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LOOKING BACKWARD AND LOOKING FORWARD:  
**HIGHLIGHTS OF  
THE EARLY COLLEGE  
EXPANSION PARTNERSHIP**

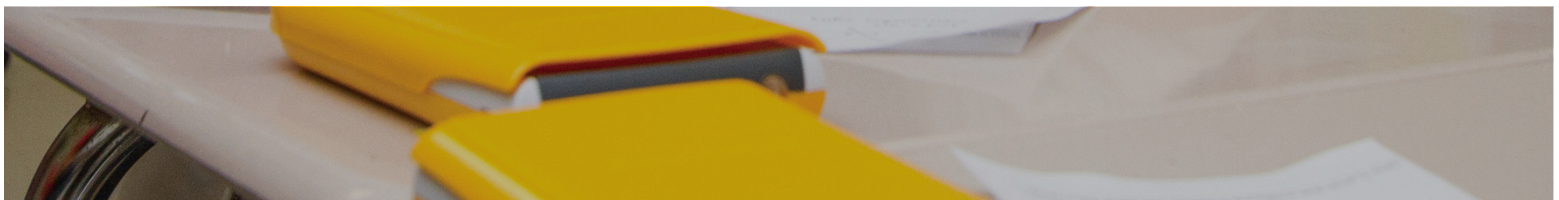
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AT A GLANCE

The Early College Expansion Partnership aimed to increase the high school and college success of 30,000 low-income youth. This brief highlights the core elements of the partnership and key lessons learned that can inform school improvement efforts everywhere.

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# Introduction

Previously classified a “turnaround school” due to low performance, Denver’s High Tech Early College today has a reputation for providing a rigorous curriculum that gives high school students a head start on higher education and high-demand careers. Located on the city’s far northeast side, 93 percent of High Tech’s students are Latino or African American, and 68 percent are English language learners. The school offers career pathways in audio production, business, computer science, engineering, graphic design, and robotics. High Tech recently received accreditation as a “satellite campus” of the Community College of Aurora, and has the ability to provide enough college classes for students to earn an associate’s degree, for free, at the same time as their high school diploma.

Principal Stacy Parrish celebrates her school’s recent successes: “I am so proud of the amount of college credits that my students have been able to earn. With the early college initiative, we’re able to skyrocket the numbers of kids that we are graduating college and career ready.”

High Tech’s transformation is still a work in progress, but this work is not happening in isolation. The school is one of nine Denver high schools that were part of the three-district Early College Expansion Partnership (ECEP), led by JFF and Educate Texas, through June 2018.

This brief summarizes the core elements of the ECEP approach.. It draws on key takeaways from JFF’s series on lessons learned from the ECEP (see box “Expanding Early College”). The brief focuses on lessons in three areas: strategy and systems, partnerships and pathways, and

teaching and learning. Links to previous papers, which cover the topics in greater detail, appear throughout.

## THE EARLY COLLEGE EXPANSION PARTNERSHIP

The ECEP included Denver Public Schools as well as two districts in South Texas: Brownsville Independent School District and Pharr-San Juan-Alamo (PSJA) Independent School District. Formed in 2012 with support from a competitive Investing in Innovation (i3) grant from the U.S. Department of

### EXPANDING EARLY COLLEGE

You can find all of the publications in the ECEP series at the links below:



[Sharing Responsibility for College Success](#)



[Leadership Lessons from the Early College Expansion Partnership](#)



[Solving the Dual Enrollment Staffing Puzzle](#)



[Taking the Long View](#)

Education, the initiative had two main goals: (1) to scale up early college designs as systemwide school improvement and college readiness strategies reaching an additional 30,000 students; and (2) to position early college designs for sustainability and further scale-up.

