

ATTAINMENT FOR ALL: POSTSECONDARY PATHWAYS

The Early College High School Model

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INTRODUCTION

The early college high school (ECHS) model is a postsecondary attainment strategy with a uniquely robust evidence base of research that demonstrates its effectiveness. ECHSs provide policy benefits that include:



Making progress toward postsecondary attainment goals;



Narrowing higher education equity gaps; and



Reducing student loan debt.

Despite the proven track record of success, many states either do not offer ECHS opportunities or have a limited number of programs. However, two states – North Carolina and Texas – have created a framework that has allowed for the widespread implementation of the ECHS model.

Although the ECHS model is driven by partnerships between district leaders and presidents of institutions of higher education (IHEs), such agreements will only flourish in states where the right policy incentives and structures are in place. In many states, existing policies on dual enrollment funding, educator licensure, or credit transfer may pose barriers to the adoption of ECHS agreements. This issue brief will serve as a guide for policymakers who are interested in identifying factors that may be preventing their state from adopting, strengthening, or scaling the ECHS model.

WHAT IS AN EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL?

The ECHS model is a program that allows students to earn a significant amount of college credit, and in some cases an associate degree or credential, by the time they graduate from high school.

ECHS programs are a subset of college and career readiness initiatives known as “college in high school” or “dual enrollment.” Another example of a college in high school program is the concurrent enrollment model, which allows students to take high school and college coursework at two different campuses simultaneously. So what differentiates the ECHS model from other college in high school programs?



There is an intentional focus on **enrolling traditionally underserved student populations** – such as first-generation students, students of color, and low-income students – regardless of prior academic performance.



Students are able to take high school and college courses in the **same facility** whether the ECHS is located on a college campus, as a school-within-a-school on a high school campus, or in another setting.



Instead of taking one-off opportunities for select courses, ECHS **students take courses along an intentional pathway** to earn either an associate degree, an industry-recognized certificate, or a significant amount of college credit hours by the time they graduate.



Students receive **comprehensive guidance and support** throughout their ECHS journey, which helps them chart an intentional pathway and navigate any challenges associated with degree completion, such as transferring to an IHE.



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WHY EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOLS?

The ECHS model produces an excellent return on investment for public funding. A recent study found that enrolling students in ECHSs produces monetary benefits that are 15 times greater than the associated costs.¹

Another unique aspect of the ECHS model is that it can be a mechanism for making progress on a number of education policy goals. According to the research, establishing or scaling ECHSs can allow your state to:

MAKE PROGRESS TOWARD A POSTSECONDARY ATTAINMENT GOAL

Attending an ECHS helps students get a head start on attaining a high-quality credential or degree, whether they graduate from high school with a certificate, an associate degree, or complete a degree after transferring to another institution.

A longitudinal study conducted by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) analyzed three cohorts of students who were randomly accepted to an ECHS through an admissions lottery and found that the students who were accepted to an ECHS have been significantly more likely to attain a postsecondary degree than the students who were not accepted.²

Percentage Of Students In AIR Study Who Attain A Postsecondary Degree Within 2-4 Yrs Of HS Graduation

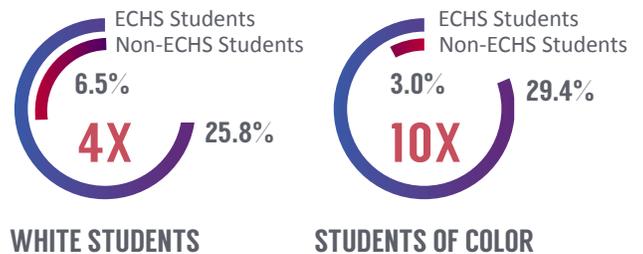


NARROW EQUITY GAPS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Too often, higher education serves as a mechanism to exacerbate achievement gaps among racial and ethnic student subgroups that have persisted throughout the K-12 space. The ECHS model is defined by an intentional focus on underserved student populations, including students of color and low-income students, and it can help ensure that all students are able to share in the prosperity that higher education has to offer.

