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The Postsecondary Outcomes of High School Dual Enrollment Students

A National and State-by-State Analysis

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Each year, nearly 2.5 million high school students take dual enrollment college courses. Dual enrollment has become one of the most prominent on-ramps to postsecondary enrollment and degree completion, and its expansion has been particularly significant at community colleges, where the number of dual enrollees has more than tripled in the past two decades (Fink, 2023). The increasing popularity of dual enrollment among students, families, and policymakers is not surprising, as prior research has documented the benefits of dual enrollment as a strategy for getting a head start on college, for students in general and for those from underrepresented groups (An, 2013; Berger et al., 2013; Henneberger et al., 2022; Liu & Minaya, 2022; Liu et al., 2020; Song et al., 2021).

Despite the documented benefits of dual enrollment, Black, Hispanic, and low-income students, as well as those from other underserved groups, have been consistently underrepresented among dual enrollment students nationally and in most states. This has led researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to explore strategies for expanding access to dual enrollment among students from these underrepresented groups (Fink, 2021; Fink & Jenkins, 2023a), for which national and state-level evidence on the postsecondary outcomes of dual enrollment students is critical.

Using National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) data, this report presents national and state-by-state findings on the postsecondary enrollment and completion outcomes of high school students who began taking dual enrollment (DE) college courses in fall 2015, tracked for four years after high school. We describe the size and significance of the DE population for postsecondary institutions and states and compare postsecondary outcomes among dual enrollees to outcomes of other recent high school graduates entering higher education without prior DE experience. We further disaggregate results for low-income, Black, and Hispanic students to highlight the potential for DE to strengthen high-school-to-college-and-career transitions and increase equity for underserved communities.

The report is the first to provide national and state-by-state results on the success of DE students, broken down by racial/ethnic group, neighborhood income, and gender. The report and an accompanying [data dashboard](#) allow states to assess whether their policies and practices are maximizing the potential of DE for their students.

Key Findings

1. High school DE is widespread and growing across states; it is especially prevalent at community colleges.

- DE represented a significant segment of postsecondary enrollment in fall 2015: 38% of all new undergraduates entering postsecondary education were either currently taking or had formerly taken DE coursework. For community colleges, which serve nearly three fourths of all dual enrollment students, 60% of new students were either current (21%) or former (39%) dual enrollees.
- Ten states (California, Florida, Illinois, Minnesota, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin) accounted for more than half of all new DE students nationally in fall 2015, and the state with the most new DE students—Texas—had nearly twice as many as the second largest state (New York).
- Other research indicates that DE has continued to grow at community colleges since 2015. DE increased 46% from fall 2015 to fall 2021 and another 18% from fall 2021 to fall 2023.

2. DE students have strong postsecondary outcomes after high school, particularly in some states.

- Eighty-one percent of DE students in our fall 2015 starting cohort went to college in the first year after high school—including nearly a third at community colleges and a majority (51%) at four-year institutions.
- Among the students who took DE during high school, 42% completed a college award within four years of finishing high school; 29% completed a bachelor's degree.
- Four years after high school, almost a third (31%) of DE students were still enrolled in college but had not yet earned an award.
- Completion rates for DE students in the entry cohort were well above those of recent high school graduates entering postsecondary education without DE. Four years after high school completion and among the DE students who entered college right after high school, 36% had completed a bachelor's and 12% had completed an associate degree, compared to rates of 34% and 9%, respectively, among recent high school graduates who started college without any DE.
- In 41 states, DE students who enrolled in college right after high school had higher college completion rates than recent high school graduates entering postsecondary education without prior DE, and in 16 states, DE students showed double-digit higher completion rates. The postsecondary outcomes of dual enrollees were particularly strong in some states, including Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, and New Jersey.

3. Low-income, Black, and Hispanic students are underrepresented in dual enrollment and have lower average award completion rates than DE students overall. However, among low-income, Black, and Hispanic students, dual enrollees' award completion is still stronger than that of non-dual enrollees.

- Black DE students were more likely to enroll in college directly after high school than DE students overall, and they were more likely to enroll at a four-year institution. Black dual enrollees also tended to enroll at selective four-year institutions at higher rates than low-income and Hispanic dual enrollees.
- In the first year after high school, low-income and Hispanic dual enrollees were less likely to enroll at a postsecondary institution than Black DE students and other DE students in general. Four years after high school, low-income, Black, and Hispanic DE students were more likely than other DE students to have enrolled at a postsecondary institution without completing an award.
- Award completion rates were lower for low-income, Black, and Hispanic DE students four years after high school, but in contrast to Black DE students, low-income and Hispanic dual enrollees were more likely to have completed an associate degree than DE students in general.
- Despite gaps in postsecondary outcome rates compared to other dual enrollees, low-income, Black, and Hispanic DE students who enrolled in college right after high school were still more likely to complete an award compared to recent high school graduates entering college without DE.

4. High school students who take DE at a four-year institution do particularly well in college but are not as diverse as other DE students in terms of race/ethnicity and income.