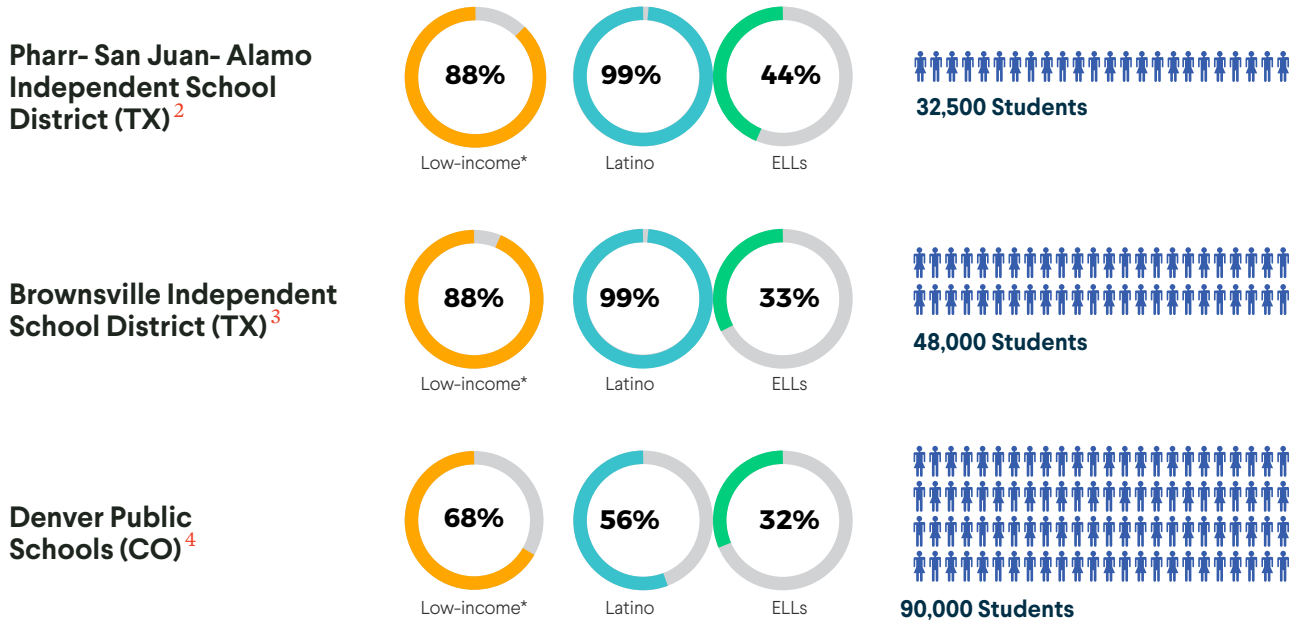
Early college high schools provide all students with the opportunity to earn significant college credit, and potentially an associate’s degree, by the time they graduate high school. They enable this feat by providing a curriculum that maximizes opportunities for dual enrollment with postsecondary education partners.<sup>1</sup> Students

also receive extensive academic and social support to ease the transition to college coursework. Most early colleges nationwide are small schools or clusters within larger high schools. ECEP, by contrast, took on the ambitious challenge of implementing early college in multiple large, comprehensive high schools within a single district.

As the district leaders, principals, teachers, and students working in the ECEP can attest, expanding early college requires a long-term, strategic effort to redesign multiple systems, with an unwavering focus on connecting all students to college certificates and degrees.

### THREE SCHOOL DISTRICTS, THREE CONTEXTS FOR CHANGE

All three districts in the ECEP enroll a disproportionately large share of students from low-income backgrounds and other groups that are underrepresented in higher education, including a high share of English language learners (ELLs). Aside from these commonalities, the districts have striking differences:



*\*Refers to economically disadvantaged students, whose family incomes qualify for the federal free and reduced-price lunch program.*

## WHAT IT TAKES TO EXPAND EARLY COLLEGE: A BLUEPRINT FOR CHANGE MANAGERS

When it comes to scaling early college across large, complex districts and their myriad postsecondary partners, there's no single strategy. Leaders at all levels need to commit to a long-term process of continuous improvement, with a sustained focus as well as a willingness to adapt. Denver, Brownsville, and PSJA still have plenty of work ahead of them to make the early college vision a reality for all learners. Nonetheless, core elements of the ECEP approach will be instructive for others interested in redesigning schools to launch students much further toward the goal of college completion.

### 1 Strategy and Systems

Scaling up early college designs across large schools and districts requires extensive strategic planning and careful management of components ranging from curricular alignment and professional development to staffing and budget analysis.

#### Premise and Approach

Early college high schools have a robust research base on their effectiveness, particularly for students from groups underrepresented in higher education. Previous national research has found that early college students have higher high school graduation rates and are more likely to enroll and persist in college compared to peers from similar backgrounds.<sup>5</sup>

The ECEP's "early college for all" approach is based on the premise that all students,

