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State Dual Enrollment Policies: Addressing Access and Quality

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Policymakers and educators continue to seek options for helping high school students transition successfully into postsecondary education. This interest stems, in part, from evidence that American students are unprepared for college—nearly half of all postsecondary students need at least one remedial course upon entering college (NCES, 2002).

A body of research demonstrates that postsecondary success is predicated on a clear understanding of the expectations in college as well as rigorous academic course work in high school (Venezia, Kirst, and Antonio, 2003; Adelman, 1999). This suggests that high schools and colleges should work together to ensure students' high school experiences are related to college expectations.

Dual enrollment programs can do just that: blur the distinction between high school and college by allowing high school students to enroll in college courses and earn college credit. In dual credit programs, the college course yields high school credit as well.

Traditionally, dual enrollment has been targeted toward the most academically proficient high school students. Some educators and policymakers now suggest that a broader range of students could benefit from these programs; many more students could achieve at the college level earlier if only they are challenged to do so. And, by exposing high school students to the academic and social demands of college, it is hoped that the need for remediation in college will be reduced (AASCU, 2002; Martinez and Bray, 2002; National Commission on the High School Senior Year, 2001).

This Brief, based on a longer report of the same title, examines how – and whether – access to dual enrollment programs is influenced by state policies. The regulatory landscape of dual enrollment is unclear. In many states, these programs have only recently become the subject of legislation. Thus, we summarize dual enrollment legislation in all 50 states, as of the end of 2003. We analyze the implications of state policies for programs and students, in particular the ways that policies can promote or inhibit broad student participation in dual enrollment.

It is important to note that local interpretations of

state-level legislation may result in programs operating differently than state policy intends. However, we focus on policies as written, rather than program practices.

Findings

We reviewed all publicly available state policies and regulations regarding dual enrollment programs in the 50 states, as well as program information in states where programs existed. Ten states have no legislation or regulation addressing the enrollment of high school students in college courses.

Ten features along which dual enrollment programs can vary were identified: state mandates and oversight; target population; admissions requirements; location; student mix; credentialing and approval of the instructors; course content; method of credit-earning; program structure and intensity; and tuition and funding. No state has policy addressing all ten features, but in the majority of states at least some aspects of dual enrollment are regulated.

General Policies

Of the 40 states with policies or regulations, 17 mandate that dual enrollment opportunities be provided to students. That does not mean that institutions must develop and implement a dual enrollment “program,” but simply means that high school students must have the opportunity to enroll in postsecondary education.

In ten states, legislation gives high schools and colleges the option to provide dual enrollment opportunities to students but does not require them to do so. This type of policy preserves local authority by allowing high schools and colleges to decide whether or not high school students should have access to college courses. However, in this situation, dual enrollment availability may be influenced by the resources of local schools and colleges, rather than by student needs. Eleven states do not specify whether dual enrollment is mandatory or voluntary, though it can be assumed that in these states it is optional.

Although some state policies encourage a particular model of dual enrollment, most state policies leave open the question of program content. Rather than dictate program type, state policies allow educators to decide which model is most appropriate for their student body and institutional environment. Similarly, very few states dictate the method of earning credit, though most legislation implies that students shall earn dual credit via transcript.

State Oversight

Only 13 states directly oversee dual enrollment, meaning that they require some accountability on the part of the participating institutions. In some cases, programs must report annually on their course offerings or student outcomes (grades or college attendance); in others, they must report compliance with state guidelines regarding student admissions requirements and teacher qualifications. Two states require financial reporting. The extensiveness of these reports is unclear from publicly available documents. It is possible that in other states, oversight occurs through other mechanisms, such as auditing of postsecondary institutions or general high school reporting measures, but this is not evident from the dual enrollment-specific policies.

Target Population and Admissions Requirements

Thirty-three state policies address student eligibility requirements for participation in dual enrollment. In some cases, states stipulate that eligibility criteria are to be set by the postsecondary or the secondary institution, or in one case, jointly.

Some state policies specify that dual enrollment is to be targeted towards advanced students. Admissions restrictions generally take two forms: restricting the grade level of students eligible to participate, such as to juniors and seniors; and setting academic requirements for program admissions. The latter requirements are complex and vary widely among the states, with some states requiring a specific grade point average or test score for participation, and others requiring students to have passed the state high school exit examinations, for example.

