary institutions that implement dual enrollment innovations.

Dual enrollment policy and execution vary widely from state to state, and the recommendations in this brief are designed to be applicable across a variety contexts and policy and practice environments. Use these pillars as tools for assessing current policies and practices and to spark new solutions that strengthen dual enrollment systems for all students.

Read on for discussions of each of the four pillars, with a look at strategies for enabling K–12 leaders and state education leaders to uphold the pillars and examples of how state policies and the ICAN initiative are advancing the pillars in Minnesota.

Student Access and Awareness

Course Design Innovation

Instructor and Institutional Capacity

Student Success

Student Access and Awareness

Expanding access to dual enrollment requires intentional outreach and support, particularly for students of color, those who are from low-income backgrounds, and those in rural communities. Strategies to promote early awareness of the available opportunities must be coupled with funding models that eliminate affordability barriers for students and families by covering the costs of tuition, books, materials, and technology without shifting unsustainable costs onto K–12 or postsecondary institutions.

College and K–12 Leaders

- Programs should offer a variety of strategic dual enrollment online course options, particularly for students living in rural areas or those who don't otherwise have access to a wide range of courses. Strategic dual enrollment models include courses such as math and English that open doors and serve as a foundation for a range of postsecondary credential and degree options.

- Online courses are available to students from multiple schools to extend reach to students across a wide geography.

- College and K–12 partners have clear agreements on their strategies and responsibilities for recruitment and enrollment. These agreements should include approaches for sharing information with students and families starting in middle school, with multiple opportunities to learn about dual enrollment options and their benefits and incorporate dual enrollment into individualized career planning. They also have strategies for reaching students who aren't attending the high school (perhaps because they're being home-schooled, for example). Educators leverage partnerships with intermediaries to support awareness efforts.

- College and K–12 partners have agreements about funding and cost-saving strategies (discounts on equipment, access to loaner items, cost-sharing arrangements, for example) and other matters to ensure that students have textbooks and other instructional materials, as well as technology (broadband access, apps, and devices, for example) that enables them to consistently participate in courses, especially courses offered online.

State Education Leaders

- The state funding model and related policies are designed so that students or families don't pay tuition for dual enrollment courses. The model and policies support scaling of dual enrollment courses and provide incentives for both K–12 school districts and colleges to offer a wide range of courses that reach all students and meet the needs of both individual students and regional labor markets.

- State education agencies provide transparent and easy-to-understand information and guidance about state-specific dual enrollment policies to secondary and postsecondary institutions. Technical assistance is available to support institutions in interpreting and applying policies.

- An accountability measure is in place and data is systematically reported and disaggregated to ensure that states and districts are providing all students with access to dual enrollment opportunities. States use many accountability indicators, and 37 of them currently include dual enrollment in their state ESSA accountability systems—but most of them aggregate the metric with other advanced coursework, including Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate offerings.[3]

Pillars in Action: Examples From Minnesota and ICAN

In Minnesota, state policy limits the ability of colleges to directly recruit students into their dual enrollment courses. To ensure that students are aware of and have access to opportunities, it's necessary for colleges and K-12 partners to forge close, trusting relationships and set up clear structures to support student enrollment. For example, ICAN partner Alexandra Technical and Community College offers its courses to students across the state through a multi-college consortium called Online College in the High School (OCHS), which provides transparent information to school districts about course offerings, partnership requirements, and processes. Dedicated coordinators at each partnering school district promote the opportunities to students and families and manage all steps of student enrollment and success with OCHS.

Intermediaries or nonprofits can augment dual enrollment awareness strategies that are led by colleges and schools. For example, in Minnesota, a nonprofit called People for PSEO focuses on promoting and expanding opportunities for dual enrollment to students and families through the state's Postsecondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) program. Through the ICAN project in the 2023-24 school year, People for PSEO expanded its efforts and successfully reached more than 2,300 students and community members through 192 in-person events and virtual meetings. People for PSEO also created a communications toolkit in English, Spanish, Chinese, Somali, and Arabic and disseminated it to over 3,000 Minnesotans through partnerships with K-12 schools, postsecondary institutions, and other nonprofit organizations that provide career and college readiness programs.

Course Design Innovation

Innovation in course design, like with the ICAN model, can support student access and success in dual enrollment and ultimately prepare students with skills and experiences to be successful in college. Course design innovations should seek to improve students' engagement with course content and build skills that are important for college and career success. Innovation may include embedding new content into curricula, such as lessons and activities to promote social-emotional learning and development of durable skills; adapting instructional strategies to increase engagement in hybrid and online learning; or integrating other important career preparation components such as work-based learning. Course innovation ultimately helps students develop new skills, forge deeper connections with instructors and peers, and adopt strategies that help them succeed in college.