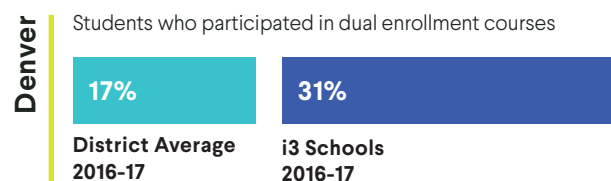
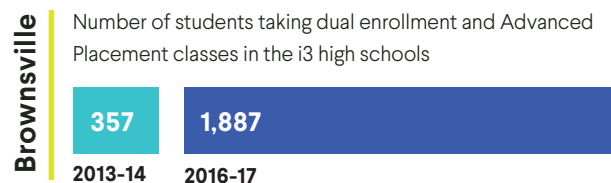
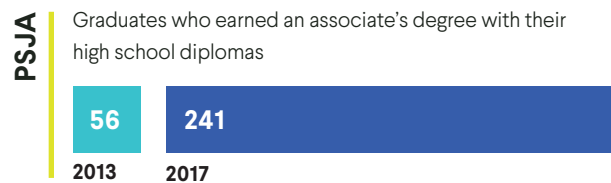
regardless of prior academic performance, can achieve college readiness when they have sufficient academic and social support, engaging instructional practices, strong postsecondary partnerships, and sequences of high school and college courses aligned with their postsecondary goals. For early college high schools to achieve their potential, it is critical for leaders, staff, and educators at all levels to embrace this premise.

#### Visionary Leadership

One of the overarching lessons learned is that leadership support is an essential ingredient for transforming high schools into early colleges. Leaders throughout each school

### SIGNS OF PROGRESS

Each of the i3 schools in the ECEP districts started work at very different stages in terms of their prior academic achievement and their experience with (and infrastructure for) dual enrollment. Nonetheless, there have been improvements and bright spots across all three districts. The following data points offer a snapshot of their progress.<sup>6</sup>



district need to understand and embrace their roles in the process and share accountability for making essential changes in policy and practice. [Leadership Lessons from the Early College Expansion Partnership](#) features case studies of influential leadership practices in each of the ECEP districts and provides recommendations for other system leaders. Important actors include:

*Superintendents*—The superintendent’s office can establish early college expansion as a central priority and continually reiterate its importance throughout the district and to the broader community. As an example, PSJA Superintendent Dr. Daniel P. King has earned a longstanding reputation as an early college visionary. He brought early college aspirations to PSJA when he took the helm in 2007, and he began implementing early college designs one school at a time. By spring 2015, all of PSJA’s comprehensive high schools had been officially designated as early college high schools by the Texas Education Agency. King translated his vision into the district’s conspicuous “College Cubed” motto: “Every graduate ready for college, connected to college, and able to complete college.” King and his team have carried out a long-term campaign to promote the “College Cubed” goals and generate community support. [Sharing Responsibility for College Success](#) provides a detailed case study of the cultural shift that has taken place in the Rio Grande Valley community under King’s leadership.

*Deputies and Managers*—With a strong base of commitment from the superintendent’s office, determined deputies and mid-level leaders often drive the day-to-day

work of early college implementation. In Brownsville, Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction Berta Peña was a steadfast driver of early college expansion throughout the ECEP initiative. Her ability to identify strategic solutions kept early college expansion on track in spite of resource constraints, turnover, and changing postsecondary partnerships.

### **Capacity Building at the District Level**

The ECEP districts learned that executing a shared early college vision and strategy across multiple schools requires a district-level team that is responsible for overseeing implementation of the curricular, instructional, and logistical elements of early college designs, as well as critical student supports.

Denver provides an example of a district that has recently expanded the central office’s capacity to support the changes taking place in its early college high schools. The i3 grant initially funded an ECEP manager and three instructional coaches, housed in the Office of College and Career Readiness. In 2017-18, after a group of six schools earned state designation as early college high schools, the district created a new Early College Division with its own executive director, Antonio Esquibel. As of the 2018-19 school year, the state-designated early college schools will be part of a new Early College Network that will be overseen by a single instructional superintendent and supported by the Early College Division. This centralization will allow leaders to offer more targeted expertise in the unique management, budgetary, staffing, and instructional priorities of these schools.



## The Role of Intermediary Partners in Advancing Strategy and Systems

Throughout the five-year i3 grant, JFF and Educate Texas provided strategic advising and technical assistance to deputies and managers responsible for early college implementation. The intermediary partners offered their perspective from overseeing early college transformation in other sites nationwide, helping the districts to focus and align their efforts to advance college readiness and systematically scale up college course-taking.

JFF and Educate Texas incorporated sustainability planning in their work with the districts over several years. Coaches developed templates focused on sustainability planning, and sustainability was a central focus of annual in-person meetings that convened leaders from all three districts along with their college partners. As detailed in [Taking the Long View](#), the ECEP partners recognized that maintaining and advancing the gains made during the i3 grant requires deep integration into the core work of schools.

