

A photograph of three students, two men and one woman, sitting at a desk and writing on papers with pencils. They are all looking down at their work. The student on the left is a man with dreadlocks wearing a blue and white striped shirt. The student in the middle is a woman with curly hair wearing a purple and white striped shirt. The student on the right is a man with dark hair wearing a blue and white striped shirt. The background is a blurred classroom setting.

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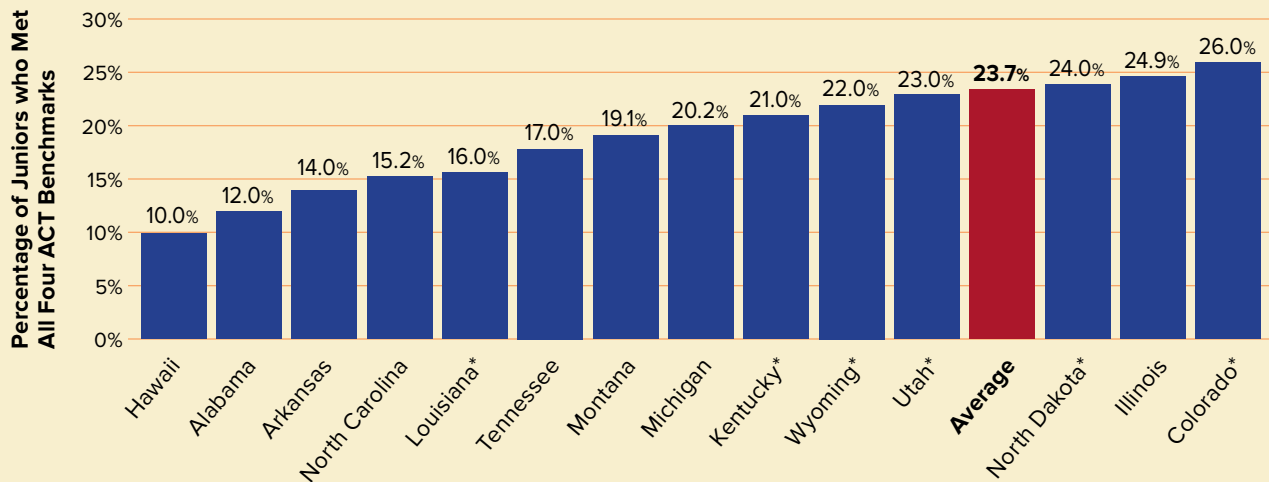
ALLIANCE FOR
EXCELLENT EDUCATION

BUILDING A FAST TRACK TO COLLEGE:

An Executive Summary

BY MICHAEL DANNENBERG & ANNE HYSLOP

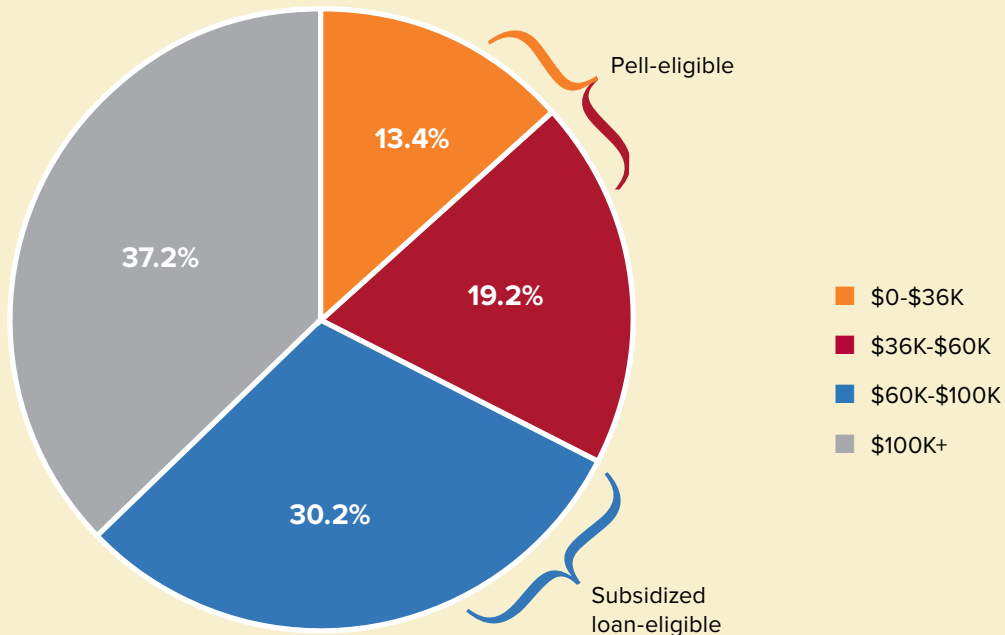
Good News: Overall, 1 in 4 high school juniors meet all four ACT college-readiness benchmarks. That would mean more than 850,000 students could be eligible for a Fast Track pathway nationwide.



