


Creating and Sustaining Early College High Schools:





State Policies that Support 9-14 Education

State education systems are not preparing enough students to succeed in college or in careers with prospects of a family-sustaining wage. This is largely because neither our high schools nor our colleges were designed to produce the number of highly skilled, postsecondary-trained workers that today's economy demands. One promising approach to redesigning secondary schooling and increasing post-secondary attainment is the early college high school. With 129 early college high schools in over 20 states, a good understanding has emerged of what state policymakers can do to initiate, support, and sustain these small schools of 400 or fewer students. Created by collaborations between high schools and colleges, they are

designed so that underserved students can simultaneously earn a high school diploma, an Associate's Degree, or up to two years of transferable college credit.

The popularity and rapid proliferation of early college high schools nationally belie the barriers they face in implementation and sustainability. First and foremost, state policies are not naturally designed to promote the seamless transition of high school students through college, especially for low-income and racial minority youth. Because early college high schools integrate high school and college for these groups, they put into sharp relief the gaping disconnect between secondary and

by **Joel Vargas**

post-secondary education—in both practice and policy—even as they try to bridge that divide.

Several types of state policy can support early college high schools and the replication of their promising practices. If designed well, these policies can help both early colleges and also other programs and schools that constitute new, improved pathways from high school through post-secondary degree or credential programs. They can support the efforts of young people, including those who have or may become high school dropouts, to prepare for and complete a post-secondary education. Moreover, they point to broader policy changes that could advance the agenda of creating a seamless P-16 system.

A number of states have implemented one or more of these policies, helping to account for much of the success of the early college movement to date. Yet many policy barriers remain and continue to challenge schools.

The Need: The Education Pipeline Is Broken

National statistics on the progression of students from high school to college illustrate why it is imperative to better connect and integrate secondary and post-secondary schooling. For every 100 low-income students who start high school, only 65 will get a high school diploma and only 45 will enroll in college. Only 11 will complete a post-secondary degree.¹

The poor overall performance of our education system is largely a function of its failure to educate underserved populations. Many of these, such as Latinos, are among the fastest growing demographic in public schools and the workforce. Their educational and economic success directly affects the entire nation's economic health. With several points of leakage across the entire education pipeline, only bold policies and practices will ensure that more young people earn the post-secondary credentials that are crucial to individual economic security and the viability of our nation's economy. Strategies must include:

- Raising graduation standards to the level needed for post-secondary success;
- Supporting struggling students to meet those standards; and
- Buttressing their critical transition into college.

Early College High School as a Strategy

Early college high schools address these three strategies simultaneously. Their students start college-level work as soon

as they are academically ready, sometimes as early as the 9th grade. In addition, early college high schools are located on or near a college campus, so that young people experience the academic and social environment of college from an early age. The post-secondary institution, by dealing directly with high school students, gains knowledge about how to improve both the transition to college and retention rates in the first years of college.

The early college high school strategy draws on and shares characteristics of other approaches to college-level work in high school, including dual or concurrent enrollment options, middle colleges, tech prep, Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate. Based on research and practice about what helps underrepresented young people move into and through post-secondary education, early college high schools have several key features:

- Students are motivated to work hard in school by the opportunity to accelerate into college-level work as soon as they are prepared for it.
- Students are rewarded for their hard work with the opportunity to earn two years of college credit for free.
- Learning takes place in small, personalized learning environments that demand rigorous, high-quality work and provide extensive support so that students can meet expectations.
- The physical transition between high school and college is eliminated—and with it the need to apply for college and for financial aid.

Early Outcomes and Projected State Benefits

The early college high school movement is still too young to make definitive judgments about its efficacy. However, early evidence from the oldest of these schools is very promising. Of 115 students starting at the first three early colleges four years ago, over 95 percent graduated with a high school diploma, over 57 percent earned an Associate's degree, and over 80 percent were accepted at a four-year college.² If their record with this small initial group is any indication of future school success, early college high schools will play an important role as an ongoing state strategy for improving high school and post-secondary attainment. Currently, there are nearly 16,000 students in early college high schools nationally, and that number is expected to increase as the number of schools expands to over 240 by the end of the decade, with a projected total enrollment of over 80,000 young people.

