

Scaling Dual Enrollment Pathways to College and Career Opportunity

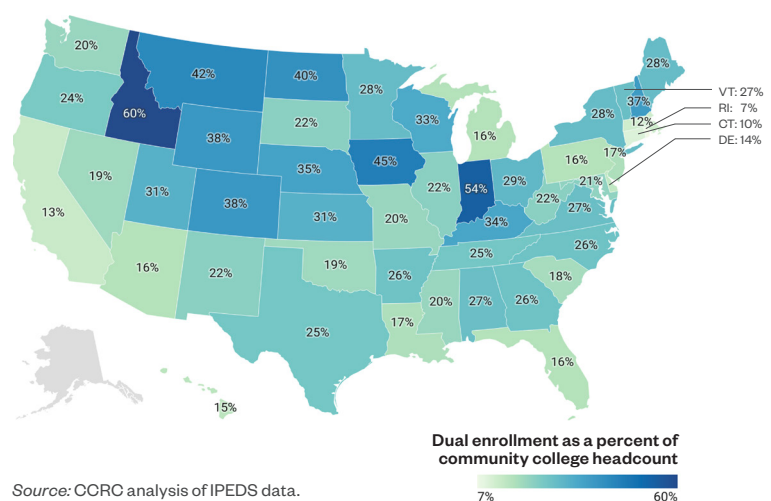
Five State Policy Strategies

By Davis Jenkins and John Fink

Dual enrollment—through which high school students take college courses for credit—has become a major and rapidly growing part of American education. In 2023-24, approximately 2.8 million high school students took college courses through dual enrollment, including roughly 2 million at community colleges.¹ Nationally, dual enrollment students now account for one in five community college enrollments, with substantially higher shares in some states and colleges.²

A growing body of research demonstrates that students who participate in dual enrollment are more likely to enroll in college, persist, complete credentials, and experience stronger labor market outcomes.³ Nationally, students who participate in dual enrollment complete college degrees at higher rates than college entrants without prior dual enrollment.⁴ Dual enrollment also appears to help students complete college more quickly.⁵ And taking dual enrollment is associated with greater earnings in the crucial years following high school graduation.⁶ The benefits of dual enrollment can be especially large for students from groups historically underrepresented in higher education.⁷ Research also shows that dual enrollment can help high school students who may not initially appear “college ready” succeed in college-level coursework when they receive appropriate supports.⁸

Percentage of Community College Students in High School in 2023-24



Source: CCRC analysis of IPEDS data.

Growth Is Not Enough: Why States Need to Rethink Dual Enrollment Policy

States are increasingly investing in dual enrollment to improve college affordability, strengthen educational attainment, and build workforce talent pipelines. We have counted nearly 1,500 policies enacted across all 50 states from 2010 through 2025, many of which aim to expand dual enrollment access and availability.⁹ Despite its growth and promise, dual enrollment is often not designed to maximize returns for students or states. Many dual enrollment programs are still organized around

isolated college courses rather than coherent college and career pathways. Students frequently accumulate credits without a clear connection to a postsecondary credential, bachelor's degree transfer pathway, or career field—a pattern commonly described as “random acts of dual enrollment.” Access to high-quality dual enrollment opportunities also remains uneven, with students from higher-income and college-educated families participating at substantially higher rates than Black, Latino, rural, low-income, and first-generation students. As a result, dual enrollment too often functions as a “program of privilege,” disproportionately benefiting students already on track for college while doing less to expand opportunity for students who might not otherwise continue their education after high school.

Several factors contribute to gaps in access and success in dual enrollment:

- **Insufficient funding for colleges and school districts.** Only 10 states provide close to adequate funding for community colleges and school districts to provide a high-quality experience without passing on costs to students and families or K-12 schools.¹⁰ Limited funding often constrains outreach, advising, instruction, transportation, and academic supports. In many states, colleges and school districts absorb the costs of dual enrollment or pass costs on to students and families, creating barriers for lower-income students.¹¹
- **Out-of-pocket costs for students and families.** While roughly half of states cover dual enrollment tuition for low-income students (and in some cases all students), students and families in the other half of states typically have to pay out of pocket.^{12 13} Tuition, fees, textbooks, and transportation costs can discourage participation, particularly among low-income students. Even relatively small costs can reduce participation among students who could benefit most.
- **Restrictive eligibility requirements.** Reliance on placement exams and rigid college-readiness thresholds can exclude students who could succeed in dual enrollment coursework with appropriate supports.¹⁴ Research suggests that using multiple measures for eligibility can broaden access without reducing student success.¹⁵
- **Uneven program quality across partnerships.** State policies often focus more on expanding access than ensuring the quality of dual enrollment programming. As a result, students can experience dramatically different levels of advising, academic support, instructional quality, and pathway alignment depending on where they attend high school.¹⁶

The policy challenge for states is no longer simply whether to expand dual enrollment participation. The more important question is whether states are investing in forms of dual enrollment that produce the greatest educational and economic returns for students, communities, and taxpayers.