Source: Data represent 2013–14 ACT scores for public high school juniors in the 2015 high school graduating class among the 14 ACT census states. State ACT data come from each state education agency's website. We worked to identify and estimate data only for public high school juniors.

* Some states did not have ACT data limited to public schools. To produce state estimates in these cases, we used data for public and private high school juniors. In all cases (except Louisiana) the estimated proportion of juniors enrolled in public high schools among statewide exceeds 90%.

Better News: Nearly 2/3 of college-ready high school juniors come from low- and middle-income families.



Source: Income data and analysis provided through our partnership with ACT. ACT test score and income data represents 2013-14 public high school juniors in the 2015 high school graduating class among the 14 ACT statewide administration states. Data are based on students who self-reported family income data (missing responses are omitted).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Senior year of high school: a coming-of-age period of such significance that there is an entire genre of television and film devoted to its rites of passage, full of characters afflicted by “senioritis”—the academic slacking off that occurs in 12th grade before students head to college. Ignored on screen are the one-quarter of students from a surprisingly wide cross-section of the population who will have to take (and pay for) remedial classes at the postsecondary level the fall immediately after high school graduation.¹ But as real world policymakers tackle postsecondary education remediation rates by looking for ways to improve high schools, they often overlook an early success — those who are already academically prepared for college *before* their senior year of high school. **According to new ACT data, one in four high school students is academically ready at the end of 11th grade to start college-level coursework *full-time*. Even better, one-third of those students come from low-income families, and 30 percent of those are racial minorities.**

Given these facts, policymakers have an opportunity to creatively rethink the transition from high school to college and save students time, money, and frustration in the process. Currently, all too many of the estimated 850,000+ academically-ready-for-college high school juniors waste much of 12th grade taking courses that fall below their capabilities, sometimes in order to meet “seat time” requirements for graduation. Senioritis is real. As an antidote and to reduce college costs for families, we recommend rethinking and reframing the transition from high school to college around one basic principle: **when students demonstrate college readiness, they should have a meaningful option to enroll in full-time, college-level coursework—and this choice should be encouraged with state and local funding.**

There already are established ways of allowing high school students to earn college credit, but they are underutilized and disconnected. Academically ready students can take college-level coursework during high school via Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), or dual enrollment programs. But, even though states have been expanding these programs, the data indicates most **current early postsecondary course offerings fall short of a full-time, intensive program that consistently results in attainment of *widely transferable* college credit.**

25%
of high school students are academically prepared at the end of 11th grade to start college-level coursework.

850,000+
students ready for college-level work waste much of their senior year taking courses that fall below their capabilities.

43%
of all college credits
are lost when
students transfer.

