

Scaling Career-Connected Dual Enrollment

How College and K-12 Partners Can Strengthen Pathways and Expand Opportunity

CASE STUDY ON STRATEGY 1: HIGH SCHOOL CTE PATHWAYS

Connecting High School CTE to Career Mobility at Texarkana College

When Texarkana College President Jason Smith met with a group of local manufacturers to discuss workforce challenges facing the region, the employers all reported the same problem: They could not find enough qualified workers.

Smith was initially puzzled. If employers were receiving dozens of applications for every opening, why were positions remaining vacant? The answer, employers told him, was that only a handful of applicants had the postsecondary training and industry-recognized credentials required for today's manufacturing and skilled-trades jobs.

The conversation reinforced a challenge that college leaders were familiar with. Like many rural regions, the Texarkana area has historically lagged behind state and national averages in postsecondary educational attainment.

Texarkana College saw an opportunity to address this challenge through dual credit (DC) (Texas's term for dual enrollment). While DC students now account for roughly 60% of the college's headcount enrollment, college leaders recognized that many DC students were not graduating with a useful credential or continuing on to a postsecondary credential program after graduation.

In response, Texarkana began rethinking the purpose of dual credit. Rather than viewing it primarily as a way to provide access to college courses, leaders increasingly saw it as an on-ramp to postsecondary credentials and careers. Their goal shifted from simply increasing participation to increasing the number of students who completed a credential by high school graduation and continued their education in high-demand fields after high school.

FAST FACTS:

Texarkana College

- Serves 15 high schools (all comprehensive) in its Texarkana, TX, service area
- Dual credit students make up about 60% of the college's total enrollment
- Most dual enrollment is taught on high school campuses by qualified high school teachers
- CTE dual enrollment courses, embedded into existing high school CTE programs, help students make progress toward postsecondary CTE credentials

While these efforts have included both baccalaureate transfer and career and technical education (CTE) pathways, CTE dual credit has become a particular focus. Strong employer demand, growing student interest, and clear connections between credentials and labor-market opportunities make CTE pathways especially promising for helping more students get the education and training they need to enter high-demand, career path jobs soon after high school.

Connecting High School CTE to Postsecondary Pathways

Unlike models that only bring students to college campuses for technical training, Texarkana's strategy embeds college coursework directly into existing high school CTE pathways taught at area high schools by high school instructors credentialed by the college.

Working with partner districts, Texarkana faculty and DC staff collaborate with high school CTE teachers and administrators to identify opportunities to build into high school programs of study college-level coursework in postsecondary pathways that lead to well-paying jobs in high demand among local employers.

One of the college's most important tools is a set of pathway plans customized for each partner high school. Developed by the college's dual credit office, the plans serve as templates to help students see not only which courses to take but also how those courses connect to credentials, careers, and educational opportunities after high school. The plans are designed to enable students to complete a substantial portion of Texarkana College's Associate of Applied Science degree while still in high school.

College staff also work closely with districts to identify, recruit, and credential qualified high school instructors to teach DC courses. Stephanie Stokes, director of dual credit, described the process as highly collaborative. Rather than simply determining whether a teacher qualifies, college staff help instructors document industry experience and credentials needed to meet accreditation requirements and align instruction with college expectations.

Career Exploration Through Hands-On Learning

Though Texarkana's pathway strategy includes both transfer and workforce programs, CTE pathways are important because they tap into growing student interest in career-connected education, and they generate high levels of student engagement with hands-on learning experiences.

Students we interviewed at two Texarkana partner high schools (DeKalb High School and New Boston High School) consistently described CTE DC courses as more engaging than many of their academic DC experiences. Healthcare students described learning with mannequins, practicing patient-care skills, and participating in clinical experiences, while welding students emphasized the opportunity to get hands-on experience in fabricating real components.

One student said hands-on learning made it easier to understand what they were doing. Another described her DC experience as so motivating that it provided a "jump start on life."

For some students, the experience helped confirm existing career goals. For others, it helped them discover new directions. A student who completed the certified nursing assistant pathway explained that the experience helped her realize she wanted to pursue social work rather than nursing. “I think I want to be a medical social worker,” she said. “I found out [about that job] through the CNA [pathway] and figuring out that nursing’s not really what I wanted to do.” The experience did not simply prepare her for a job—it helped her make a more informed decision about her future.

Partnerships Responsive to School Needs

Texarkana’s approach depends on close partnerships with school districts. College leaders emphasized being responsive to districts’ needs and reducing burdens on school staff. Stokes described the college’s philosophy as collaborative rather than hierarchical. The goal, she explained, is not to tell districts what to do but to work alongside them to create opportunities for students.

For example, school leaders we interviewed mentioned the college’s academic coaches for dual credit, who provide students with college advising, pathway planning, and transition support that many districts could not otherwise offer. By helping students understand pathways and complete enrollment processes, academic coaches for dual credit reduce pressure on high school counselors while improving communication between schools and the college.

The college has recently hired an analyst with expertise in Texas’s College, Career, and Military Readiness (CCMR) high school accountability system to help partner schools—particularly in smaller rural districts—identify ways to strengthen student outcomes while maximizing CCMR performance. School leaders described this support as especially valuable because many districts lack staff dedicated to tracking changing accountability requirements and identifying how DC and CTE offerings can help students meet them. By helping districts align pathway design, course offerings, and advising with CCMR goals, the college reduces administrative burdens on schools while advancing both district accountability objectives and students’ progress toward postsecondary credentials and careers.

Improving Outcomes Takes Time

Texarkana has built substantial infrastructure to support DC students and is already seeing the fruits of its labor. From 2021 through 2026, for example, the number of DC students who graduated from high school with a Level 1 workforce certificate increased from 18 to 186. Still, leaders acknowledge that improving post–high school yield remains a work in progress.

Students often face powerful incentives to enter the workforce immediately after graduation. Financial barriers, transportation challenges, family responsibilities, and local attitudes toward college can discourage college enrollment.

Texarkana’s response has been to layer supports that strengthen the transition from high school to college. Beginning in fall 2026, the Texarkana College Promise program will add another layer of support by eliminating tuition costs for eligible students who continue their education after high school.

College leaders emphasize that these reforms have been implemented largely within the last four to five years and that improvements in postsecondary continuation and credential completion are only beginning to emerge. Feedback from K-12 students and families, counselors, teachers, and school leaders suggests that their strategy is moving in the right direction.

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