The AIR study also showed that attending an ECHS makes white students four times as likely to attain a college degree, but the ECHS effect is even more impactful for students of color who become nearly 10 times more likely to earn a degree.³

Percentage Of Student Subgroups In AIR Study Who Attain A Postsecondary Degree Within 2-4 Yrs Of HS Graduation



REDUCE STUDENT LOAN DEBT

ECHS programs allow students to accumulate college credit while following an intentional career pathway at no cost to the student. As long as they are able to successfully transfer those credits to an IHE, ECHS graduates are able to significantly reduce the time it takes them to earn a degree and therefore do not have to take out as many student aid loans to complete their studies.

A study from the SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina Greensboro showed that ECHS students are likely to earn a significantly larger number of transferable college credits (almost a full year's worth of courses on average), which allows them to attain degrees more quickly and take out fewer student aid loans.⁴

Number Of Transferable College Credits Earned By Students In SERVE Study



CREATE MEANINGFUL AND LASTING COLLABORATION BETWEEN HIGH SCHOOLS AND INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Establishing an ECHS model requires the development of lines of communication between high school leaders, IHE leaders, district leaders, and the regional business community.

“When we created one of the first early college high schools in Craven County [NC], it was the first time there had ever been a meeting between the county board of education, the community college board, the county commissioner board, and the economic development board. Once the Early College High School had been established, we all asked ourselves ‘what can we work on next?’”

- Dr. Scott Ralls,
President of Wake Technical Community College



STATE LEADERS IN EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL

NORTH CAROLINA

ECHS programs have flourished in North Carolina, which was an early adopter of the ECHS model. When former Lt. Governor Walter Dalton was the co-chair of the Senate Education Committee in 2003, he spearheaded the [passage of legislation](#) to establish partnerships between school districts and IHEs that would provide college in high school opportunities, including ECHSs. There are now 106 ECHS campuses in North Carolina that are producing real results for students across the state.

*A recently completed study looked at 12 years of data on ECHS students in NC and concluded that they are more likely to:*⁵



Graduate from high school



Enroll in postsecondary education



Earn a credential or degree

Lt. Governor Dalton noted that the success of ECHSs can be attributed to their **comprehensive approach**, which he says:

“Raises the rigor of student coursework, saves them money, and prepares them for 21st-century careers.”

Why has North Carolina seen such success in adopting the ECHS model? Here are some key components of the state policy framework:

- ▶ The state was able to secure **broad stakeholder buy-in** at the earliest stages of implementing the ECHS model, mainly through the Governor’s Education First Task Force, which met from 2001-2003 and provided recommendations that led to the creation of the ECHS network.⁶
- ▶ The ECHS statute in NC provides **automatic tuition reimbursement** to IHEs for ECHS students who enroll in order to take college coursework.⁷ This provision is a strong incentive for IHE leaders to enter into ECHS partnerships.
- ▶ North Carolina has implemented policies that create a robust culture of **statewide articulation agreements**, allowing ECHS students to easily transfer their credits to the state’s 58 community colleges, 17 public universities, or 30 independent institutions.^{8,9}

TEXAS

When the Texas state legislature was seeking policy solutions to prevent students from dropping out of high school in 2006, they turned to the ECHS model and set a goal of establishing 35 ECHSs across the state. Today, there are 200 ECHSs serving Texas students.

How did Texas scale the ECHS model successfully? A number of aspects of the state’s policy framework incentivized the expansion, including the following examples:

- ▶ The state sets **clear expectations** for ECHS campuses and provides **comprehensive oversight** to ensure that ECHSs are serving students well. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) publishes an ECHS blueprint document that lays out all of the requirements that ECHS providers must meet, and the agency also has an annual recertification process that is used to provide oversight.¹⁰ TEA is in the process of incorporating outcomes-based student data into the annual recertification process.¹¹



- ▶ Texas also allows a great deal of **flexibility for local districts** to use creative solutions to meet state ECHS requirements. For example, Texas statute requires that ECHS opportunities are offered at no cost to participating students but allows ECHS partners to determine the best way to achieve that goal – whether through the braiding of local funding streams, tuition reimbursement waivers, partnerships with community service providers, or a combination of other strategies.¹²
- ▶ ECHSs in Texas have access to **technical assistance and support** that helps ensure the successful rollout of their programs. This support is provided through a **public/private partnership** between the state and Educate Texas, which has created a roadmap to help ECHS partners think through the questions they need to address in order to implement a successful program.¹³ The state also requires a **one-year planning period** before an ECHS program can begin enrolling students, which allows partners to ensure that they have all of the pieces in place to support student success.¹⁴



GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

For policymakers who are interested in narrowing higher education equity gaps, raising postsecondary attainment rates, reducing student loan debt, and fostering collaboration between K-12 and higher education leaders, the ECHS model is an attractive policy strategy. Many state leaders may be asking themselves: why don't ECHSs exist in my state? How can I initiate efforts to incentivize ECHS partnerships?