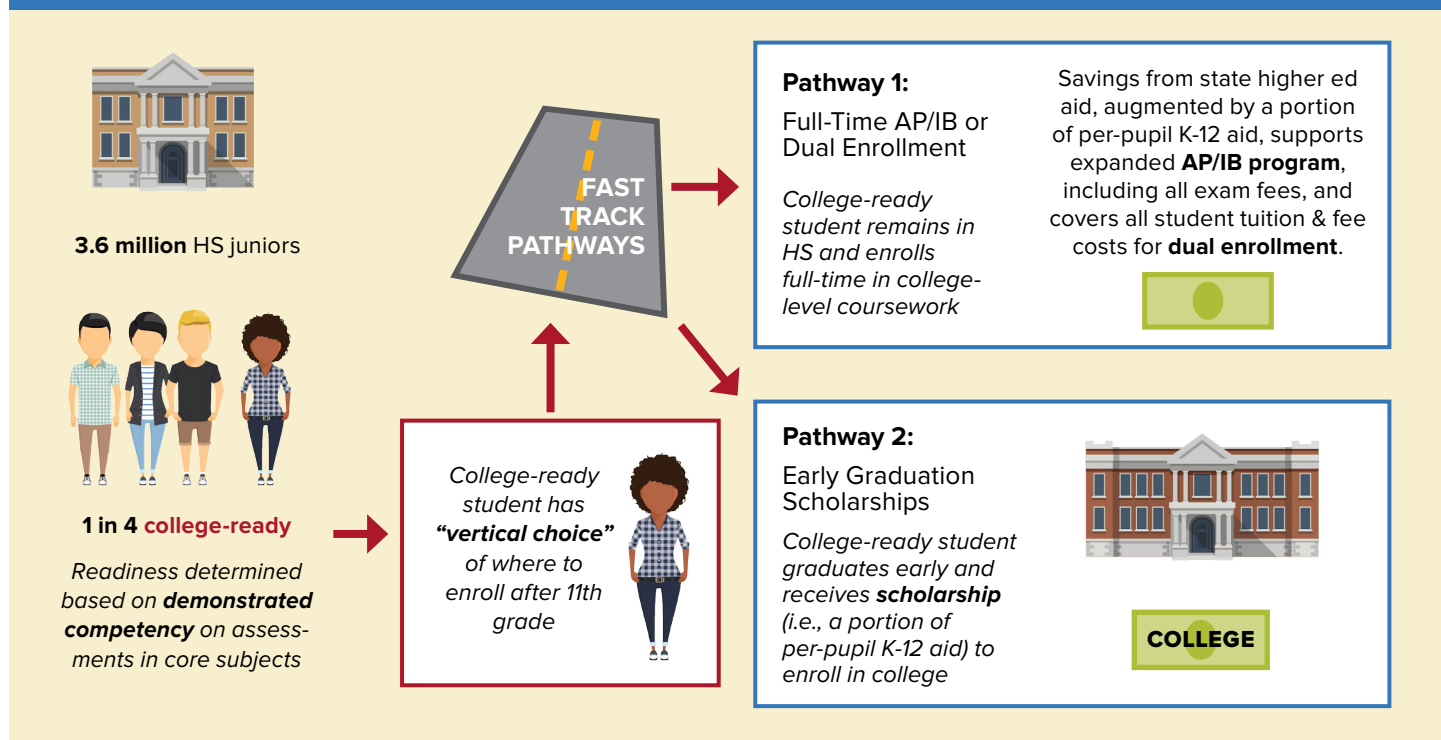
750,000+
of the 2 million
dual enrollments
likely result in
no transferable
college credit.

In other words, even when students have access to college-level coursework in high school, the promise of completing a college degree faster and with less debt is broken: Students fail to earn college credit or earned credits are lost when they arrive on campus. Of the 4.9 million AP exams taken each year, 42 percent are scored below the minimum passing level that most colleges will accept for credit (a score of “3”), and that’s true for the majority of tests taken by Latinx students and nearly three-quarters of tests taken by Black students.² Only half of states ensure that students in dual enrollment programs earn both high school and postsecondary credits.³ Moreover, institutions of higher education frequently make it challenging for students who do earn college credits elsewhere to apply them toward a degree. The Government Accountability Office estimates 43 percent of all college credits are lost when students transfer colleges. Some 37 percent of credits are lost when students transfer between public institutions of higher education (e.g., if dual enrollment students subsequently enroll in a different public college or university following high school graduation).⁴ Even using the more conservative rate of credit transfer between public colleges, based on the number of student enrollments in dual credit courses in 2010–11, over 750,000 of the 2 million dual enrollments likely resulted in no transferable college credit.⁵

Imagine instead if advanced high school students had a choice to enter a “fast track” pathway—supported by state and local funding—that enabled them to take, free of charge, a full-time college-level course load during their senior year of high school that they could be reasonably assured would result in transferable college credit.

