



PATHWAYS TO COLLEGE: EXPLORING DUAL ENROLLMENT MODELS

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OVERVIEW

Dual-enrollment programs provide a promising alternative to the student loan crisis and represent an opportunity to expand college access and success for high school students from all backgrounds.¹ Dual enrollment is growing faster than ever, with the Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Teachers College, Columbia University reporting that 2.8 million high school students participated in some form of dual enrollment in the 2023-2024 academic year (CCRC, 2025). In fact, according to *Inside Higher Ed*, “At the average college [based on federal data], dual-enrollment students accounted for more than a quarter of all enrollment.” (Alonso, 2025).

Dual enrollment has become an integral part of the higher education system in many states, allowing students to earn college credit while in high school. Dual enrollment is advantageous for students because higher education institutions often accept the credits earned directly. These programs also provide an alternative to test-dependent programs such as Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) classes. AP or IB test scores can offer opportunities to earn college credit, but they are based on performance. They may be rejected for major or minor requirements or for departmental policies.

According to the College in High School Alliance (CHSA), students who participate in any form of dual enrollment or early course taking exhibit higher college enrollment and completion rates than high school students who do not (CHSA, 2024). Furthermore, dual enrollment has been shown to improve college readiness and reduce overall time to degree completion (Cohen et al., 2024).





This brief examines four types of dual-enrollment models: independent dual enrollment, concurrent enrollment, early college high schools (ECHS),ⁱⁱ and Pathways in Technology Early College High Schools (P-TECHs) with CTE (Career and Technical Education) articulated credit. It provides an overview of each model, analyzes its benefits and challenges, and identifies opportunities for improvement, with particular attention to Michigan's dual-enrollment landscape.

Four Types of Dual Enrollment

(1) Independent Dual Enrollment

Independent dual enrollmentⁱⁱⁱ is when students are enrolled at both a high school and a college or university. These programs encourage students to take college or university classes while enrolled in high school, provided that their parent or guardian completes the consent forms. These classes are generally taken after school, online, or during the summer, in addition to students' high school schedules.

The college credit earned is not guaranteed to count toward a high school diploma. It is sometimes possible to get credit for a college class at the high school level, but the student must make the case to the high school. If the high school allows the student to earn college-level credit at the high school level, the course is considered dual credit, as it counts toward both the high school diploma and an associate's degree. Enrollment fees and tuition are waived, but the students are still responsible for the cost of class-related items such as books.

Independent dual enrollment is a flexible form of dual enrollment because it requires minimal coordination between school districts and colleges or universities. Although it is less standardized than other models, it is widely accessible. This model is used by homeschooled students who lack access to *concurrent enrollment* courses or by advanced high school students seeking additional

opportunities to earn college credit beyond what their high school offers.

The funding models for independent dual enrollment vary significantly by state and institution. Students are typically responsible for the cost of textbooks, course-related supplies, and any student fees associated with attendance at an institution. While students and/or their parents may occasionally be responsible for a portion of tuition, it is typically funded wholly or partially by the state, with some states subsidizing concurrent enrollment more heavily than others.

The flexibility of independent dual enrollment allows students to explore college-level coursework on their own terms and without being locked into a particular high school (as is the case with ECHS). Other benefits of this model include flexibility in course selection, as students can often choose which class(es) interests them. Also, they get real-life collegiate experience while still maintaining connections with their high school peers and activities. However, the model is less structured than others, which may make it difficult for some students to navigate. Transportation can also pose a challenge if the college-level course is not online. Lastly, the cost can be prohibitive if the expense of books and supplies adds up.



(2) Concurrent Enrollment

Concurrent enrollment^{iv} occurs when students earn both college credit and high school credit toward their diplomas. Essentially, students earn credit at both institutions simultaneously. Sometimes courses are taught in high schools by qualified teachers who meet the requirements of college instructors. This is the most common form of dual enrollment or dual credit offered nationally.

