

Twenty Percent of Community College Students Are in High School. Now What?



July 31, 2023

Shortly before assuming her new role as chancellor of the California Community College system in June, Dr. Sonya Christian announced a bold proposal to [enroll every ninth grader](#) in the state in a college course.

Increasing dual enrollment—meaning, high school and sometimes middle school students taking college courses—is a natural extension of Christian’s work as the former president of Bakersfield College and chancellor of the Kern Community College District. Christian championed the expansion of dual enrollment, especially to rural regions of Kern County, and paired the growth with internal reforms that organized the college’s courses into

program-specific pathways. Those efforts paid off: Dual enrollment students in the Kern Community College District [grew twelvefold](#) from the 2013-14 academic year to 2021-22.

It's not just California. Dual enrollment is growing in [Alabama](#), [Arizona](#), [Colorado](#), [Oklahoma](#), and [Virginia](#). In fact, high school-age students are one of the few growing student groups at higher education institutions, according to the latest data from the National Student Clearinghouse. Meanwhile, enrollment of students age 21 and older declined over the past two years.

These trends are even more acute at community colleges, where high schoolers are already most likely to take college classes. At community colleges, the number of students under 18 grew 16 percent from spring 2021 to spring 2023. According to [one estimate](#), one out of five community college students is in high school.

Community colleges can and should be doing more to [re-enroll adult students](#) who left without finishing their programs. But colleges should also recognize that the growing number of high school students taking college classes is the new normal. It's not just a fluke of the pandemic and its recovery; [dual enrollment was growing](#) for years before the COVID era. And the pandemic accelerated the trend.

[Existing research](#) suggests that dual enrollment leads more students to complete high school, succeed academically, enroll in college, accumulate college credits, and ultimately earn a college degree. Dual enrollment can also help reengage students who no longer feel challenged by their high school curriculum or who want to participate in a new social environment. With thoughtful planning, colleges can ensure that the growing number of students opting into dual enrollment experience these benefits.

Colleges should ensure access to dual enrollment is equitable.

Unfortunately, the growth of dual enrollment hasn't been even. [Analysis](#) from the Community College Research Center found that white students are overrepresented in dual enrollment courses, while Black and Hispanic students, English language learners, and students with disabilities are underrepresented compared to their shares of the total high school population. Students from rural communities may also have difficulty participating, as they may have to traverse large distances to reach colleges and lack reliable Internet connectivity to participate in online classes. Meanwhile, many school districts are struggling to fill teaching positions, let alone hire teachers with the credentials to teach college-level courses.

[Research-based practices](#) suggest that colleges, in collaboration with their school and district partners and state policymakers, can reverse these trends. Strategies to reach more students include minimizing the use of placement tests to decide which students are eligible; reducing the costs of tuition, fees, and books born by students and families; providing transportation to campus; and embedding college advisors at local high schools.

Even in the current climate, with the Supreme Court's decision banning race-based affirmative action, colleges can evaluate which student populations they are failing to serve equitably with dual enrollment and reach out to specific high schools in their community based on those gaps.

Colleges should connect students to programs of study via dual enrollment courses.

Ideally, students use dual enrollment to get a head start on a degree or certificate, either through purposeful course selection, or through structured programs like [youth apprenticeships](#) which include dual enrollment course sequences [as part of required instruction](#). In [many states](#), dual enrollment is free or low cost, potentially reducing the overall cost of college for students and families. And unlike Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate,

dual enrollment courses translate to college credit based on the grades students earn from regular course assignments rather than from one high-stakes test.

But this can only happen if advisors encourage dual enrollment students to consider the career they want to pursue, what program or major will help them get there, and, based on those goals, which dual enrollment courses to take. Other institutions, especially four-year universities, will also need to accept dual enrollment coursework and apply the courses toward students' programs of study. That way, dual enrollment courses translate directly into the degrees and certificates students continue after high school graduation.

Colleges should adapt to serve this distinct type of student.

As dual enrollment blurs the line between high school and college, all postsecondary institutions will need to reconsider what it means to be a "new" college student. Is an eighteen-year-old enrolling with several college credits—and perhaps even an associate degree—a freshman or a transfer student? Do their courses count as prerequisites for more advanced classes? Currently, former dual enrollment students may find themselves stuck between these categories as "[stealth transfer](#)" students who have prior experience with college courses and expectations but still crave the community and services typically provided to first-time students.

Likewise, community colleges may face hard decisions about how to adapt their class schedules and services to dual enrollment students without sacrificing the resources and attention given to other student populations. Introductory courses, like English composition, will be in high-demand with high schoolers. Some colleges may opt to adjust the timing of those courses or reserve certain sections exclusively for dual enrollment students. College advisors will also need to build academic plans for dual enrollment students that both fulfill their high school requirements and advance their college

attainment goals, ideally in coordination with staff at the high schools. To do so, colleges may dedicate some advisors to work exclusively with dual enrollment students.

Colleges should prepare now for the continued growth of dual enrollment students. As Dr. Christian said in explaining her goal to expand dual enrollment in California, "We can't wait for tomorrow." Hundreds of thousands of high school students are already knocking on colleges' metaphorical doors. Colleges should ensure these students, as well as their peers who don't know of or believe they qualify for dual enrollment, have an earlier entry point to college. The academic success of current and future high schoolers and the contributions they will make to our society depend on it.

Enjoy what you read? [Subscribe](#) to our newsletter to receive updates on what's new in Education Policy!

[College Credit in High School](#)