



Early College High School Initiative

Lessons from the Lone Star State

Designing a Sustainable Financial Model to Expand Early College High School in Texas

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Texas is a national leader in creating early college high schools, an innovative small school model that blends secondary and postsecondary education with intensive supports to increase college-readiness and success for underachieving students. The state now has 29 early colleges in operation, with several more to open in fall 2009, thanks largely to several rounds of education reform that have created public policies favorable to their development. Texas leaders hope to further expand the model, which provides the opportunity to earn one to two years of transferrable college credit—tuition free—along with a high school diploma, using it as a priority strategy to boost college success rates across the state.

This paper focuses on the efforts of El Paso Community College, South Texas College, and their respective partners to build clusters of early colleges in their regions. Their experiences illustrate important lessons about how to make the most of a state's public policy environment to create, sustain, and expand early college schools.

A Policy Foundation for Sustaining and Expanding Early Colleges

The Texas approach to scaling up the early college school model, which grew out of the state's extensive dual enrollment programming, has three major strengths:

Multiple funding streams: State policy provides several funding streams to support the development of dual

enrollment course offerings, including early colleges. Both high schools and their partner colleges receive per-pupil funding for each dually enrolled student, while high schools receive an additional \$275 per pupil to help students reach college-readiness standards. Early colleges can integrate significant college coursework into their curricula without financial penalty to the institutions or their students.

Public-private partnerships: To help fund the sizeable start-up costs of early colleges, the state has joined forces with private organizations, most notably the Texas High School Project. This \$261 million public-private initiative supports the development of new and redesigned high



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schools and other innovations to prepare more students to succeed in college and careers. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has been the major private donor, providing \$400,000 to each of 14 new early college schools. The state education department, the Texas Education Agency, has awarded 19 grants averaging \$425,000 each.

Regional economies of scale: A growing number of postsecondary institutions like El Paso Community College and South Texas College are building clusters of early college high schools to better serve their regions and take advantage of economies of scale. Organizers expect that the partnerships will save money by centralizing many of their operations, such as professional development, human resources, financial aid, and purchasing. They also hope that new early colleges will benefit from the standardization of design and implementation procedures, which could save considerable additional money.

Lessons from El Paso and South Texas

Both El Paso Community College (EPCC) and South Texas College (STC) are taking advantage of the favorable Texas policy landscape to sustain and expand their early college clusters, but each is pursuing a slightly different approach.

For EPCC, which has four early colleges in operation and is planning two more, using qualified high school faculty to deliver college courses at the high school is key to making the program financially sustainable and feasible to deliver on a broad scale. EPCC grants adjunct status to these instructors, but their local school districts pay them as part of their regular salaries. The college also offers online classes, in which high school teachers facilitate computer-based instruction that a college faculty member leads remotely, from the college campus.

STC has a similar cluster of early college high schools. In contrast to EPCC, STC's four schools use a blended design to deliver dual enrollment courses, with extensive use of college faculty in addition to high school instructors. STC charges school districts a small fee for every course its faculty deliver; these fees supplement state per-pupil payments to the colleges. In addition, the college keeps faculty costs low by using instructors who already are teaching a full load and gives them stipends for taking on extra courses. STC also aligns dual enrollment college courses with high school AP courses, using both high school and college faculty to teach them. This also allows the college to use state high school textbook funding.

Extending the Lessons of El Paso and South Texas

While Texas funding policies provide a strong base for sustaining early colleges once they have been operating for several years, barriers remain in the way of expansion. Policymakers will need to consider ways to provide sufficient start-up funding, facilities, and qualified staff if they want to support continued expansion of the model:

Lower start-up costs by addressing payment lag. While maintaining a supply of funds to support the development of new early college schools is crucial to expansion efforts, reducing the amount of money each school requires during the start-up phase would allow the state and private investors to spread their dollars to more schools. One way to significantly reduce these early operational costs would be to address the two-year lag in state funding to colleges for enrolling new early college students in their courses. The lag creates a significant revenue gap during the early years of each school's operation. Although the impact of this lag is not limited to early college schools, the rapid expansion of any new program that relies on enrollment-based funding can place an acute strain on sponsoring colleges. Reducing or eliminating lag payments would close a major early college revenue gap, one that start-up funds now fill.

Promote blended approaches to funding facilities. There are major benefits to locating early college high schools on college campuses, but few of the state's postsecondary institutions have enough space for them, and funding for new facilities is difficult to secure. Encouraging school districts and colleges to co-develop schools or to pool their facilities resources may be a solution. The state should consider ways to encourage or facilitate such efforts.

Increase the supply of qualified faculty. The biggest barrier to scaling up early college programs may be finding enough qualified high school instructors, on whom many partnerships rely because they can be supported by K-12 per-pupil funding. To teach early college courses, high school instructors must meet college faculty requirements, including a Master's degree or significant Master's-level work in the field. Making Master's-level courses more available to high school faculty online or reducing tuition are two avenues worth exploring. Increasing training opportunities to help prepare high school teachers to deliver college courses to diverse learners would further help the state meet its goals for underserved students.

Removing these obstacles to the growth of early college high schools in Texas would pave the way for many other colleges and their partners to follow the lead of EPCC and STC and help achieve the goal of making college accessible to all.