The following guiding questions will help policymakers identify potential barriers to ECHS implementation in their state and develop an action plan for making progress. The questions are divided into three fundamental components of a successful ECHS policy framework: funding, educator capacity, and transfer success.

FUNDING

In order to implement the ECHS model, state policymakers need to think about how to provide funding for IHE enrollment fees, transportation fees, textbook costs, and more.

Guiding Questions

What state funding streams can be used to cover ECHS costs?

Can my state take advantage of the fact that ECHS costs are an allowable use of federal funding streams, such as Title I of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) and Perkins V?

What public/private partnerships have developed innovative strategies to cover ECHS costs, and how can the state promote and scale those best practices?

State Exemplar

In North Carolina, ECHS sites receive funding from the state – both the standard funding level based on student attendance as well as automatic supplemental funding that is available for ECHSs based on their regional economic designation. In addition, the state provides automatic reimbursement of tuition and other expenses associated with enrolling ECHS students for IHEs who partner with ECHS programs.



EDUCATOR CAPACITY

ECHS students will need to take courses that have the same rigor and curricula as courses that would be taken at an IHE. Depending on the structure of various ECHS models, these courses could be taught by an IHE professor who has received training on how to teach high school students or by a high school teacher who has met the requirements to teach college coursework.

Guiding Questions

What state licensure requirements must be met in order to teach credit-bearing courses to high school students?

Are teaching licensure requirements differentiated based on the curricula of the coursework being taught? E.g. is a master's degree required for a teacher who oversees a course that leads to a specific industry-recognized credential?

Do local IHEs, such as community colleges, have an adequate supply of instructional staff who would be able to teach ECHS coursework? Have those instructors received training on the difference between teaching postsecondary students and teaching high school students?

State Exemplar

In Texas, the regional higher education accrediting body has established minimum requirements that educators must meet in order to teach a course that offers college credit: a master's degree in the teaching subject and at least 18 graduate semester hours. District leaders are responsible for determining whether to "upskill" high school teachers by helping them meet the requirements or to prepare higher education professors for teaching high school students. One common arrangement is for high school teachers who meet the dual credit requirements to be hired by an IHE as an adjunct professor and paid a stipend for the dual credit courses they teach.

TRANSFER SUCCESS

Some ECHS students will graduate with an associate degree or industry-recognized credential that allows them to enter high-demand fields. But many ECHS graduates will seek to continue on to a two- or four-year IHE and complete their degrees.

Guiding Questions

Are there statewide articulation agreements or credit transfer policies between IHEs, and do those agreements govern the transfer of college coursework taken in high school?

What is the counselor-to-student ratio in our state? Is there an adequate supply of postsecondary counselors who could provide the support that ECHS students need to navigate the transition to an IHE?

Are IHE leaders, including admissions and registrar staff, prepared to handle the unique cases of ECHS graduates – who often are prepared to take junior-level coursework but may need freshman-level accommodations such as dorm rooms?

State Exemplar

In North Carolina, state policymakers have established a Comprehensive Articulation Agreement (CAA) that governs the transfer of credit between all of the state's public IHEs – the 16 University of North Carolina institutions as well as the 59 community colleges. The state has also established an Independent Comprehensive Articulation Agreement (ICAA) that governs the transfer of credit between community colleges and independent institutions. Because of these policies, all dual credit coursework taken by an ECHS student is covered by either the CAA or the ICAA.



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- 14 Ibid.

FURTHER READING

Many resources are available to help policymakers improve their state's policy framework and remove barriers that hinder the proliferation of ECHSs. Leading advocacy organizations have developed the following resources with policy recommendations that can guide this stage of the work:

- ▶ College in High School Alliance – [State Policy Roadmap](#)
- ▶ JFF – [Starter Kit: Launch an Early College](#)
- ▶ Education Commission of the States – [Early College High Schools: Model Policy Components](#)
- ▶ Alliance for Excellent Education – [How Federal Funding Helps High School Students Get a Jump on College](#)

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