The schools are also a smart state fiscal investment. Augenblick, Palaich, and Associates, Inc. (APA), experts in school finance, examined the costs associated with a sample of early college high schools in California, New York, Ohio, and Texas, states that are initiating large numbers of these schools. APA then compared the estimated educational and financial benefits for individuals, schools, and the state (e.g., taxable revenues, social costs avoided) to those for traditional high schools. The analysis suggests that in states like both California and New York, despite their very different education financial structures, policymakers might expect to harvest \$1.33 to \$2.11 more for every dollar invested in early college high schools than in traditional high schools over the course of 15 years, and \$2.51 to \$3.95 more over the course of 25 years.

Policies That Support and Sustain Early College High School

The gains for early college high schools have often been made in the absence of favorable state policies. But if states and young people are to reap the full benefits of these schools and other accelerated learning options, state policies must be designed intentionally to support the essential features of early college high schools: the alignment of secondary and post-secondary standards; the integration of high school and college curricula; the creation of student support systems by high school and college partnerships; and the ability of students to advance to college-level work as soon as they demonstrate they are ready. These features embody an underlying assumption of early college high school: students are motivated by challenge, not remediation, and by the opportunity to move into tuition-free college coursework while in high school.

Given the salient characteristic of early college high schools—that they integrate secondary and post-secondary education—two types of policy are most relevant. The first are laws and regulations that define the jurisdictions of the secondary and post-secondary sectors, and the second are those that better align these two sectors. These two areas include policies related to dual enrollment/credit, transfer of credit, teacher qualifications, funding formulas and structures, and P-16 governance. Also influential are state accountability systems and provisions that encourage or constrain school autonomy.

Many current policies constrain implementation of key early college design features. These barriers—and recommended alternatives—include:

Dual Credit Restrictions: Early college high school students should be able to count college courses simultaneously for high school graduation, college credit, and high school day/

minute requirements. Some states do not permit this, although the college content meets or surpasses that of a high school course and has the added advantage of allowing students to advance toward a post-secondary degree.

Recommendations:

- ❑ Give discretion to secondary and post-secondary schools to grant dual credit toward program and graduation requirements.
- ❑ Permit college coursework to count toward seat-time requirements for high school.

College Eligibility Requirements: Early college high school students should advance to college courses as they are ready, based on transparent standards and subject-specific assessments. However, some states limit the number of college courses high school students can take or restrict enrollment to students of a certain age or grade. Some restrict enrollment to those with minimum cumulative grade point averages or combined SAT scores. In these states, a student with strong math scores cannot take college math if her/his English language arts scores do not meet the standard.

Recommendations:

- ❑ Base eligibility on performance criteria, not age or grade level.
- ❑ Regulate access on a subject-specific basis corresponding to subject-specific performance.
- ❑ Authorize high schools to determine how many college courses a student may take in a given period.

Alternative approach: Allow open access to college classes, but grant college course credit only after students pass an external exam or assessment.

Transfer Rules: Clear, formal, statewide articulation agreements would ensure that graduates of early college high schools can transfer their college courses easily to a four-year post-secondary institution, shortening the time to a Bachelor's degree and resulting in savings to students and states. Such agreements would establish a systematic means of equating courses for transferring credit, yet many states have not enacted them across post-secondary education institutions.

Recommendations:

- ❑ Mandate formal articulation agreements within and across state higher education systems.
- ❑ Make prerequisites for transfer into general education and major requirements for degree programs more transparent.

- ❑ Make transfer agreements widely accessible to schools and individuals.
- ❑ Require public higher education institutions to accept dual credit courses as equivalent to courses transferable under articulation agreements.

Funding Limitations: Funding arrangements for schools and students should promote high schools that incorporate college coursework and help students subsequently avoid remedial classes in college. High schools and colleges should receive state support for the instructional and support costs of educating early college students and have the flexibility to combine various funding streams for these purposes.

In most states, however, high school students are ineligible for college financial aid, even though early college high schools would promote more efficient uses of this aid. Also, in many states K-12 districts lose funding when students enroll in college courses. This can discourage high schools from entering into partnerships with post-secondary institutions to start early college high schools.