We envision two fast track pathways to accelerate academically ready students to and through higher education. The primary pathway would allow students to enroll in a full-time sequence of AP/IB or dual enrollment courses that enables them to graduate high school with at least the equivalent of a year’s worth of college credit, crucially with the assurance that those credits will apply toward a degree at any public college statewide. A second, alternative pathway would offer students the option to graduate high school early—before 12th grade—with the reward of a scholarship that reduces their full-time college costs. In either case, rather than waiting for senioritis to take hold, academically ready students would get a head start on college—at a discount—that could enable them to complete high school and a postsecondary degree more quickly *and* incur less student loan debt in doing so. Think of it as high school in three years or college in three years, for those who are capable and so choose.

When students demonstrate college readiness, they should have a meaningful option to enroll in college-level coursework, full-time.



Our research indicates the basic building blocks to develop high-quality fast track pathways already exist. They just need to be put together in the right way. A majority of states have some mix of: college readiness assessments administered to students before 12th grade, AP/IB programs and/or dual enrollment coursework with a wide variety of credit transfer policies, proficiency-based high school graduation requirements, and early high school graduation scholarships. In addition to the millions of students taking at least one AP, IB, or dual enrollment course, we found that 34 states have an early high school graduation policy, and six states provide early high school graduates with college scholarships. But unlike AP/IB and dual enrollment, participation is low, with only 1 or 2 percent of students taking up the option to leave high school early. Current early graduation scholarships—in most cases, around \$2,000—appear to be too small to convince students to participate. Plus, powerful cultural norms and social forces, including strong friendships, protective parents, sports, the senior prom, and other social activities, lead even the most academically advanced students to remain on the traditional high school track.

Few students want to graduate early—with, or without, the incentive of a scholarship. That is why it is essential that fast track pathways give academically ready high school students the chance to move on to college-level material without necessarily leaving high school. We recommend a series of steps for states to enhance their AP/IB and dual enrollment programs, prevent wasteful credit loss between high school and higher education, and tackle the shortcomings of existing early graduation scholarships. Even better, the benefits of these steps would extend beyond fast-track eligible students and also help those who are not yet on-track to graduate college- and career-ready.

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states have an early high school graduation policy, and six states provide early high school graduates with college scholarships.

To determine if students are ready for college-level work prior to senior year, states should adopt performance-based criteria for early high school graduation based on demonstrated proficiency as opposed to “seat time.”

With new policies to guarantee transfer of AP, IB, and dual enrollment credits, states can mitigate credit loss and accelerate time to degree even for students who do not pursue fast track.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Fast Track Eligibility.** To determine if students are ready for college-level work prior to their senior year, all states should adopt performance-based criteria for high school graduation, including early high school graduation, based on demonstrated proficiency of academic content as opposed to “seat time” exclusively. States should consider using existing assessments (such as the SAT or ACT, state-developed assessments in core subject areas like the New York Regents exams, AP or IB exams, or a combination of these tests) to determine fast track eligibility and examine postsecondary data to ensure performance benchmarks are set at a level that corresponds with success in introductory college-level courses.
- 2. State Policy, District Flexibility, & Student Choice.** States should build upon their current systems to enable all rising high school seniors meeting their state’s performance-based criteria to enter one of two new fast track pathways. Our thinking is that while the policy infrastructure for fast track pathways should be statewide, a state could also incorporate local flexibility, if needed, to ameliorate concerns from districts with limited resources to offer a full suite of AP courses or dual enrollment for all eligible students, or to open new IB high schools. For example, a state could support a suite of online AP courses that meet minimum quality standards for eligible students or even permit districts that meet a hardship standard to opt-out of the primary full-time AP/IB or dual enrollment pathway and exclusively offer the alternative early graduation scholarship fast track pathway. But we believe fast track will work optimally if there are multiple pathways—maximizing student and family choice and recognizing that AP/IB and dual enrollment are popular and that early graduation scholarships are less common as well as underutilized where they do exist.
- 3. Quality Fast Track Pathway Assurance for All.** States should establish parameters for at least two fast track pathways to maximize quality, success, and efficiency.