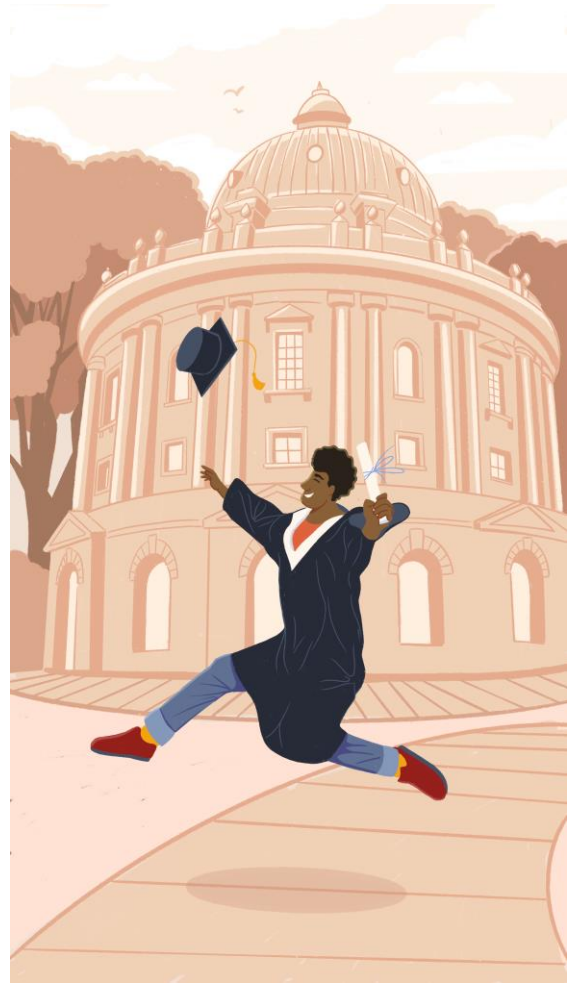
Funding for these programs varies largely by state. For example, in New Mexico, the state ensures that students do not pay tuition at all (State of New Mexico, 2025). In contrast, Michigan operates under a different model. School districts in Michigan pay directly and later receive reimbursement from the state (State of Michigan, 2025). Many districts view this as a loss in revenue received from the state because it flows out of their districts.^v

The model is beneficial for students seeking guaranteed credit in both college and high school, as dual credit is built into its structure. When these courses are taught on the high school campus, the transportation barriers are eliminated. Additionally, if the class is built into the student's schedule, they can continue to participate in afterschool activities if they choose.

However, since high school teachers teach these classes, the quality of instruction can vary depending on the teacher's qualifications and institutional oversight (National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships, 2025). The courses offered are also limited to those the school offers, so there is less autonomy in deciding which classes to take.

California's concurrent enrollment model has been lauded for providing structured pathways for students, establishing clear credit transfer agreements, and focusing on underrepresented populations. Courses are taught on high school campuses and prioritize students from historically underrepresented communities (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2025).

California's Concurrent Enrollment: One specific example of a state concurrent enrollment model is employed primarily in California. They have established College and Career Pathways partnership agreements, which are formal agreements between school districts and community colleges. College and Career Pathways programs were established by AB 288 in 2015 (California State Legislature, 2015).





Iowa's Comprehensive Approach: Iowa is the national leader in concurrent enrollment. Created in 1987, Iowa's *Postsecondary Enrollment Options Act* provides for any upperclassmen to take college courses for credit (Iowa Code, 2016). Underclassmen are also allowed to participate in the program, but only if they have been identified as gifted by the school district. In the 2021-2022 academic year, almost all school districts in Iowa offered at least one dual credit concurrent enrollment course (Iowa Department of Education, 2022). One unique aspect of dual enrollment in Iowa is that it is available to homeschooled students.

(3) Early College High Schools

Early college high schools, often referred to as ECHSs, are open-enrollment high schools that result from partnerships between public and local community colleges. At these high schools, students can earn both their high school diplomas and an associate's degree. Essentially, this form of dual enrollment blends high school and college into a single streamlined program, often at minimal cost to the student.

In Michigan, there are three forms: (1) **Early Middle College High School** (a stand-alone public high school where 100% of the pupils are enrolled); (2) **Early Middle College Program** (a high school program designed to serve less than 100% of the high school population); and (3) **Early Middle College Consortium** (a program comprised of multiple school districts with one coordinating agency).

ECHSs are more prevalent in some states than others, with California and Texas leading the way. Funding for these schools can come from a variety of sources, including state and federal funding, as well as district and college partnerships. One of the primary benefits of the ECHS model is the continuity it provides for students. The transportation barrier is often eliminated, and students have the opportunity to earn an associate's degree at no cost.

However, this model requires specialized schools, which are not widely available. Students may miss the cultural experiences and activities offered by a traditional high school, and the per-student cost is higher than that of a traditional high school (Zeiser, 2025).

North Carolina's Early College High Schools have been highly successful. Research has shown that students who attend one of the ECHSs in North Carolina are more likely to participate in class, have fewer suspensions, earn more college credits, have higher graduation rates, and are more likely to enroll in a postsecondary institution upon graduating high school relative to students who did not attend an ECHS (Bell, 2019). Interest in these schools is high, and demand outweighs supply. The state has implemented a lottery system to ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to participate, while actively seeking ways to expand the program and create more spots.