College and K-12 Leaders

- The course innovation is fully embedded in the course content, syllabus, and short- and long-term learning outcomes. For example, embedding acquisition of SEL competencies into syllabi signals to students that these skills are not "extra," but rather essential to their success in education and beyond. When development of competencies like self-management or problem-solving capabilities is clearly tied to course goals, students are more likely to see their relevance, engage meaningfully, and use these skills in multiple settings.

- The college deploys a learning management system and provides no-cost access to other technology platforms (such as meeting software or communication tools) with features that facilitate interaction between and among students and instructors.

- Student course progress, instructor implementation of course innovations, and other outcomes data is monitored regularly and shared widely by instructors, deans, and other dual enrollment administrators to track progress and allow for adaptations to happen in real time based on insights uncovered.

State Leaders

- State leaders identify how course innovations can align to, streamline, and advance other statewide initiatives. For example, Minnesota's Department of Education has created implementation guidance that explicitly connects SEL competencies to academic standards. In some states, such work spans K-12 and postsecondary systems. For example, Pennsylvania's Career Ready Skills framework includes SEL progressions that support students from pre-kindergarten through postsecondary education and help advance career readiness priorities in its state ESSA plan. A model like ICAN can help states and institutions meet a similar goal by explicitly demonstrating how students develop SEL skills through a dual enrollment course.

- State leaders design grant opportunities that support piloting new dual enrollment course innovations or scaling of established innovations. Grant opportunities may be designed in partnership with philanthropies or across secondary and postsecondary education departments to ensure the availability of sufficient resources for long-term investment.

Pillars in Action: Examples From Minnesota and ICAN

Participating instructors integrated ICAN strategies—a set of activities, routines, and structures that allowed opportunities for the development of core SEL competencies—into their math and English dual enrollment courses. While there are a number of methods for incorporating SEL into academic courses, ICAN includes six practical and approachable strategies designed to strengthen students' self-awareness, resilience, and sense of belonging: team-building activities, emotions check-ins, "challenge of the week" programs, calendar "look-aheads," self-assessments, and individual check-ins. These aren't stand-alone lessons, but small, flexible activities that instructors adapt and repeat in ways that fit their course curriculum sequences. Each instructor used different approaches for incorporating these strategies into courses based on their curriculum, learning objectives, and online delivery format (asynchronous, hybrid, or synchronous, for example).

Instructors using ICAN strategies maintained logs tracking activities implemented each week and reflected on students' engagement with the activities. This exercise in intentional reflection allowed instructors to identify what was working well and where pivots or enhancements would be necessary for the week ahead. This week-by-week tracking throughout the semester also enabled the project's technical assistance partners to identify sample activities or practices to share among other instructors, and it gave them an opportunity to intervene in real time when instructors identified challenges. Reviewing trends in implementation over time allowed the team to identify best practices and positive adaptations to the model, so students could ultimately receive the full benefit of the ICAN innovations.

Instructor and Institutional Capacity

A key to successfully implementing course innovations is to create a strong network of skilled and supported instructors and leaders to drive the design and execution of the work. Instructors should have access to quality professional development opportunities and ongoing supportive services so they have the expertise and capacity to integrate course innovations, assess progress, and continuously improve practices.

College and K-12 Leaders

- Professional development for instructors is offered via live, hybrid, and asynchronous training options, and institutional leaders and content experts establish professional learning communities that meet regularly. Professional development includes training on social-emotional learning and instructional strategies for delivering courses online.

- Incentives and structural components of employment (such as course schedules and contracts) are designed to enable instructors to complete training and planning activities and participate in professional learning communities.

- Instructor contracts include flexibility or adaptations to responsibilities in order to give instructors the capacity to implement innovations, such as providing additional student supports or carrying out data collection and evaluation activities.

State Leaders

- Innovation often requires new funding or new ways of using existing funds. Sufficient funding is available to support professional development for college instructors and for colleges to implement dual enrollment course innovations. Funding may be provided directly to instructors or to institutions. State education agencies also offer comprehensive professional development programs with opportunities to feature innovations.

- Grant funding is provided to intermediaries to help bridge gaps in professional development, technical assistance, or evaluation activities. Intermediaries can bring specialized expertise and convening power to facilitate course innovation and fully implement professional development.

Pillars in Action: Examples From Minnesota and ICAN

To gain the skills and expertise necessary to effectively execute ICAN innovations, instructors completed asynchronous learning modules and participated in live training sessions on the ICAN model, SEL, and ICAN strategies. They were also provided with tools such as a course planning template and an instructor log, and they had access to additional research and tools on SEL and online learning. Instructors were also part of a community of practice that met twice a year and they participated in monthly group and individual technical assistance sessions to support course design, troubleshoot implementation challenges, and share best practices and strategies among peers. These activities also provided critical access to support networks that enabled instructors to consult with peers in real time and share resources and ideas as they seek solutions to student barriers and challenges, particularly issues related to mental health. Instructors received a stipend as compensation for the additional time and effort required to participate in these learning activities.

