



A Double the Numbers Publication from Jobs for the Future

On Ramp to College

A State Policymaker's Guide to Dual Enrollment

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“It’s like I’m so much more important to the teachers now that I’m [taking college courses]. They pay attention to me because they know I’m serious and I’m not going to fool around in class and miss assignments and stuff like that. I’m college-bound now.”

—RHODE ISLAND HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

Introduction

We can predict the future economic well-being of our young people, and that of the United States, by how well educated they are. Those with a Bachelor’s degree or higher will head toward the top of the income scale, while those with only a high school diploma will move to the bottom—where they are likely to cost states more in services than they can contribute in taxes and workforce productivity (Carnevale 2007). Indeed, according to *Hitting Home*, a Jobs for the Future report on challenges confronting U.S. higher education, educational attainment correlates with personal income and state economic strength (Reindl 2007). When educators celebrate high school graduation, they sell students short unless they send a second clear message: completing an Associate’s degree or an industry certificate is a minimum educational requirement for achieving a family-supporting income.



Despite this economic reality, the number of students who actually earn a postsecondary credential is startlingly small, and states face enormous challenges in increasing postsecondary attainment. In fact, fewer than half of all ninth graders—only 40 percent—enroll in college four years later, according to a national report card by the nonprofit National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. Of those who do enroll, many never complete a postsecondary credential. Even in the best-performing states, only 65 percent of community college students return for a second year. In 2006, only 29 percent of community college students attained a degree within three years of enrolling. And 56 percent of students completed a degree within six years of enrolling in a four-year institution.¹ Completion rates for low-income students and students of color are significantly lower.

An analysis of data from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS:88) pinpoints the problem: Students from the middle and upper ends of the socioeconomic spectrum (i.e., quintiles 3-5) are almost five times more likely to earn a college degree than their least-advantaged classmates.² While 52 percent of students from the middle and upper levels of the socioeconomic ladder complete college and earn a postsecondary degree, only 11 percent of students from the lowest group attain a degree. Students from the second-lowest group fare

better, with 24 percent earning a college degree, but this rate of completion is still significantly worse than their more affluent peers (Goldberger 2007). (See Figure 1.)

State education leaders, like most Americans, believe that hard-working students, regardless of their family backgrounds, should be able to get a postsecondary credential. So how can states ensure that more young people get the postsecondary skills and knowledge needed for financial self-sufficiency, civic participation, and state economic stability?

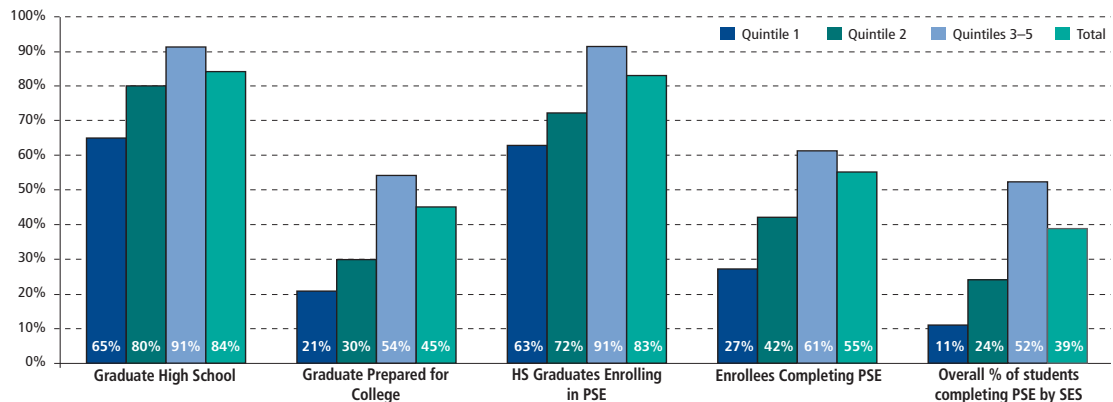
Many states are raising high school graduation standards and building better bridges between secondary schools and higher education to help ensure that more students start on the path to a postsecondary credential and stay on that path to earn one. Within states, this work entails:

- aligning high school exit and college entrance standards;
- requiring a rigorous academic curriculum;
- building incentives into the state’s accountability system for schools to retain and graduate all students;
- promoting collaboration between education sectors through K-16 councils; and
- installing data systems to track student progress.

This guide also addresses each of those points. Just as important, it shows how state policymakers can use dual enrollment—a rapidly expanding mechanism for allowing students to enroll in and earn credit for college-level coursework while still in high school—as a valuable part of a comprehensive, statewide effort to expand college opportunity for all.

While dual enrollment programs have existed in some form for many years, their primary purpose has been to provide accelerated work for advanced students, including those in Career and Technical Education programs. However, dual enrollment can do much more than advance such students. When properly designed, it can serve as an “on ramp” to postsecondary education for students otherwise unlikely to attend college. Dual enrollment gives students practice at doing college-level work while receiving support from collaborating high school and college instructors. In addition, dual enrollment can serve as a powerful impetus for integrating high school and postsecondary education into a continuous system spanning grades 9 through 16.

Figure 1: The college completion gap between low-SES and high-SES students is the cumulative result of gaps in achievement along every step of the education pipeline.



Percentage of eighth graders by SES status who attain different levels of education.
Source: Goldberger (2007).

A New Generation of Dual Enrollment Policies

As dual enrollment programs become more popular and a wider range of students participate, many states are discovering a mismatch between their policies and the new purposes dual enrollment is beginning to serve. All but eight states have dual enrollment policies, while the remainder have locally developed programs (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education 2006). However, few were explicitly designed as a bridge to college for students not already college bound. Nor were the policies set up to take advantage of the connections between secondary and postsecondary education required in a dual enrollment program.

This situation has begun to change. A number of states—including Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Maine, New York (CUNY), North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Texas, and Utah—now have or are crafting statewide dual enrollment policies that look decidedly different than those established mainly for the benefit of the gifted and talented. These policies make the attainment of college credit in high school an opportunity for a wide range of high school students. This guide draws examples primarily from these states.

The table beginning on the next page provides a snapshot of the scale of dual enrollment participation and increases in growth.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Based on Jobs for the Future’s experience in the field, we have defined high-level principles that characterize the best dual enrollment programs:

- ▶ The mission of dual enrollment is to serve a wide range of students, particularly those from groups who attend college at disproportionately low rates.
- ▶ All of the state’s public high schools provide equal access to dual enrollment opportunities.
- ▶ College credit substitutes for high school credit, allowing students to accelerate in the specific subjects in which they demonstrate strength.
- ▶ The secondary and post-secondary sectors share responsibility for dual enrollment student success.
- ▶ Funding mechanisms are based on the principle of no cost to students and no financial harm to secondary and post-secondary partners.
- ▶ The state collects individual student and statewide data in order to assess the program’s impact and help design improvements.
- ▶ The policy is part of a statewide agenda to increase the rigor of the high school diploma and is guided by a K-16 governance structure.