This challenge is becoming more urgent. Immediate college-going rates among high school graduates have declined nationally over the past decade,¹⁷ while the number of high school graduates is projected to decrease in many states over the coming years.¹⁸ At the same time, labor markets increasingly demand education and training beyond high school for access to jobs that provide family-sustaining wages and opportunities for advancement.¹⁹ Future workforce and enrollment growth will depend increasingly on populations historically underrepresented in higher education.

Rethinking Dual Enrollment as an On-Ramp to College and Career Opportunity

States can increase the return on investment of dual enrollment by supporting programs that both broaden participation among underserved students and connect coursework to postsecondary credentials and careers. CCRC has developed a research-based framework called Dual Enrollment Equity Pathways, or DEEP, to guide practitioners and policymakers to rethink dual enrollment in ways that

expand college and career opportunity. DEEP reframes dual enrollment from a collection of college courses into an on-ramp to college and career pathways after high school. The framework emphasizes helping a broader group of students enter and succeed in postsecondary pathways aligned with their goals and regional workforce opportunities.

The DEEP framework²⁰ is informed by research on early college high schools,²¹ community college guided pathways reforms,²² and field research at colleges and K-12 partnerships that have expanded dual enrollment participation while producing strong postsecondary outcomes for students from underserved groups.²³

DEEP involves four core areas of practice:

Outreach and Access

- Proactively recruit students from underserved schools and communities.
- Remove financial and informational barriers to participation.

Alignment to Pathways

- Align dual enrollment coursework to postsecondary programs and transfer pathways.
- Connect students to pathways in high-demand, high-opportunity fields.

Advising and Planning

- Help students explore career and academic interests.
- Ensure students leave high school with a clear, goal-aligned postsecondary plan.

High-Quality Teaching and Support

- Deliver rigorous college-level instruction with strong academic supports.
- Build students' confidence and identity as college learners.

States must ensure that students are accessing high-quality, pathway-aligned dual enrollment programs that connect college coursework to postsecondary credentials of value, transfer opportunities, and careers. The DEEP framework outlines how practitioners and policymakers can implement dual enrollment as a strategy to grow the number of students in a postsecondary pathway aligned to careers or further education in fields of interest.

Five Ways States Can Scale Dual Enrollment To Expand College and Career Opportunity

With college enrollment dropping despite the need for postsecondary degrees to secure good jobs,²⁴ states need dual enrollment systems that expand—rather than merely accelerate—the college-going population. Drawing on research by CCRC and others, we outline five ways state policymakers can help colleges and K-12 partners scale dual enrollment practices, such as those outlined in the DEEP framework, that expand college and career opportunity, particularly for students who might not otherwise continue their education after high school.

1. Define dual enrollment as a pathway strategy.

State policy signals shape institutional behavior. States that define dual enrollment primarily as an opportunity to earn college credits early often produce fragmented “random acts” models of course-taking. States that define dual enrollment as a pathway strategy are more likely to encourage colleges and school districts to align coursework with transfer pathways, career-connected programs, and regional workforce needs.

A growing number of states are reframing dual enrollment as part of broader attainment and workforce strategies designed to help students transition successfully into postsecondary education and careers after high school.

Policy recommendations

States should:

- Define dual enrollment in statute, regulation, and guidance as part of a pathway to postsecondary credentials, transfer, and careers—not simply a means to early college credit accumulation.
- Set statewide goals for dual enrollment participation and postsecondary momentum, particularly for students historically underrepresented in higher education.
- Incentivize structured pathway models that align dual enrollment coursework to transfer pathways and high-opportunity career fields.
- Align dual enrollment policy with broader state postsecondary attainment and workforce development goals.

State examples

Several states are beginning to align dual enrollment policy with workforce and attainment goals. North Carolina’s [Career and College Promise](#) program provides funding for students to take college credit courses in one of two tracks: College Transfer for students planning to pursue a four-year degree, and Career & Technical Education (CTE) for those seeking job training or certifications. [Alabama](#) and [South Carolina](#) provide scholarships that help students participate in dual enrollment pathways connected to high-demand workforce fields.