Academically advanced and highly motivated students are probably headed for success in college, regardless of their dual enrollment participation. Policies restricting participation to these students may exclude others in need of an extra push toward college attendance or those who are disengaged from traditional academic study.

However, restrictive admissions requirements help address concerns that dual enrollment courses do not live up to the standard of “true” college courses. Such requirements also help maintain colleges’ control over the quality of their student bodies and discourage colleges from enrolling unqualified students in order to boost enrollments. From the perspective of higher education institutions, such requirements are logical and beneficial.

Some states have sought ways to include a broad range of students while maintaining program quality. In Ohio, students are required to be academically advanced in the subject of their dual enrollment course but not in other courses. Florida has two sets of admissions requirements, one for academic and another for technical courses. This helps to ensure that most students have access to some dual enrollment options, even if they are not ready to participate in a college-level academic course.

Location and Student Mix

State policies commonly address program location

and student mix, yet do not tend to dictate either. Language pertaining to the location of dual enrollment courses is included in the regulations of approximately two-thirds of the states that have dual enrollment policies. Of the 27 that address location, only four (Colorado, Hawaii, South Dakota and Vermont) require that dual enrollment courses take place on the campus of the postsecondary institution. In the remaining 23, the classes may take place at either the high school or the college.

Language regarding student mix—whether or not dually enrolled students attend classes with traditionally enrolled college students—is included in eight states; two of these (California and Ohio) require that dual enrollment courses be mixed. The remaining states mention that the classes may be either mixed or reserved for high school students only.

Location and student mix can contribute significantly to the perceived rigor or quality of dual enrollment and sometimes can affect the ability of students to transfer their credit toward a degree at other institutions (Clark, 2001; Johnstone and Del Genio, 2001). It may be beneficial, therefore, to require that dual enrollment courses be offered on a college campus and with regularly matriculated college students. Yet, such requirements could limit student access to dual enrollment.

Instructors

Thirteen states have stipulations regarding instructors of dual enrollment courses, but the stipulations vary widely. For example, Georgia mandates that all instructional duties lie with the postsecondary institution, while Wyoming allows for any secondary teacher to teach a dual-credit course. The other eleven states fall between these two policy extremes.

The question of who is allowed to teach dual enrollment programs has implications for their perceived quality. Assurance that a student is receiving college-level instruction is a key issue in the transferability of dual credit. Not all dually enrolled pupils matriculate to the postsecondary institution they attend as a dually enrolled student. Some postsecondary institutions may not consider a course eligible for degree credit if it was taught by an instructor lacking traditional postsecondary credentials or training.

The ideal level of regulation of dual enrollment instructors is difficult to determine. Stringent regulation may discourage institutional participation. Institutions must have the resources to recruit and provide professional development for teaching staff in order to implement such requirements. However, strong regulation of dual enrollment instructors may improve the level of rigor and quality, thereby maintaining support for dual enrollment and perhaps easing students’ transfer of credit earned through dual enrollment.

Course Content

In an attempt to ensure the collegiate nature of dual enrollment courses, some states regulate instructional practices. Fourteen states impose regulations that, for

example, require dual enrollment programs to limit course offerings; to seek college approval for courses and their content; or to use standardized college curricula, books, or exams regardless of location or instructor.

Limits on course offerings are stipulated in a number of ways, such as not allowing physical education and/or developmental courses to be offered as dual credit courses or by mandating that a dual credit course offering cannot be comparable to a course already offered by the school district the pupil attends. While standardizing course content would seem to be the most efficient way to ensure college-level content, this is imposed only in two states (Arizona and Missouri).

Although regulating course content may help maintain the college level of dual enrollment courses, stringent regulations can limit the course offerings of the programs. Dual enrollment courses may also be limited indirectly by other aspects of policy such as regulation of instructors, location, or funding. For example, policies requiring postsecondary credentials for instructors reduces the pool of qualified teachers, potentially limiting the courses available.

It is possible that quality controls exist outside of state policy—perhaps with regional accreditation boards—or that the lack of policy ensures institutional control of course content, pedagogy, and evaluation.

Program Financing

Program financing is a significant concern for states, and funding arrangements have implications for institutions and individuals. Given the complexity of education funding at the secondary and postsecondary levels generally, and with regard to dual enrollment in particular, it is impossible to give a detailed account of financing arrangements in this Brief.

