



Enhancing the Impact of the Build Back Better Act Integrating College in High School Programs

Recommendation

In the upcoming reconciliation bill, we urge the U.S. Congress to address the substantial decline in college enrollment resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic by:

1. **expanding access to dual enrollment programs as part of free community college packages, and**
2. **expanding and investing in activities to support students' transition from high school to higher education.**

Background

College in high school programs, such as dual enrollment, concurrent enrollment, and early college high school, are proven mechanisms for increasing postsecondary program enrollment and completion and an essential strategy for addressing the serious impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on postsecondary enrollment and success.

To maximize the impact of the free community college proposal within the Build Back Better Act, and not undermine dual enrollment, we ask that financial support for early college credit to be incorporated into the final tuition and fee free college package. If community college is made free without also making early college credits free, there may be an unintentional disincentive for students to participate in dual enrollment programs. The choices for students and families in many states would be (1) pay for college credit while in high school, or (2) wait to take the college courses for free in community college.

Considering the strong evidence supporting early college experience, we urge Congress to include funding for tuition

and fees associated with dual enrollment programs for students from low-income families and support for the transition from high school to higher education in the reconciliation package. This could be included as part of any plan for free community college and/or to increase college retention and completion.

7% Decline in College Enrollment; Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) Completion Down by 270,000 Students

According to the [National Student Clearinghouse](#), there have been **significant declines in postsecondary enrollment** caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. These declines include a 7% overall decline in fall enrollment, which is four times greater than the prepandemic decline. The data for students from low-income families and students of color is even more concerning.

Sadly, these trends are continuing. FAFSA completion for this upcoming academic year **is down by 270,000 students since 2019**, with the greatest declines for Title-I eligible high schools and high schools serving large concentrations of students of color. As part of a strategy to boost college enrollment and completion, Congress should look closely at the role college in high school programs (e.g., dual enrollment and early college), can play in boosting access to and success in postsecondary programs.

Reversing the College Enrollment Decline and Increasing College Completion

The research supporting the outcomes behind college in high school programs is significant, including a [What Works Clearinghouse](#) Intervention Report from the Institute of Education Sciences on dual or concurrent enrollment programs and a long-running [American Institutes for Research](#) study on early college high school programs. These approaches



High School/Student Characteristics	Decline in Postsecondary Enrollment
Overall ¹	7%
High-poverty high schools ¹	11%
Low-poverty high schools ¹	3%
Black ²	15%
Latino ²	14%
Native American ²	19%
Asian ²	11%
White ²	13%

¹Source: These data refer to the rates of immediate college enrollment for the high school Class of 2020 and come from the National Student Clearinghouse [High School Benchmarks](#) report.

²Source: These data refer to spring enrollment rates in public two-year colleges and come from the National Student Clearinghouse [spring enrollment update](#) (April 2021).

effectively improve both student access and success in college, particularly for students from low-income families and students who are underrepresented in higher education. In addition to the national studies, recent state-specific studies in [Colorado](#), [Kentucky](#), [Massachusetts](#), [Texas](#), and [North Carolina](#) also demonstrate the significant positive impacts of college in high school programs for students in those states. [Research](#) suggests these experiences must be well-designed with scaffolded supports to ensure equitable experiences and outcomes for all students.

The nation’s existing K–12 and higher education systems are not up to the task of supporting students through postsecondary transitions during this difficult period. We need bold strategies that will allow students to accelerate rather than fall behind. College in high school programs will result in significant academic and workforce preparation gains and produce financial benefits for students and taxpayers as more prepared students enter the workforce and enjoy greater lifetime earnings.

Policy Options

In reviewing President Biden’s proposal for the Build Back Better Act, we believe there are three areas where college in high school programs can be integrated with the existing recommendations:

1. Include dual enrollment programs in plans to offer two years of free community college to all Americans, including DREAMers.

Given the significant population of community college students who are also in high school, and the high return on investment from the earlier start to college, Congress should include college in high school programs as part of the strategy for free community college. Specifically, the proposal should include the following:

- Fund dual enrollment programs for students from low-income families.
 - Option 1: Allow high school students enrolled in community college to be eligible for free community college. Costs could be contained by limiting the number of transferable credits high school students would be eligible to receive (e.g., 60, 30, or 15 credits). Alternatively, funds could only be made available for dual enrollment programs that offer a specific number of transferable credits as part of defined pathways toward a postsecondary credential.
 - Option 2: Pair free community college with a separate proposal like the [Jumpstart on College Act](#) or the [Fast Track to and Through College Act](#) to incentivize states to offer robust, tuition-free college in high school

programs to ensure that students have the maximum chance of success.

These options will ensure students are not disincentivized from taking a dual enrollment course because the costs associated with doing so will be waived if that student waits to take college-level course work until after high school graduation. Research shows that students who start college in high school are significantly more likely to complete degrees, so this proposal will have the added benefit of increasing degree completion rates.

- **Require states to fund dual enrollment programs for students from low-income families.**

Include a requirement within the state funding system created to support free community college that, in order to access federal funding to subsidize free community college, states are required to provide assurances that students from low-income families in the state do not pay tuition costs associated with college in high school programs like dual enrollment or early college high school. Currently, [24 states](#) have no existing state policy that waives these costs for students.

- **Include funding of dual enrollment programs as an allowable use of federal funds to states and/or institutes of higher education (IHEs) to implement free college proposals.**

Including funding dual enrollment programs as an allowable use of funds will allow states and IHEs to achieve free college goals in ways tailored to the needs of their student populations and reach a broader group of students, while also increasing students' chances of completing degrees. This provision would not add any costs to the overall proposal, however it gives flexibility to states and IHEs to invest in evidence-based approaches to free college.

2. Increase college retention and completion rates.

Given the strong research base supporting college in high school programs and their success in improving student postsecondary completion rates, funding college in high school programs should be an allowable use of funds for the state grants authorized under this proposal, in addition to costs related to priorities for strengthening transfer agreements between IHEs (which benefit high school students who have participated in dual or concurrent enrollment programs) and implementing evidence-based

remediation programs (which aligns with dual or concurrent enrollment, as these programs reduce the need for remedial coursework in higher education).

In addition, new funding supporting college retention and completion should be available to school districts and community-based organizations for high school to higher education transition activities. Such activities might include leveraging data and technology to facilitate [enhanced college advising](#), support of [summer bridge programs](#), assistance to students and families in navigating the [financial aid](#), college application and college selection processes, and other activities with a track record of improving postsecondary access and success.

3. Help current teachers earn in-demand credentials.

Many states and school districts are struggling to find enough teachers with the discipline-specific graduate credits necessary to become dual enrollment instructors. Congress should define "in-demand credentials" to include the discipline-specific coursework necessary to ensure a teacher is credentialed to teach a dual enrollment course, particularly in, but not limited to, priority subject areas such as STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) and CTE (career and technical education).



Conclusion

The upcoming reconciliation bill provides a tremendous opportunity to address the decline in college enrollment resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. By expanding access to dual enrollment programs and supporting students in making the transition from high school to higher education, we will improve college completion rates and prepare young people for success in life.



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Photos by Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for [American Education: Images of Teachers and Students in Action](#)