2. Fund access and student supports.

Funding policy strongly shapes who participates in dual enrollment and what kinds of programs colleges and schools are able to offer. When state funding is low, colleges often default to low-cost, low-support models that provide limited advising, pathway alignment, and academic support. These approaches may work reasonably well for already college-bound students but are less effective in expanding opportunity for underserved students.

Building pathway-aligned dual enrollment programs with advising, academic support, and career exploration requires greater investment than conventional “random acts” models of coursetaking.²⁵

State funding policies vary widely. While many states provide some direct funding to colleges and schools for dual enrollment, relatively few provide funding levels sufficient to offset the revenue colleges lose by offering dual enrollment at little or no cost to students and families. In many states, colleges, school districts, and students absorb the remaining costs.

Policy recommendations

States should:

- Make dual enrollment free for low- and moderate-income students.
- Cover non-tuition costs such as fees, textbooks, and other instructional materials.
- Provide enough funding to enable colleges to offer high-quality advising, pathway planning, outreach, and academic support—not only course delivery.
- Ensure that both colleges and K-12 districts have financial incentives to expand access and support student success.

State examples

Texas House Bill 8 combines financial aid and performance funding incentives to encourage colleges to expand pathway-aligned dual enrollment. FAST (Financial Aid for Swift Transfer) scholarships support dual enrollment participation among students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, while colleges receive additional funding when students complete at least 15 dual enrollment credits toward a credential of value. Colleges can use these funds to invest in outreach, advising, and pathway supports for students who may not otherwise pursue postsecondary education.

Some states are also taking steps to reduce non-tuition costs. For example, several states, including Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Tennessee, and Texas, have supported the development of open educational resources (OER) to reduce textbook costs for dual enrollment students.²⁶ These states have supported the use of OER in dual enrollment by providing grants to fund repositories of free course materials, encouraging faculty training and adoption of OER, and targeting the development and use of OER course materials in the highest-enrollment dual enrollment courses.

3. Expand access while supporting student success.

Traditional eligibility requirements often prevent students who could benefit from dual enrollment from participating. Reliance on high-stakes placement exams and rigid college-readiness thresholds disproportionately excludes first-generation students and students attending under-resourced high schools.

Research suggests that broader eligibility policies can expand access without reducing student success when colleges and schools pair expanded access with advising, academic support, and clear pathway structures.²⁷ Removing barriers without adding supports risks expanding access without improving outcomes.

Policy recommendations

States should:

- Replace single-test eligibility requirements with multiple measures, such as high school GPA, course history, and teacher recommendations.
- Allow more flexible eligibility pathways and waivers for students underrepresented in dual enrollment.
- Pair expanded access with advising, academic supports, and structured pathway planning.
- Encourage colleges and school districts to proactively recruit students who may not already see themselves as college-bound.

State examples

During the pandemic, Florida and Ohio relaxed placement testing requirements for dual enrollment and allowed greater use of high school GPA and coursework for placement. Both states found that these changes expanded participation without substantially reducing student success rates and have since incorporated more flexible placement approaches into their regular policy.²⁸

Ohio has gone further through its **Innovative Waiver Pathways** program, which allows approved high school–college partnerships to use alternative eligibility measures while requiring outreach and supports for underrepresented students.²⁹ While it initially focused on individual dual enrollment partnerships, the state has expanded it to cover numerous partnerships statewide with a particular focus on enabling students to take dual enrollment courses aligned with career-technical programs in high-demand fields.³⁰ The policy reflects an emerging recognition that expanding access and supporting student success must go hand in hand.

4. Strengthen college and K-12 partnerships and governance.

Dual enrollment operates across K-12, postsecondary, and workforce development systems. Strong programs therefore depend on sustained partnerships among colleges, school districts, employers, and state agencies. States can strengthen these partnerships through clearer governance structures, partnership requirements, and quality expectations.

Most states require formal agreements between colleges and school districts that define responsibilities related to student eligibility, course offerings, funding, advising, instructor qualifications, and data sharing. These agreements can become powerful tools for promoting pathway alignment, equity, and student success rather than simply operational compliance.

Policy recommendations

States should:

- Require formal partnership agreements that address pathway alignment, advising, funding, instructor quality, and data sharing.
- Support regional partnerships aligned with workforce and transfer priorities.
- Encourage employer engagement in the design of career-connected dual enrollment pathways.
- Establish quality standards or accreditation processes to promote more consistent student experiences across partnerships.