Thirty-three states address tuition payment for dual enrollment, with some states requiring students to pay, others placing the burden for tuition on the participating institutions, and still others providing funding for tuition. The policies of seven states allow the institutions to decide together how tuition should be covered.

Given the strong role of the state in funding education, it is somewhat surprising that only 21 state policies specify funding streams for dual enrollment. In ten states, dual enrollment students are doubly funded, meaning that states pay both participating institutions—the high school and the college—for the same student. This likely has the effect of promoting institutional and student participation.

In other states, one or both institutions lose some or all funding for dually enrolled students. In some cases, such as in Michigan, both institutions receive funding for such students but not as much as they would under a double-funding arrangement.

What is important to take away from this limited discussion is that funding can be a strong incentive or disincentive for participation—for students and institutions. Given concerns about access to dual enrollment and higher education generally, students bear the burden more often than might be expected. On the

other hand, in many states institutions are given strong financial encouragement to offer programs.

Recommendations for Policymakers

Not all states have policy governing dual enrollment, and there is great variation in the policies that do exist. Program structure is the least governed area, while student admissions and program finances are most often addressed by state policy. There seems to be little interest in promoting specific models of dual enrollment. Yet states do have a vested interest in ensuring that their financial investment in dual enrollment is used wisely and that dual enrollment programs remain college-level and do not dilute the meaning of credit earned through state postsecondary institutions.

States have a difficult balancing act to perform. Any desire to promote access to dual enrollment for a broad range of students is balanced by the need to maintain academic standards and ensure that only students ready for college-level work participate in college courses. Likewise, the desire to ensure that no stakeholder is deterred from participating due to funding constraints must be balanced with states' need to ensure that dual enrollment does not become a drain on resources.

In thinking through the implications that state policies may have for programs and for students, the authors offer the following recommendations to policymakers and program regulators.

Clarify program goals. Policies should emanate from clear program goals, so that policies do not have unintended consequences. Policies and regulations for dual enrollment programs that are intended to offer enrichment for academically sound students will differ from policies addressing programs targeted at a wide range of students.

Identify funding mechanisms that meet the needs of all stakeholders. Funding mechanisms have important ramifications for student and institutional participation. Although earmarked state funds directed toward dual enrollment are an appealing way to finance the programs, recent economic developments indicate that such funding may be unstable. Instead, policymakers might consider arrangements such as those used in North Carolina and Michigan, where high schools and colleges share the funding burden for dually enrolled students. This seems a more equitable solution and one that ensures that economically disadvantaged students will not be excluded.

Think through the implications of both minimal and detailed dual enrollment policies. Limiting the regulation of dual enrollment is one way to maintain institutional control over educational programming, and may be appealing to legislators seeking stakeholder support for dual enrollment. Policies that are too stringent may limit participation or prevent program innovation, thereby discouraging institutional participation. However, vague or not very detailed policies can create unanticipated consequences.

Develop ways to ensure the rigor of dual enrollment

courses. Policymakers must find ways to ensure that dual enrollment courses offer students a true postsecondary experience. This is important not only for the students themselves, but because it maintains the integrity of postsecondary education. Dilution of quality may reflect poorly on postsecondary credit generally.

Consider the needs of students beyond academic course taking. Despite the attention paid by the education and grant-making communities to comprehensive and enhanced comprehensive dual enrollment programs, which provide support services such as tutoring or counseling, few state policies create such programs. Though not precluded by policy, funding streams that provide only the minimum support for dual enrollment may inadvertently prevent programs from providing services such as counseling that can promote student success.

Meet the needs of students interested in technical courses as well as academic courses. Dual enrollment programs often target those students ready for academic course work at the college level. But many students, particularly those who find relevance and motivation in technical classes, may benefit from the career-related opportunities available in the postsecondary sector. Policymakers should support dual enrollment programs that meet the needs of these students as well. Otherwise, they risk turning dual enrollment into yet another program for those at the top of the academic hierarchy. One possible way to encourage broad participation may be the creation of career pathways that offer dual enrollment credit for both technical and academic courses.

The ramifications of the variation found in the state policies are not wholly clear. Future research should focus on exploring the ways that state policy variation influences the implementation of and participation in dual enrollment programs at the local level. This Brief provides a sense of the myriad ways to structure and regulate dual enrollment. As such, it may aid both federal- and state-level discussions regarding dual enrollment policies and practices.

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