Student Success

Students need readily available resources and supports from trusted adults from both college and K–12 systems to succeed in dual enrollment courses and ultimately persist in a sequence of strategic college coursework that leads to degree or credential completion. Supports should be made available at no cost to students, along with clear information about how to access them.

College and K-12 Leaders

- Dual enrollment leaders at the colleges and all of their high school partners have clear agreements on their roles and responsibilities, communication and collaboration practices, and data-sharing practices. Agreements are explicit about when, where, and how dual enrollment counseling, including transition supports, is taking place.

- Dual enrollment students have access to college support services, including tutoring, at no additional cost. Tutoring services from the college and/or the high school are available and easily accessible to students.

- High schools provide students with dedicated spaces where they can complete online dual enrollment coursework. As feasible, a dual enrollment coordinator is available to supervise students and offer them guidance as they complete their coursework.

- Mental health resources from the college, high school, and state are available to students and instructors (via a 211 helpline, for example).

- The transferability of credits is ensured, and policies and practices related to the portability of credits are transparent.

State Leaders

- With money from state allotments or federal grants, states provide funding to support colleges in hiring transition advisors, dual enrollment coordinators, or career navigators.

- State allotments are established to directly support both students and educational institutions that need to access funds or other resources to cover non-tuition expenses.

- State policy requires high schools to provide students with both dedicated spaces where they can work on their online dual enrollment coursework and access to the technology equipment and systems they need to do that work.

- Standards are in place to ensure that students receive adequate dual enrollment advising services, including information on postsecondary credit mobility. For example, in Idaho, students who use the state's Fast Forward Fund to cover dual credit tuition must receive postsecondary advising if they take 15 or more college credits while in high school. And Arizona's co-advising framework offers a model for collaboration between secondary and postsecondary educators and advisors.

- Statewide policies, such as standardized course numbering conventions and common statewide sets of lower-division courses, support transfer and credit mobility, and they include courses completed through dual enrollment.

<u>Pillars in Action: Examples From Minnesota and ICAN</u>

In the ICAN initiative, instructors were a critical layer of additional support for students. By integrating SEL strategies, such as emotions check-ins, instructors built trust and opened an avenue for ongoing communication not typically seen in online dual enrollment courses. As students engaged in various SEL activities, they developed a level of comfort with their instructors that empowered them to share details of their personal lives, including topics related to mental health, relationship struggles, and home life. College administrators supported instructors in navigating these complex conversations by sharing information about mental health resources available at their colleges and across Minnesota. They also offered guidance for when and how to connect directly with high school counselors or coordinators to address persistent concerns.

To support students as they worked to complete their online dual enrollment coursework, Minnesota's PSEO statute requires school districts to allow students enrolled in PSEO courses to stay in their high school buildings during regular school hours. Districts must also ensure that students have reasonable access to computers and other technology resources needed for their PSEO coursework during school hours.

Transform Policies to Support Innovation

ICAN is enabling Minnesota students to successfully complete more dual enrollment courses and persist on pathways that accelerate them toward promising postsecondary credentials. To replicate this effective model and ensure that all students have similar opportunities, leaders in other states and regions across the country should adopt state and institutional policies and practices that enable dual enrollment programs to succeed. To get started, review your state or institution's current policies and practices to see where they align with the ones we discuss in this brief and where there are opportunities for change. By creating more seamless and supportive learning experiences, dual enrollment models like ICAN can serve as a foundation for more coherent and purpose-driven pathways from education to career.

Learn More

To explore lessons we learned while launching and implementing ICAN, read the JFF blog post "Innovative Dual Enrollment Model Shows Promise in Year One."

To learn more about ICAN and access relevant JFF resources, visit the Increasing College Access Network page on JFF.org.

Endnotes

1. Leah Moschella and Julia di Bonaventura, Promising Credentials in the Great Lakes Region (Boston, Massachusetts: Jobs for the Future, October 3, 2018), https://www.jff.org/idea/promising-credentials-great-lakes/

2. World Economic Forum, The Future of Jobs Report 2025, January 2025, https://www.weforum.org/publications/the-future-of-jobs-report-2025/in-full/3-skills-outlook/, website accessed June 16, 2025.

3. College in the High School Alliance, ESSA State by State Analysis: Strategies for Incorporating College in the High School Programs Into the Every Student Succeeds Act, September 2018, https://collegeinhighschool.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/CHSAESSAState-by-StateAnalysis.pdf

JFF

Building a Future
That Works
For Everyone