For the primary AP/IB or dual enrollment fast track pathway, states should:

- Specify a sequence of AP courses that must be available to students and how credit would transfer to higher education.⁶ Much as the IB program has already defined course criteria to earn an IB diploma, states should set parameters (i.e., number of courses and subjects that compose a typical first-year college course of study) for a full-time AP sequence for fast track students. States should also establish a corresponding policy that any student earning a “3” or higher on the associated AP exam (or a comparable score on an IB exam) must receive college credit at all in-state, public two- and four-year institutions. Likewise, states should create an articulated, full-time sequence of dual enrollment courses where credits earned in the sequence must be accepted toward degree requirements at all in-state, public two- and four-year institutions. Such moves would have the additional benefit of mitigating credit loss with early postsecondary course options generally and accelerate time to degree even for students who do not pursue fast track but still take AP/IB or dual enrollment courses.

- Ensure that the AP/IB or dual enrollment fast track pathway is offered tuition-free to students, with any generated savings reinvested in improving instruction, coursework, programs, and support services in the feeder district's high schools. Net savings that are captured from state higher education funds associated with accelerated time to degree for fast track students should be used to improve college and career readiness for traditional students who are not eligible for fast track and need additional support.
- Require districts to allow non-fast track eligible students to participate in a district's AP/IB or dual enrollment offerings if there is space and a student demonstrates readiness for the course. This—coupled with new policies to guarantee transferability of credits—will help ensure any expansion of AP/IB or dual enrollment as a result of fast track promotes college readiness overall and has a positive impact on the district's students as a whole.

For the alternate early graduation scholarship fast track pathway, we recommend states:

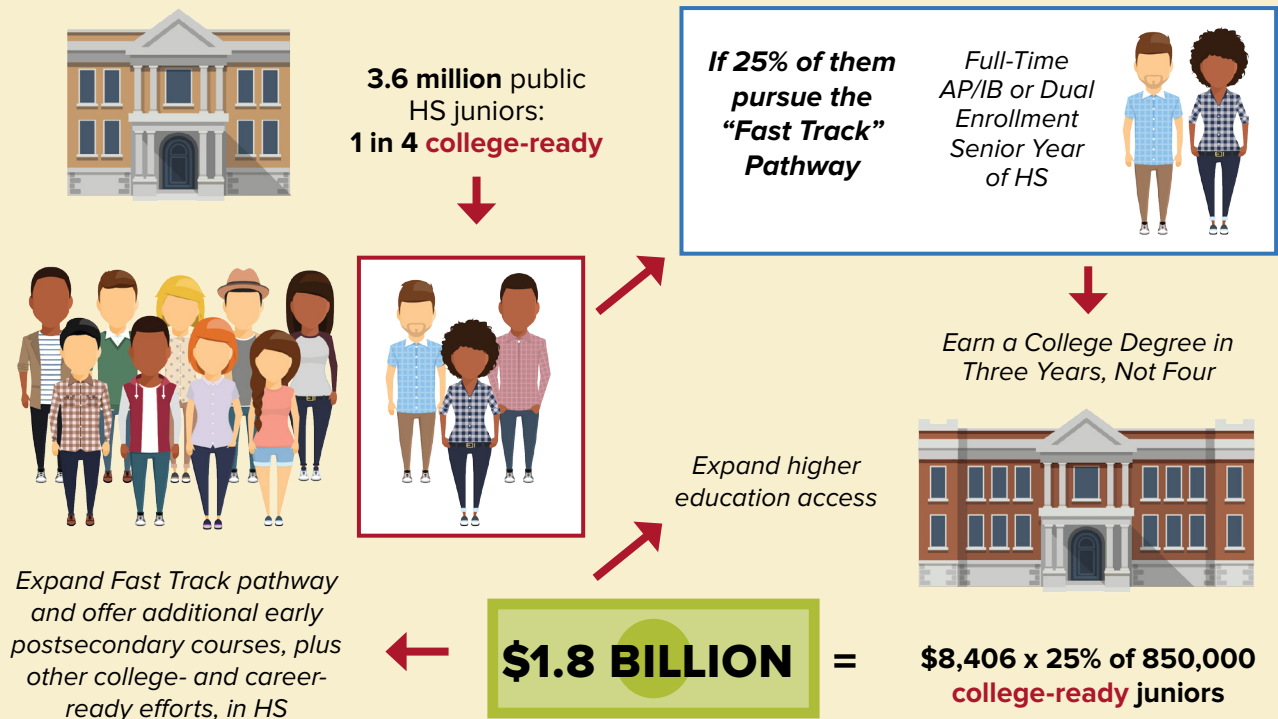
- Assure a meaningful award size based on the state's share of per-pupil K–12 spending (e.g., two-thirds or \$3,000, whichever is greater, with higher spending states encouraged to match the scholarship to the size of the maximum federal Pell Grant, just under \$6,200 for the 2019–20 school year);
- Require that any remaining state funds be reinvested in the feeder school district to, in effect, increase per-pupil spending for those still enrolled; and
- Adopt provisions that ensure funds remain invested in public education. For example, scholarships may not be accepted at certain colleges and universities (e.g., out-of-state, private, or for-profit institutions) and must be used within one year of the student's high school graduation.