Recommendations:

- ❑ Allow schools to claim K-12 state apportionments for Average Daily Attendance (ADA) until age 21.
- ❑ Permit a portion of per-pupil ADA to follow students to pay for college credits.
- ❑ Give high school students access to financial aid if half or more of their coursework is college-level in early high school courses.
- ❑ Allow two- and four-year public colleges to claim full-time equivalent (FTE) reimbursement for dual enrollees.

Teacher Qualifications: In early colleges, high school and college teachers must have the flexibility to teach according to their expertise and qualifications at any level within the school. The collaboration of high school and college faculty helps eliminate repetition, promotes the alignment of course content and standards, and better prepares students for the college environment.

However, union regulations and post-secondary hiring policies can limit flexibility in staffing early college courses. A union may be leery of allowing teachers from outside of its membership to teach courses at high schools for credit. Post-secondary institutions hire faculty based on refereed publications and the reputation of their graduate institution. The more selective the post-secondary partner in the early college high school, the less likely it is to grant adjunct status to a high

school teacher and allow her or him to teach courses bearing college-credit in that institution.

Recommendations:

- ❑ Encourage districts and unions to provide incentives, such as adjunct professor status, to high school teachers in return for allowing college instructors to teach in high schools.
- ❑ Offer incentives to state post-secondary institutions that demonstrate they encourage faculty to engage in high school improvement and instruction.

Constraints on Autonomy: An early college high school needs autonomy to design a unique, integrated education environment—requiring latitude in curricular design, the assignment to personnel of responsibilities that foster high school-college collaboration, and the design of integrated professional development for secondary/post-secondary faculty.

Charter school laws can generally grant the flexibility required for early college high schools, and this approach works well in some states, but it is neither a panacea nor the only means of promoting school-level discretion. Indeed, not all states have charter legislation, and even those that do, charter schools often do not receive maximum per-pupil state or district allocations or cannot tap into local bond funding for capital needs. Also, relations between public school districts and charter schools need improvement. Some charter laws inherently build in tension between the two. For example, some laws hold sending districts accountable for student outcomes in charter schools over which they exert limited or no control.

Recommendations:

- ❑ Encourage agreements at the district or state level that grant autonomy in exchange for accountability. For example, the Boston Public Schools and the Boston Teachers Union agreed to create a number of “Pilot schools,” with autonomies akin to charter schools regarding scheduling, staffing, curricular, and budgeting decisions.
- ❑ Fund such schools, including charter schools, at the same rate as other public schools.
- ❑ Hold these schools accountable for the students they actually serve.

Mismatches Between School Design and Accountability: Under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), states are required to report on the Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) of

their schools, including an accounting of graduation rates for high school students. Many states have not provided for the special, accelerated features of early college high schools in the design of their accountability systems for reporting AYP, which include graduation rates under NCLB. Thus, they may inadvertently penalize high schools that, rather than offering the traditional four-year program, offer a fifth year so that students can complete a high school diploma *and* college degree.

Recommendation:

- Designate special AYP graduation rate reporting rules for early college high schools in state accountability plans under NCLB.

States Promoting “Early College-Friendly” Policies

While no state has adopted a full set of the policies needed to support early college high schools, some have reshaped key policies to meet early college goals. Changes to date are modest, but they suggest that some states are open to harmonizing dissonant policies—or, at least, to finding enough latitude within existing rules—to have established over 125 early college high schools nationally.

Some “enabling policy conditions” have been within easier reach than others.

Easiest ▼

Dual crediting: Many states allow dual crediting and permit college courses to count toward high school seat time requirements. Other states might be more amenable to change if policymakers can be convinced that dual crediting is not tantamount to “double dipping” by high schools and colleges, with two institutions claiming state per-pupil funding for the same student. Rare states, like Florida, actually require high school students taking college courses to do so for dual credit, even while providing state funding to both the student’s high school and college, in order to shorten their time to a post-secondary degree.

Eligibility: States generally are willing to consider exempting early college high schools from certain statewide college course eligibility rules. This acknowledges the need for students to accelerate into college courses and toward the Associate’s degree goal as soon they are academically ready. The University System of Georgia allows early college high schools to use a framework of P-14 competencies being developed by the state. Through its efforts to create a coordinated P-16 education system, the University is able to determine

each student’s college course readiness, rather than the typical minimum combined GPA and SAT score requirements.