The intermediary partners also created opportunities for cross-site sharing. JFF developed an online [Community of Practice](#) to facilitate resource-sharing across the ECEP sites and to connect these districts to a broader national network of early college leaders and practitioners. The Community of Practice includes relevant tools, articles, and research for early college practitioners and hosts webinars that provide opportunities for the ECEP districts and other sites to disseminate promising practices and



lessons learned to a much wider audience. Educate Texas also developed an [i3 Resource Toolkit](#) for practitioners to access a range of instructional materials, coaching documents, and other tools developed in the Texas districts during the ECEP grant.

## 2 Partnerships and Pathways

By design, all early colleges must provide students with an opportunity to earn significant, transferrable college credit through dual enrollment; therefore, building and maintaining a strong

partnership between the high school and the postsecondary institution is of utmost importance. Partners from each side of the secondary-postsecondary divide must collaborate to design and implement sequences of courses leading from ninth grade to a degree or certificate, and to provide high school students with a supportive head start on college.

### **Governance Structures: the “i3 Cabinet”**

One of the ECEP’s central design strategies was the creation of an “i3 Cabinet” at each site: a governance body that brings together key leaders of the district’s early college initiative, including the superintendent or senior district leaders, school principals, and college or university administrators. As described in [Leadership Lessons from the Early College Expansion Partnership](#), the cabinet plays a critical role in keeping partners focused on the goals of early college expansion and ensures that all have a regular (typically monthly) time to connect, analyze data on student outcomes, monitor progress, and work through challenges. The Texas districts also formed working groups on various topics including data analysis, student support, and instructional transformation, which pull together administrators and staff with deep expertise in each area.

### **Course Sequences Leading to Degrees and Certificates**

In many ECEP schools, college course-taking evolved away from “random acts of dual enrollment” and became more strategic as the high schools focused on offering courses that transfer to a wide variety of college degrees and majors. With assistance from JFF and

Educate Texas—and in close consultation with their higher education partners— the schools took on the task of revising their master schedules and developing course sequences, or pathways, allowing students to accumulate college credits that meet the requirements for specific college majors and credentials.

### **Dual Credit Staffing**

Scaling up dual enrollment requires districts and college partners to answer a critical question: who will be responsible for delivering college courses for dual credit? In some cases, high school students travel to the college campus to take college classes; in other cases, these courses are delivered by college instructors who travel to the high school campus for a fee. When the demand for these courses grows, however, it can be more affordable and more logistically feasible for high schools to use their own teachers who can serve as college adjuncts.

However, the ECEP districts face a shortage of high school teachers with the advanced qualifications needed to teach at the postsecondary level—a problem that is shared by districts nationwide that are attempting to expand dual enrollment. As profiled in [Solving the Dual Enrollment Staffing Puzzle](#), the ECEP districts and their postsecondary partners have experimented with strategic solutions to stretch their current pool of qualified dual credit instructors and to expand the pool by helping other teachers advance their education through accessible and affordable graduate programs. The dual credit staffing challenge provides an example of how the early college transformation

has implications for—and requires the involvement of—the district’s offices of human resources and finances as well as curriculum and instruction.

### **College Enrollment, Advising, and Navigation Support for Students**

Assisting large numbers of high school students—the majority of whom are first-generation college-goers—in choosing college courses, interpreting prerequisites and degree requirements, and meeting enrollment deadlines requires intensive advising and logistical support. Each of the ECEP districts created managerial positions to act as go-betweens for schools and college partners, as well as frontline college liaisons and counselors, as described in *Taking the Long View*. Their duties differ from those of a traditional guidance counselor; these individuals are the in-house experts on the intricacies of dual enrollment. For their part, many of the institutions of higher education also expanded their student support staff to provide dedicated assistance for early college students.

### **3 Teaching and Learning**

To achieve the goal of providing all students with a successful, supportive head start on college courses, early colleges need to transform teaching and learning to ensure high levels of rigor, acceleration, and student support across the entire school community.

#### **Implementation of a Common Instructional Framework**

A core component of the ECEP logic model was professional development to help schools

implement the Common Instructional Framework (CIF), a set of six instructional practices that research associates with student engagement, deeper learning, and the development of college and career-readiness skills.

#### **Instructional Coaching and Professional Development**

To help teachers and school leaders learn the CIF strategies, national coaches from JFF and Educate Texas were assigned to work with cohorts of teachers in each of the participating schools. Coaches visited the schools on a monthly basis for individual classroom observations and feedback. They also worked with district staff to design and facilitate larger-group professional development institutes to introduce the CIF strategies to a wider range of teachers, administrators, and district leaders.

The districts also used i3 grant funds to hire internal coaches to provide ongoing support for instructional improvement. These coaches played a key role in designing a wide range of lesson-planning materials and tools to guide teachers in integrating the CIF strategies while also advancing other district initiatives and priorities.