Ideally there would be an infusion of public revenue to upgrade current high school academic offerings and facilitate new fast track pathways, but it is worth highlighting that fiscally strapped states also can make aggressive use of existing resource levels. Consider that the average bachelor's degree recipient currently takes five years to complete a postsecondary program,⁷ rather than four—meaning costs are 25 percent higher than they otherwise need to be. **Speeding up postsecondary education time to degree could save students, institutions, and taxpayers substantial sums—savings that could be reinvested to improve high school curricula for advanced students and help other students working to get on-track to graduate college- and career-ready.**

States should assure a meaningful scholarship award, with higher spending states encouraged to match the size of the Pell Grant: **\$6,200.**

State higher education costs are **25%** higher than they need to be, because the typical bachelor's degree recipient now takes five years to complete their postsecondary program, instead of the traditional four.

By accelerating time to degree for academically ready students, states could generate savings from state aid to higher education and reinvest those dollars to offer early postsecondary courses in high school.

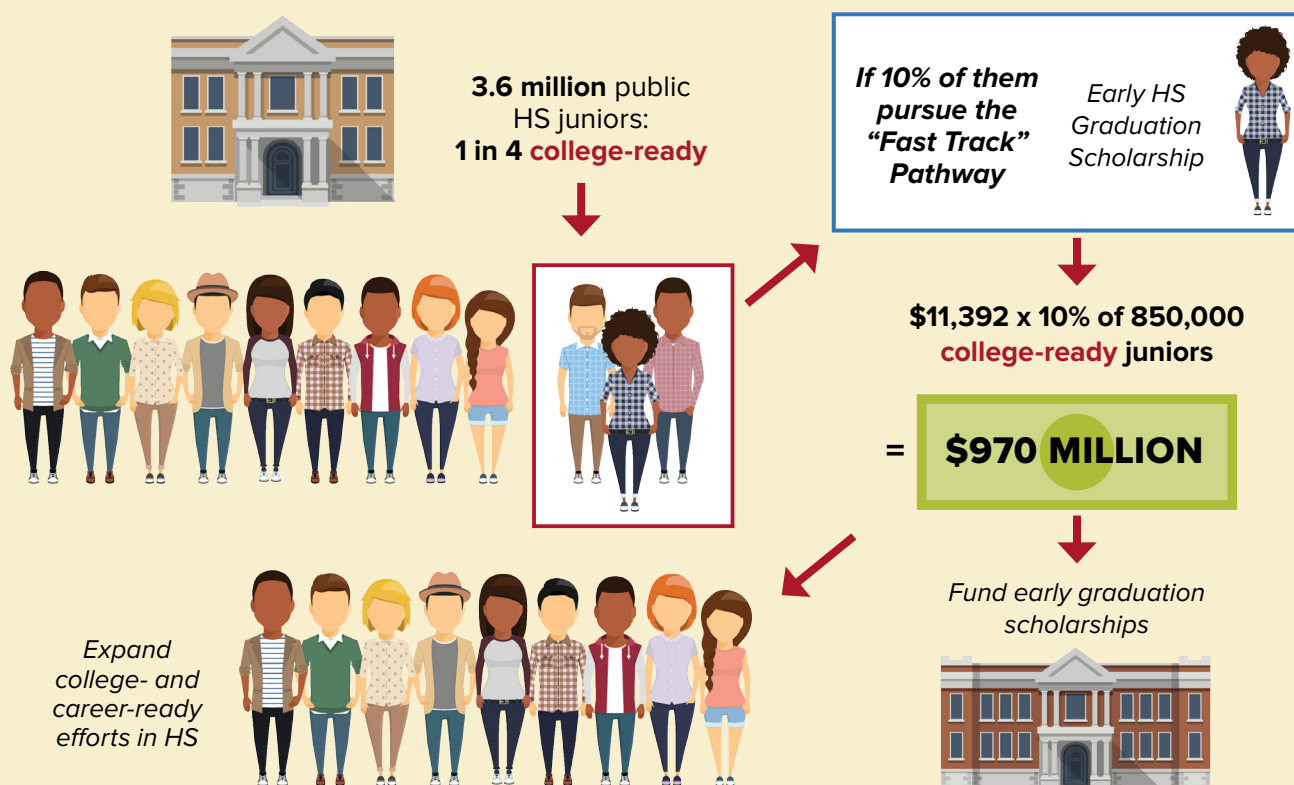


Source: College readiness rates were estimated from 2013–14 ACT scores for public high school juniors in the 2015 high school graduating class among the 14 ACT census states. Grade 11 enrollment data is from the National Center of Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics 2017. State postsecondary per-student spending estimated from national average institution of higher education operating support, plus grant aid.

Each year, **\$1.8** billion dollars from state higher education budgets could be saved and reinvested toward improving college access and K-12 preparation.

To the extent more college credit is earned in high school and applied toward postsecondary degrees, back-end savings of taxpayer spending on higher education (i.e., taxpayer spending on the final year of college before degree conferral) are available to be captured. If enrollment projections for public colleges and universities are updated to account for fast track students arriving with a year of college credit, states could generate savings from reduced institutional aid to public institutions of higher education because some entering students would be projected to attain a degree faster than traditional students. A state would only have to subsidize four or, better yet, three years of public higher education for relevant