Teacher qualifications: When included in the planning for early college high schools, teachers unions have generally been amenable to allowing college professors to teach dual-credit courses. Some early college high schools have instituted team teaching arrangements, with a high school teacher and a college professor collaborating, an approach that both instructors find rewarding. Utah dual enrollment regulations support early college principles in another way: they authorize colleges to grant adjunct status to instructors of dual enrollment courses, and high school partners can nominate teachers. Also, dual enrollment partnerships can use state funds to develop joint professional development activities.

Harder ▼

Credit Transfer: Ensuring that college course credits earned in an early college high school transfer to a Baccalaureate program is a necessary enabling condition, and many states have long struggled to build systemic transfer and articulation agreements to help students transfer from two- to four-year post-secondary institutions. That said, it is a challenge for post-secondary institutions to interpret and accept dual credit courses for transfer. They sometimes question the quality of college courses that contain high school students, especially if those courses are taught on high school campuses.

In Ohio, the “transfer module” is a helpful policy vehicle for early college high schools. The module is a transparent set of post-secondary courses articulated to general education requirements at the state’s four-year colleges. Early college high schools can align their curricula with the transfer module to help ensure that college credits earned by graduates can be applied toward a Bachelor’s degree.

Autonomy: Certain state conditions, such as charter school laws or the clear initiative of state leadership, can grant the autonomy that early college high schools need to begin and operate. California’s charter school laws helped to resolve some barriers in initiating an early college high school serving high school dropouts and near-dropouts. They allowed community college instructors to deliver a fully integrated high school-college curriculum, supported through ADA, without having to be supervised by an employee from the sending school district.

Another example of a policy supporting autonomy is North Carolina’s Innovations Initiatives Act of 2003-04. It estab-

lished a process for waiving state rules for districts and colleges engaged in “cooperative efforts between secondary schools and institutions of higher education,” including those that “provide flexible, customized programs of learning for high school students who would benefit from accelerated, higher level coursework or early graduation,” such as early college high schools. In fact, this waiver is critical as North Carolina creates 75 such high school post-secondary partnerships, known as “Learn and Earn” schools.

Accountability: States like New York, with a number of early college high schools, have shown a willingness to include—and the U.S. Department of Education a willingness to consider—provisions in reporting AYP for redesigned high schools, such as early colleges, in which students will be taking a substantial number of college classes in the fifth year of high school. However, many states have yet to do so, and impending reauthorization of NCLB may create both opportunity and uncertainty for the design of state accountability systems in the near future.

Hardest ▼

Finance: There have been modest but notable steps to help finance early college high schools. Georgia and Tennessee, rare states with their own sources of funding for financial aid and scholarship programs, have made aid accessible to high school students for college courses.⁴ However, the overall ability of state finance systems to fund an integrated secondary/post-secondary curriculum remains quite limited. Moreover, as noted about dual crediting, some policymakers are suspicious of what they perceive to be any “double” funding of high schools and colleges for dual enrollees.

Ohio policymakers think about early college high schools differently. They have committed investments of over \$8 million in funding over two years to supplement existing per-pupil allocations for early college high schools, under the budgets of both the state education department and the Board of Regents. Under this demonstration, the state is exploring whether earlier investments in early college students (of funds that would have otherwise been allocated later for post-secondary work) can translate into students’ more efficient completion of a post-secondary degree.

Improving Policies: Where to Start

With the first early college high schools having been launched in 2002, they are still in the first stages of develop-

ment—but are already showing promising results. Moreover, efforts to support and sustain them cannot only help students in these schools, but also can inform and influence the development of education policies that improve the transition of students from high school through college, especially for those who may traditionally struggle and drop out of high school or college before attaining a credential. Thus, policymakers interested in supporting early college high schools should explicitly situate their efforts within broader education reform so that the most promising early college practices are not only sustained, but replicated more broadly.

There are at least three ways to connect early college-friendly policies to broader education improvement efforts.