- About a quarter of DE in the fall 2015 entry cohort occurred through partnerships with four-year institutions, and four-year institutions dual enrollees were even more likely after their participation in DE to enroll in college, enroll at a four-year institution, and complete a bachelor's degree after high school than community college DE students.
- However, compared to community college DE students, four-year institution dual enrollees were less likely to live in a lower income neighborhood or to identify as Black or Hispanic.

5. For community colleges, former DE students are a strong source of post-high-school enrollments.

- More than a third of community college DE students in the fall 2015 entry cohort returned for at least one term to the same community college in the first year after high school, and about a quarter enrolled for at least two consecutive terms.
- In some states with large numbers of community college dual enrollees, such as Iowa, Texas, and Washington, nearly half of dual enrollees returned to their DE community college after high school.

Key Implications for Practice and Policy

Broaden the benefits of DE. Our findings show that DE coursework can be a strong lever for increasing equity in college access and completion. But to fully realize the potential of DE, high-quality DE opportunities need to be accessible to more students. One major area for improvement is increasing participation among low-income, Black, Hispanic, and other groups underrepresented in DE. Expanding access to and participation in DE for underserved groups is particularly important for achieving state goals around postsecondary education and especially bachelor's degree attainment. This is underscored by the findings from this study showing strong postsecondary outcomes among low-income, Black, and Hispanic students who were able to participate in DE coursework. Finally, equalizing access to DE provided by four-year institutions is particularly important—four-year-institution dual enrollees in the study had among the strongest postsecondary outcomes but were the least likely to be Black, Hispanic, or from low-income neighborhoods.

Help DE students complete college in a timely fashion. While dual enrollment students overall have stronger postsecondary award completion rates than non-dual enrollees, disparities persist for low-income, Black, and Hispanic students. The disparities indicate that more investment and support from postsecondary institutions and their K-12 partners is needed. For instance, four years after high school, about a third of dual enrollment students—and even greater proportions among low-income, Black, and Hispanic students—continue to be enrolled at a postsecondary institution. This suggests that, for DE to both serve as a jump start on college and address concerns about affordability, colleges and states need to provide further incentives and supports to help students complete more quickly.

Examine outcomes across different state and local contexts. Although we generally find that DE students enroll and complete college at high rates, our analyses reveal substantial state-by-state differences in DE student outcomes. Colleges and states should use the findings from this report to assess whether they need to prioritize efforts to broaden access to DE, increase DE student success, or both. Further, state-level results from this report can inform the development of statewide strategies to help more DE students complete college in as little time and cost as possible. Given the wide range of state policies and local implementation practices in the national DE landscape, our analyses raise questions about how different state and local approaches to DE policy, programmatic design, and implementation may explain differences in participants' postsecondary outcomes. This study provides a framework for using data currently available from NSC to all states and postsecondary institutions to measure college outcomes for DE students. State, college, and K-12 leaders should use this framework and their own data from NSC and other sources to benchmark outcomes, set improvement targets, and track progress.

Recommendations for State and College Leaders

In this report, we provide national and state-by-state benchmarks on a set of common metrics assessing DE student outcomes in the years immediately following high school. State and college leaders can use their own NSC data to replicate analyses matching our data definitions and tracking periods to further compare their results and set improvement targets. We recommend the following next steps for state and college leaders seeking to examine their own data using the metrics and results presented in this report.

State Leaders

State leaders should review outcomes for their state’s DE programs alongside measures of DE access and participation by student demographic subgroups available from public sources in order to set clear targets for broadening postsecondary participation and completion through DE.

- Use these and other data to identify whether your state’s major challenges primarily involve unequal access to DE opportunities, lower postsecondary outcomes among former DE students, or both.
- Share results from your state to help make the case for further investments to expand DE opportunities, particularly for underserved schools and communities.

College and K-12 Leaders

College and K-12 leaders implementing DE programs should regularly monitor their students’ postsecondary outcomes to inform continuous improvement efforts to strengthen outreach and supports for underrepresented groups and underserved high schools.

- Use your own NSC data to review which postsecondary institutions your DE students matriculate at after high school and which majors they enroll in and complete, and then use this information to backward map programmatic pathways and to strengthen transfer and applicability of DE credits. This information can frame conversations among DE partnerships, motivating reforms to strengthen DE as an on-ramp to college and career opportunity.¹
- Replicate similar analyses with your own NSC data and use the findings to benchmark outcomes to state and national averages, with a focus on disaggregated results by race/ethnicity, income, gender, and other student characteristics. Practitioners can also use outcome data to market the benefits of DE coursework—including details on top postsecondary destinations, completion rates, time to completion, and estimated cost savings from DE participation—to prospective students and families.

¹ For more examples of how colleges and K-12 partners are implementing dual enrollment as an on-ramp to college and career opportunity, see CCRC’s Dual Enrollment Equity Pathways (DEEP) framework ([Fink & Jenkins, 2023a](#)) and the partnerships profiled in [Fink et al. \(2023\)](#).

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