(4) P-Techs and CTE-focused coursework^{vi}

A fourth type of dual-enrollment model, although less common than the other three across the country, are programs focused on STEM or CTE courses. P-Techs, also known as Pathways in Technology Early Career High Schools, are similar to ECHSs. However, they focus on career pathways in STEM fields, rather than offering a wide variety of degree pathways. CTE credit is another type of dual enrollment, but it focuses on courses that prepare students for trade or tech schools. An example of this is Chicago's City Colleges' Pathways to Professional Success. They offer certificates that prepare students for careers in construction, manufacturing, IT, and more while they are in high school (Slagg, 2025).

In Michigan, some community colleges are prioritizing the inclusion of CTE courses in their dual-enrollment curriculum. For example, Henry Ford Community College has developed Henry Ford Middle College Trade School. Middle College is a dual-enrollment program in which students participate for five years and, upon completion, earn their high school diploma and an associate degree or trade certificate. At Henry Ford Middle College Trade School, high schoolers in Michigan can participate and earn a certificate in fields such as HVAC, plumbing, pipefitting, and more (Henry Ford Community College, n.d.).

Barriers to Dual Enrollment

Competition with Advanced Placement (AP).

One of the main obstacles to dual enrollment is the availability and the preference of some parents for AP classes.^{vii} School districts have a finite number of resources and, as a result, must choose which programs to host. Teachers in these programs do not need any additional certifications to teach the classes. In contrast, with dual enrollment, they must be qualified to teach a college-level course, which often requires a master's degree in the subject area. Also, in some communities, AP classes are sometimes regarded by parents as more rigorous than dual-enrollment courses.

The College Board has argued that AP classes provide a clearer basis of comparison for colleges and universities, since every student takes the same exam. They have also argued that for this reason, the curriculum is standardized regardless of which high school a student attends or where the student lives. However, more than 85% of the top universities in the United States restrict how college credit is awarded for AP classes, so passing the exam does not guarantee that a student will earn college credit (Quirk et al., 2021). For example, at the University of Michigan,

students must earn at least 4s and sometimes 5s to receive college credit (University of Michigan, n.d.).

Therefore, taking an AP class, paying for the exam, and earning a passing score of 3 or higher does not guarantee that a university will accept that credit and, as a result, does not always reduce the total time to degree. Also, AP tests currently cost \$97 each, while dual-enrollment classes are often free for students.

Funding. There are also significant financial disincentives for school districts and dual enrollment. For example, when students take dual-enrollment classes, school districts often have to pay colleges the cost of the course. In some states, schools can lose funding if students are not actively enrolled in high school-level courses, reducing their schools' per-pupil funding.

Dual enrollment can also affect instructional staffing. When students choose to enroll in dual-enrollment courses, fewer enroll in other classes. As a result, some classes may be combined or dissolved, and the number of teachers needed will fluctuate.



DUAL ENROLLMENT IN MICHIGAN

Dual enrollment is guaranteed under two statutes in Michigan: the [Postsecondary Enrollment Options Act \(1996 PA 160\)](#) and the [Career and Technical Preparation Act \(2000 PA 258\)](#). These laws ensure that every student in the eighth grade or beyond receives information about the opportunities to take college-level courses.

They also require school districts to pay for students' tuition for these courses and to receive state aid for reimbursement. For example, if a student at Brighton High School wants to take an introductory computer science course at Washtenaw Community College, the school district would have to use a portion of the per-pupil funding to pay for the course.



Challenges

Participation in dual enrollment across Michigan falls short of that in other states, especially those in the Midwest. Michigan is in the bottom 10 states for dual enrollment (despite being free), with only about 7% of public high school students participating in 2022-23 (Fink, 2024).

A significant barrier is that K-12 districts in Michigan must use their foundation allowance to cover college tuition, creating a disincentive, unlike some other states that have dedicated funding. The Michigan Community College Association and others have been advocates for state-funded programs to mirror successes in other states and meet statewide college attainment goals.

According to the CCRC, 15% of community college students in Michigan were enrolled in dual-enrollment programs in 2022-23 (Fink, 2024). This is well below that of Ohio (25%) and significantly below that of national leaders such as Iowa (44%), Indiana (52%), and Idaho (57%), which leads the nation (the national average is 21%).

Indiana and Ohio show higher dual-enrollment participation rates at their community colleges than Michigan and the national average.^{viii} In Indiana, high school students make up the *majority* of community college enrollment.



Additionally, the Michigan Community College Association (MCCA) notes significant disparities across districts (MCCA, 2025). Therefore, differences in district policies create inequitable access across the state. Michigan invests much less in dual enrollment than states with higher participation rates.

Another barrier to dual enrollment in Michigan is not just the funding, but also the parameters placed on those funds. For example, transportation costs and other fees are not required to be covered, so many K-12 districts do not cover them.

Those expenses can fall on the student or their family, making dual enrollment less accessible to those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. K-12 districts in Michigan often discourage participation in dual enrollment, with students having to qualify based on scores on standardized tests such as the ACT or PSAT. Often, they are told of the costs without noting the benefits.