State examples

California's [College and Career Access Pathways \(CCAP\)](#) program requires formal agreements between colleges and school districts that define student populations to be served, course alignment, instructor qualifications, cost responsibilities, and data-sharing arrangements. CCAP agreements are specifically encouraged to prioritize access for students underrepresented in higher education and to organize coursework around transfer or career pathways.³¹

Some states are also creating regional governance structures to strengthen employer input into dual enrollment pathways. Under the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), every state has local workforce development boards that bring together employers, workforce agencies, colleges, and school districts. Iowa has created 15 [Regional Planning Partnerships \(RPPs\)](#) and related workforce advisory councils that help align K-12 and community college career and technical education programs with regional labor market needs. These partnerships connect business leaders with educators to help ensure curriculum relevance, expand work-based learning opportunities, and support the state's Future Ready Iowa workforce goals. In recent CCRC field research on CTE dual enrollment, employers and workforce leaders in southeast Iowa described community college Career Academies as important suppliers of regional workforce talent and reported actively working with colleges to ensure that dual enrollment offerings align with current industry demand.³²

Some states are also strengthening quality expectations. Seven states—Arkansas, Connecticut, Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, Oregon, and Washington—currently require dual enrollment programs to be accredited by the [National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships \(NACEP\)](#) or to undergo comparable state quality review processes.

5. Use data and accountability structures to focus on postsecondary and career outcomes.

Most states track participation in dual enrollment, but far fewer track whether students successfully transition into postsecondary education, complete credentials, transfer efficiently, or enter careers with strong labor market outcomes.

States can strengthen dual enrollment policy by focusing accountability systems on students' post-high-school college and career outcomes rather than participation alone. A stronger focus on outcomes can also help states identify which dual enrollment models are most effective in expanding college and career opportunity for underserved students.

Policy recommendations

States should:

- Track student outcomes beyond high school, including college enrollment, transfer, credential attainment, and employment.
- Disaggregate participation and outcomes data by race, income, gender, and other priority characteristics.
- Track whether dual enrollment coursework applies toward credentials and transfer pathways.
- Use data to identify high-performing pathway models and guide continuous improvement.

State examples

Several states are beginning to build more robust dual enrollment data systems.³³ For example, [Ohio publishes annual reports](#) on participation and postsecondary outcomes for students in its College Credit Plus program, and [Kentucky provides similar dual enrollment data](#) statewide and at the county level. Using student unit record data from Texas, CCRC has conducted research on the postsecondary and labor market outcomes of former dual enrollment students³⁴ and developed a [statewide dashboard](#) to provide practitioners with dual enrollment participation, momentum, and postsecondary outcomes for specific college–K-12 partnerships. These types of longitudinal data systems can help practitioners and policymakers alike better understand which dual enrollment approaches produce the strongest returns for students and states.

Federal Role in Supporting Dual Enrollment Pathways to Opportunity

The federal government has a more limited role in dual enrollment policy than states and systems. But it plays an important role in a few areas, including data and funding. Data on dual enrollment students was recently added to the [Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System](#) and has been collected as part of the [Civil Rights Data Collection](#) since 2015. The federal government should continue to improve the collection and expand the availability of dual enrollment data through these sources.

The federal government should also support states, colleges, and local communities with funding to expand dual enrollment opportunities to more high school students, though it should be cautious about proposals to expand Pell Grants to dual enrollment since that may disincentivize state investment.³⁵

Conclusion

Dual enrollment's rapid growth has made it one of the most powerful policy levers for expanding educational opportunity, increasing postsecondary attainment, and strengthening state workforce development systems. Yet many current approaches focus primarily on expanding access to college courses without ensuring that students are entering coherent pathways connected to postsecondary credentials, transfer opportunities, and careers.

To maximize returns for students, employers, and taxpayers, states must view dual enrollment as more than a mechanism for early college credit accumulation. Instead, states should support dual enrollment pathways that intentionally connect students—particularly those historically underrepresented in higher education—to college and career opportunities after high school.

This will require policies that:

- Define dual enrollment as a pathways strategy.
- Align funding and incentives with pathway-building goals.
- Remove barriers to participation while ensuring students receive adequate supports.
- Strengthen partnerships among colleges, school districts, employers, and workforce systems.
- Use data to focus continuous improvement on long-term student outcomes.

The stakes are growing. As the number of high school graduates declines and labor markets increasingly demand education and training beyond high school, states will depend more heavily on populations historically underrepresented in postsecondary education for future enrollment and workforce growth.

When intentionally designed and adequately supported, dual enrollment can become more than an opportunity to take college courses early. It can serve as an effective on-ramp to postsecondary success, economic mobility, and career opportunity, particularly for the students and communities that states must prioritize to ensure high school serves as a launching pad for all.

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