students, rather than the typical five for those who graduate. Based on average state postsecondary student spending (institution of higher education operating support plus grant aid) of \$8,406, **if only a quarter of college-ready high school juniors choose a quality full-time AP/IB or dual enrollment fast track option, we estimate states could free as much as \$1.8 billion from their state higher education budgets each year** as a result of students graduating in less cumulative time.⁸ Further, enforcement of clear and consistent transfer policies for AP/IB and dual enrollment credits among public colleges likely would result in faster degree attainment and additional savings by even greater numbers of postsecondary students who were ineligible to participate in fast track.

By also permitting academically ready high school juniors to graduate early and fast track to college, with a scholarship, additional funds could be reinvested to help their peers become college-ready.



Source: College readiness rates were estimated from 2013–14 ACT scores for public high school juniors in the 2015 high school graduating class among the 14 ACT census states. Grade 11 enrollment data is from the National Center of Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics 2017. Per-pupil expenditure data is from the U.S. Census Bureau, Public Education Finances, 2015.

Moreover, there are potential front-end savings associated with students who choose the alternative fast track option—to graduate high school after only three years with the incentive of an early graduation scholarship—that would augment back-end savings in higher education costs driven by those who pursue what we expect would be the primary fast track pathway. Consider that for every academically ready high school junior who chooses to graduate high school a year early, the typical state could repurpose the \$11,000 it would have spent on that student’s 12th grade education. In the highest K–12 spending states like New York and Washington, DC, the efficiency figure would reach upwards of \$20,000 per fast track student who graduates after 11th grade. Multiply the more than 850,000 advanced high school juniors nationwide (based on ACT data) by the national average per-pupil expenditure and an outward bound of some \$9.7 billion dollars could be spent each year on providing students early access to college and making college more affordable. **Even if only 10 percent of college-ready juniors choose the early high school graduation fast track option, nearly \$1 billion could be invested.** That is more than any federal education program currently devotes to high school reform and improvement.