Some school districts in Michigan have expanded the types of courses offered in the dual-enrollment program to make classes more accessible to students from all backgrounds with diverse career goals.

Alcona Community Schools, in northeast Michigan, has partnered with Alpena Community College to offer courses that transfer to trade and tech schools, such as welding and concrete technology (The Alpena News, 2024).

CONCLUSION

The lessons learned from states leading the way suggest that Michigan should expand access, change how dual enrollment is funded, and eliminate equity gaps in dual-enrollment participation.

Dual-enrollment programs have tremendous potential to improve college access, reduce the overall cost of earning a degree, and fast-track degree completion. However, there are ways to strengthen dual enrollment in Michigan that would make these programs more accessible to students from all backgrounds.

Longitudinal studies of dual-enrollment participation show that despite the upfront costs to states and school districts, the return on investment is immense. According to the American Institutes for Research, the cost of a student attending an ECHS for four years is \$950 more per student per year than attending a traditional high school. This results in an additional \$3,800 per student over four years of high school (Zeiser, 2025). However, the estimated lifetime benefits of enrolling in an ECHS were reported to be \$58,000 per student (a combination of private and public benefits).



By addressing funding mechanisms, removing barriers such as transportation costs and other fees, and eliminating qualifiers like test scores, Michigan can become a leader in the dual-enrollment space. Doing so would not only benefit the students but also the state. Dual-enrollment programs help states overcome workforce challenges by preparing students for success in college and later on in their careers.

The path forward requires coordinated action from policymakers, educators, and community partners alike. With strategic investment and the implementation of best-practice policies, dual enrollment in Michigan can become a powerful pathway to success for all students.

Key Questions to Consider

- How can Michigan restructure dual-enrollment funding to eliminate disincentives for school districts while ensuring sustainable program growth?
- Should Michigan prioritize expanding Early Middle Colleges, despite their higher upfront costs, due to their better outcomes for underrepresented students?
- What eligibility criteria should replace standardized test scores to expand access to dual enrollment while still maintaining academic quality and ensuring students are prepared for the curriculum?
- How should Michigan address the competition between AP and dual-enrollment programs?
- What accountability and quality measures should be implemented to ensure that students across the state of Michigan receive high-quality dual-enrollment experiences?

Policy and Practice Suggestions

- Create a dedicated state fund that pays colleges directly for dual-enrollment courses, eliminating the current penalty that districts lose per-pupil funding when students participate.
- Establish more Early Middle College Programs, prioritizing areas with socioeconomically disadvantaged students.
- Mandate that public universities in Michigan accept dual-enrollment credits from state-approved dual-enrollment programs.
- Provide laptops and Wi-Fi hotspots to rural and low-income students to ensure that all students have adequate access and resources to participate.



References and Endnotes

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ Dual enrollment has been shown to result in stronger high school grades and completion, reduced costs for students, and reduced time to postsecondary completion of a certificate, degree, or transfer.

ⁱⁱ In Michigan, these programs are referred to as Early Middle College (EMC) Programs. These are 5-year programs, which are approved by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE), that let high school students earn a high school diploma and college credits, an associate degree, or a professional certificate by adding a “fifth year” to their high school experience, often starting as early as 9th grade, to smooth the transition to college and careers.

ⁱⁱⁱ This is a self-directed option outside of formal school-sponsored programs, often used to get ahead or explore subjects that might not be available at their school.

^{iv} Dual credit describes the academic outcome, while *concurrent* or *college-based dual enrollment* describes the course setting and logistics (where it is located or who it is taught by). A course can be both a concurrent enrollment course and a dual credit course if it is taught at the high school and the student receives both high school and college credit for it.

^v When a district uses its foundation allowance to pay college tuition, it reduces the funds available for the district’s operating expenses. This makes dual enrollment appear as a “money-loser” for the district, creating a disincentive for administrators to promote or expand the program on a large scale proactively.

^{vi} Michigan allows high school students to enroll in career and technical education (CTE) programs at postsecondary educational institutions like community colleges or trade schools while still in high school.

^{vii} Ohio has implemented a state-mandated policy regarding AP credit, which encourages both schools to offer AP and students to take the exams. Ohio also mandates that all public institutions of higher education (universities and community colleges) grant college credit for an AP exam score of 3 or higher.

^{viii} Indiana’s primary college credit strategy centers on dual enrollment, as evidenced by its extremely high community college dual-enrollment rate and the success of its Indiana College Core (ICC) program, which awards students up to 30 credits upon completion—meaning fewer students may choose an AP route in Indiana. Ohio, while also having strong dual enrollment, maintains high engagement in both programs (AP and dual enrollment).