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## **The Benefits of Starting College Early—in High School**

Dual-enrollment programs are expanding to a younger and more diverse group of students

By Lisa Ward

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Here's one way to help students complete college on time, and with less debt: start earlier. As a result, some educators and policy makers are making college-level courses available to more high-school students.

Traditionally, only the most academically gifted high-school students have taken college-level classes. But growing use of dual-credit courses—college-level classes taken in high school that offer both high-school and college credit—is making that opportunity more widely available. Even high-school students who might need extra help with difficult subjects like math can now take dual-credit classes in some states. Other courses are teaching job skills that give high-school students a better idea of the career path they may ultimately choose.

“Exposure to even one dual-credit course has a positive impact on student success,” says David Troutman, an associate vice chancellor at the University of Texas System. University of Texas students who took dual-credit courses in high school were three times as likely to graduate as students who didn't take college-credit courses in high school, according to a study by Dr.

Troutman published in August. Dual-credit students in the study also had higher first-, second- and third-year GPAs.

The state of Texas has seen an increase of around 1,100% in numbers of students taking dual-credit classes. From 2000 to 2017, the number of high-school students enrolled in dual-credit courses grew to 225,929 from 18,524, according to a report from the American Institutes for Research.

In Montana, some dual-credit classes are also seen as a way to eliminate the need for—and cost of—remedial classes in college. Since the launch of a pilot program in 2017, some high-school seniors in Helena with low ACT scores in math can now take an introductory college-level math class that reviews high-school concepts and incorporates essentials skills.

Greg Upham, a former assistant superintendent of public schools in Helena, implemented the pilot program and now hopes to introduce it in Billings, where he is superintendent of public schools. The free, full-year class includes tutorial support and meets the math requirement for non-STEM bachelors in humanities for the Montana University System.

Since 2012, high-school students in Tennessee with subpar results on their math ACT can take a college remediation math class during their senior year for free. While the course does not count for college credit, students who pass can take college-level algebra or an equivalent math course, like statistics, as early as second semester for dual credit. The number of students taking remedial math classes in community college in Tennessee fell to 11,658 in 2017 from 13,658 in

2011, says Victoria Harpool, assistant executive director for academic affairs, Tennessee Higher Education Commission.

In Iowa, meanwhile, where there are shortages of workers with technical skills, a statewide program is using dual-credit courses to attract more high-school students to technical careers. Kirkwood Regional Centers sponsors high-school classes in such fields as advanced manufacturing and engineering technology; architecture, construction and engineering; computer programming and web development and emergency management technology.

The program is free and the credits transfer to colleges and universities in the University of Iowa system. It also offers the students hands-on experience in projects ranging from building construction to high-tech laboratories where they can do automotive and manufacturing work.

“It’s a chance to get their hands dirty and get a jump start on a degree,” says Jon Weih, director of the Kirkwood Regional Center at the University of Iowa. During the 2017-2018 school year, 6,336 students from 40 high schools participated.

Some of the students forego college and get higher-paying jobs out of high school than they would have qualified for otherwise. For others, the courses help them get good jobs while they’re in college that help pay tuition bills.

Grace Gilbaugh, a 17-year-old from Coralville, Iowa, qualified as a certified nursing assistant during her junior year of high school. She worked in a nursing home last summer, earning more money for college than she might have as a waitress or in retail, she says. Now she is a high-school senior, taking an EMT-certification class and hopes to work as an EMT this summer before going to college.

Some educators are now trying to encourage even younger students to take classes that offer college credits. This model, called Early College High School, has been used for students from underprivileged backgrounds.

Two years ago, Tulsa Community College and Union Public Schools in Tulsa, Okla., started recruiting eighth-graders for a curriculum that would allow them to earn both a high-school diploma and an associate degree in four years. Some college-level English, math, science and government classes are taught, typically by college professors. Tests and quizzes are given less frequently than in high school, and students are encouraged to study and manage their time on their own, though additional help is available if needed.

Students who enroll in the free program graduate with the study habits and organizational skills they need to help them continue higher education and complete college, says Kirt Hartzler, superintendent of Union Public Schools.

“It’s not a problem getting students to enroll in college,” Dr. Hartzler says. “It’s a problem getting them to complete college.”

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