If only **10%** of college-ready juniors chose an early high school graduation fast track option, another near \$1 billion could be made available for early college scholarships and improved high school programs each year.

With both fast track pathways, “saved” funds could be garnered to support new investments in students’ college and career readiness on the K–12 side of the budget—whether expanding a high school’s AP or dual enrollment offerings or transforming it into an IB high school, hiring additional college counselors, or partnering with local industry to offer high-quality, work-based learning opportunities—or investments in early graduation scholarships for fast track students. Either way, the result would be a more individualized system of postsecondary preparation that’s better for advanced students, traditional students, *and* taxpayers.

In sum, enabling more academically prepared students to choose a fast track to college addresses three issues that vex the transition for high school students to and through higher education.

- 1. Skyrocketing college costs and student loan debt.** By increasing the number of students graduating high school with significant college credits and ensuring those credits transfer to a degree, attainment of a bachelor’s degree in three years would be more possible for hundreds of thousands of students, making college more affordable for them and their families. The same holds for those who graduate from college in the traditional four-year span instead of what is now a five-year norm—not because they participated in a fast track pathway, but because the handful of AP or dual enrollment courses they took in high school actually resulted in transferable and meaningful college credits.
- 2. High school reform, rigor, and remediation.** By front-loading a portion of state higher education funding into improved high school curricular offerings and reinvesting a portion of K–12 funds associated with early high school graduates (after accounting for any early graduation scholarships awarded) into high school programs, states could offer additional early postsecondary opportunities to all students, even those who are not fast-track eligible. This serves the express purpose of improving students’ academic preparation, easing the transition between secondary and postsecondary schooling, and increasing per pupil-served aid to K–12 schools. Associated success in high school student achievement would in turn reduce the \$1.5 billion in out-of-pocket expenses low-income and middle-class families incur for remedial coursework at the postsecondary level.⁹
- 3. The senior slump.** Fast track pathways provide academically ready students greater flexibility to personalize their learning and experience challenging, relevant coursework that will be meaningful as they pursue postsecondary education. Even before senior year, fast track pathways could motivate students to work hard toward the concrete promise of a reward—the option to enroll, free of charge and full-time, in a quality AP/IB or dual enrollment program or secure a sizable scholarship to enter college—if they do well enough academically, regardless of family financial circumstances.

Nearly a million high school juniors are ready for college each year and yet most of them spend another year in high school that costs them, and the state, money and time. By using the building blocks states already have, from proficiency-based graduation policies to AP/IB and dual enrollment to early graduation scholarships, we can design a new system, with multiple pathways between high school and higher education, that’s more efficient for the state, students, and families.

For a more detailed discussion, see our full white paper “Building a Fast Track to College: New Pathways to Empower Families, Improve High Schools, and Increase College Affordability” at www.edreformnow.org.

ENDNOTES

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2. “AP Program Participation and Performance Data 2017, National Summary Report,” The College Board, 2017. Available at: <https://secure-media.collegeboard.org/digitalServices/misc/ap/national-summary-2017.xlsx>.
3. Jennifer Dounay Zinth, “50-State Comparison: Dual / Concurrent Enrollment Policies,” Education Commission of the States, March 2016. Available at: <http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/MBQuestNB2?Rep=DE1509>.
4. “Students Need More Information to Help Reduce Challenges in Transferring College Credits (GAO-17-574),” Government Accountability Office, August 2017. Available at: https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-17-574?utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery.
5. Nina Thomas, Stephanie Marken, Lucinda Gray, and Laurie Lewis, “Dual Credit and Exam-Based Courses in U.S. Public High Schools: 2010-11 (NCES 2013-001),” U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, February 2013. Available at: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch>.
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7. Doug Shapiro, Afet Dunder, Phoebe Khasiala Wakhungu, Xin Yuan, Angel Nathan, and Youngsik Hwang, “Time to Degree: A National View of the Time Enrolled and Elapsed for Associate and Bachelor’s Degree Earners (Signature Report No. 11),” National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, September 2016. Available at: <https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/SignatureReport11.pdf>.
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