1. Coordinate P-16 education policies with the development of early college high schools: Efforts to promote coordinated education policies across K-12 and post-secondary systems—through P-16 councils or other means—can provide both benefits to and from schools, like early college high schools that manifest the envisioned coordination in practice. Georgia’s ongoing development of P-14 standards, for example, complements the implementation of early college high schools. These efforts at P-16 coordination can enhance efforts to ease credit transfer and develop appropriate eligibility requirements for high school students taking an integrated 9-14 curriculum. If early college student outcomes are positive, a state’s P-16 council could consider whether such policies should be applied more broadly.

2. Study the state’s return-on-investment in financing an integrated course of study: It is important to examine and make explicit both the benefits of integrated secondary/post-secondary education—in terms of increasing post-secondary access and improving student outcomes—and the financial costs of creating these ties. If early college high schools are found to yield a greater return on investment than traditional high schools, then states might reconsider their unease about funding dual credit for any dual enrollee. Rather, enacting “hold harmless” funding that provides an incentive for high schools and colleges to work together in powerful ways would be a good investment given the likely returns. Ultimately, to judge the validity of these or other hypotheses, early college outcomes must be tied to state finance implications.

cont’d on page 46

Valley Unified School District reports. Alumni still stop by the school to make sure we are “still doing a good job.”

Most exciting of all is the potential impact the NTHS model can have on the high school experience of students far beyond Napa. In 2000, New Technology Foundation, a nonprofit organization set up to support Napa's NTHS and engage in educational reform, received a Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation grant to help other schools replicate what it had created. The New Tech Network is currently comprised of 12 schools, and as many as 12 new schools will be coming online throughout the 2006–07 school year. New Technology High

School has more than 100 visitors each month to learn more about this small, high-tech, high-touch school. We have not solved all the woes facing the 100-year-old system, but our model represents a significant attempt to create a school for the 21st century. ■

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3. Ask and answer key research questions: Evidence about the efficacy and cost benefits of early college and related strategies is essential for rational policymaking. Policy needs to take into account the following considerations, based on solid research and measurement of outcomes:

- ❑ Who are early college high schools serving, in terms of both demographic background and academic profile?
- ❑ Are these schools reaching and achieving results with students who traditionally lag in post-secondary attainment? At what rates do students graduate high school? How many college credits or Associate's degrees do they earn? Do students go on to Bachelor's programs, require fewer remedial college courses, and persist to a post-secondary credential more easily and more quickly than do non-early college high school graduates from similar backgrounds?
- ❑ What elements of the early college high school design appear to be essential? How might public policy support their adoption and expansion to other schools and educational programs?

To the degree that early college high schools succeed in raising student outcomes in terms of both completing high school and a post-secondary credential, they can serve as critical evidence in support of expanding—perhaps making permanent—policy changes that fundamentally change the structure of the transition from high school to college.⁵ Achieving this will be by no means an easy task, but clearly there are logical and compelling ways to begin. ■

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¹JFF analysis of data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study for students from the lowest-income SES quintile. The period of time measured includes outcomes from students' entry as 9th-graders in 1988 to the year 2000.

²Early college high schools are a recent development—the first ones opened in 2002. Thus, the percentages of students graduating, earning an Associate's degrees, and accepted to four-year colleges are likely to rise in one more year.

³N. Hoffman, *Add and Subtract: Dual Enrollment as a State Strategy to Increase Postsecondary Success for Underrepresented Students*. (Jobs for the Future, 2005). Also see Utah concurrent enrollment regulations at <http://www.rules.utah.gov/publicat/code/r277/r277-713.htm>.

⁴In these states, funding for financial aid is not tied to federal financial aid that restricts students enrolled in high school from receiving aid for college courses.

⁵One way that states are addressing these and related questions is by participating in the national Early College High School Student Information System (SIS), a highly secure system that provides data to support the Early College High School Initiative. The SIS collects aggregated data and unidentifiable, student-level data for the period beginning at least two years prior to enrollment in the early college high school through graduation or departure from the school. Schools and school districts supply data related to a number of broad categories: staffing, student demographics, student longitudinal information, early college high school courses, student GPA, transcripts, student enrollment, student discipline, student attendance, and graduation. The SIS will document students' post-early college high school enrollment in higher education through the National Student Clearinghouse.