Coaches played a key role in embedding the CIF strategies into permanent school processes, such as lesson-planning templates and classroom observation protocols used by administrators. As the end of the i3 grant approached, coaches shifted to a train-the-trainer model, seeking to build on-site coaching capacity in the schools and promote longevity of the instructional strategies.



EXPANDED DEFINITION

## The Early College Common Instructional Framework

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The Common Instructional Framework, developed by JFF, is a set of six powerful, research-based instructional strategies that prepare high school students to succeed in college coursework.

**Collaborative Group Work:** Students engage in meaningful group tasks that include multiple entry points, and support and challenge students of diverse skill levels.

**Writing to Learn:** Low-stakes writing activities provide students with the practice they need to develop their ideas, think critically, build writing fluency, and master written conventions.

**Scaffolding:** Teachers use information from assessments to plan a careful sequence of activities that link prior knowledge to new knowledge and skills, challenging students with increasingly difficult tasks.

**Questioning:** Teachers and students use meaningful questions to open conversations, deepen classroom discourse, and investigate and analyze their thinking.

**Classroom Talk:** Working in pairs, collaborative groups, and as a whole class, students practice articulating their thinking, while the teacher serves as a facilitator to promote higher levels of academic discourse.

**Literacy Groups:** Students use a collaborative structure with defined roles and/or discussion protocols to actively probe the meaning of a text.

This gradual release of responsibility is discussed in [Taking the Long View](#).

### Coaching for School Leaders

JFF also provided monthly leadership coaching for school principals and, in some cases, other members of the school's leadership team. The coach served as an external adviser who had deep experience tackling similar challenges in different contexts. All of the ECEP leadership coaches brought decades of career expertise as principals, district administrators, and, in some cases, superintendents of other school systems. Educate Texas also provided coaching for early college high school directors, a role performed by an assistant principal in each of the Texas districts. Overall, coaches helped the school administrators learn to recognize the CIF strategies and provide actionable feedback for their teachers to enhance their practice, as described in [Leadership Lessons from the Early College Expansion Partnership](#).

### Academic Supports and Interventions

Expanding college course taking requires expanding college readiness. The districts have developed comprehensive strategies to prepare students for required college placement tests, beginning in middle school. The Texas districts have substantially raised the number of students taking—and passing—the state's required college placement assessment in eighth grade, which sets them up for dual enrollment starting in ninth grade and puts them on a pathway to an associate's degree.

that teach college success skills and guide students through individualized academic and career planning.

As increasing numbers of students demonstrate college readiness, the districts and their postsecondary partners face the

task of continually increasing their dual credit course offerings, student advising capacity, and academic supports. The success of these students will, in turn, bolster community demand for early college and promote sustainability and further scaling.



Taking early college to scale requires capacity building for district leaders and administrators; governance structures to manage partnerships; aligned course sequences leading to degrees and certificates; a sufficient supply of qualified instructors for dual credit courses; strong instructional strategies and professional development for teachers and principals; and a robust range of student supports. All of these ingredients have been impactful in Denver, Brownsville,

and PSJA, and each of them will continue to play a role in the next stages of each site's early college transformation. As PSJA Superintendent King reflects, "This is not an overnight thing. If you're really going to talk about scaling early college, it's a very long-term initiative, and it takes a lot of commitment." ECEP provided the districts a blueprint for implementation; it is up to each site to supply the commitment.

## Endnotes

- 1 The districts and states highlighted in this piece alternately use the terms “dual enrollment,” “dual credit,” or “concurrent enrollment.” While there are nuances among these terms in some states, this piece will use the term “dual enrollment” to refer to courses taken by high school students for both secondary and postsecondary credit.
- 2 Data from 2015-16 Texas Academic Performance Report, accessed March 6, 2017, <https://rptsvr1.tea.texas.gov/perfreport/tapr/2016/srch.html?srch=D>.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 2015-16 data from Colorado Department of Education District Dashboard, accessed March 6, 2017, <http://www2.cde.state.co.us/schoolview/dish/dashboard.asp>.
- 5 A third-party evaluation of the ECEP’s implementation and impact was conducted by the SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. The forthcoming evaluation includes a quasi-experimental impact study in which ECEP schools are matched to similar schools not participating in ECEP.
- 6 Michael Webb and Carol Gerwin, *Early College Expansion: Propelling Students to Postsecondary Success, at a School Near You* (Boston: Jobs for the Future, 2014); Andrea Berger et al., *Early College, Early Success: Early College High School Initiative Impact Study* (Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research, 2013).

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*Photographs courtesy of PSJA  
Independent School District.*