The Case for Federal Investment in Dual Enrollment

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Introduction

The United States has made substantial progress over the past two decades in expanding access to higher education. College enrollment rates have risen, and for many, awareness of the value of a postsecondary credential has grown. Yet for all this progress, a stubborn and consequential gap remains. Students from low-income families, students of color, students from rural communities, and other historically marginalized students enroll in college[1] at substantially lower rates than many of their peers, and those who do enroll are far less likely to complete a degree. The promise of higher education as a potential road to economic mobility, a family-sustaining wage, and a fulfilling career has not been realized equally, and the consequences compound over a lifetime: lower earnings, less job security, and diminished capacity to weather financial crisis.[2]

The reasons for these gaps are numerous and well-documented.[3] They include the rising cost of college, inadequate preparation in under-resourced K–12 schools, a shortage of guidance and advising for first-generation students, and a higher education system that was largely designed around students who arrive at 18 years old with ample financial support, academic preparation, and a clear sense of what college actually requires. Closing these gaps will require action on many fronts. But one strategy has a particularly strong and growing evidence base: connecting students to college-level coursework before they graduate from high school.

Dual enrollment, the practice of allowing high school students to take college courses and earn credit toward both a high school diploma and a college degree, has emerged as one of the most effective tools available for expanding college access and improving completion outcomes. Decades of research[4] shows that students who participate in dual enrollment are more likely to enroll in college, persist through their first year, and earn a degree than their peers who did not participate. They arrive at college with credits, a demonstrated experience of succeeding in college-level work, and a clearer sense of themselves as people who belong in higher education. For students who might otherwise doubt whether college is for them, that combination can be life-changing.

The benefits are markedly strong for students who have historically been underserved by both K–12 and higher education systems. Research[5] on dual enrollment participation among students from low-income families, students of color, and rural students consistently shows meaningful gains in college enrollment and completion when these students have access to high-quality programs. Dual enrollment does not just help students who were already headed to college get there faster. It brings students into the college pipeline who might otherwise never have entered it. It keeps the door open to higher education, regardless of the postsecondary path the student chooses.

Despite this promise, access to dual enrollment programming remains deeply unequal. The present landscape is a patchwork of state policies, institutional partnerships, and local programs that vary widely in quality, scope, and the people they serve. Some states have made considerable investments in dual enrollment and built coherent systems that reach students across income

levels and geographies. Others have left program development largely to individual districts and colleges, producing a system where access depends heavily on zip code. For too many students, dual enrollment remains concentrated in better-resourced schools and populated primarily by students who are already academically advantaged, the least in need of an additional boost, and most able to access college through other means.

The federal government has not been absent from this space. For example, the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act provides funding[6] that states and districts can use to support career-focused dual enrollment. But these investments are narrow in scope, inconsistent in their equity focus, and insufficient in scale to drive the systemic change the evidence calls for. No federal program exists today with the explicit purpose of expanding equitable access to dual enrollment across all states and for all students. That gap in federal leadership has real consequences for students.

This paper makes the case for changing that. A targeted federal investment in dual enrollment programming, structured around formula grants to states, competitive grants to high-need districts, and clear requirements tied to equity and credit transferability, has the potential to do what fragmented state and local efforts cannot: establish a national floor of quality and access, reduce the role of geography and income in determining who benefits from dual enrollment, and give every student a realistic pathway to arrive at college prepared, credentialed, and confident. The opportunity is clear. The need is urgent. And the consequence of inaction is measured in students who never get the chance to find out what they are capable of.

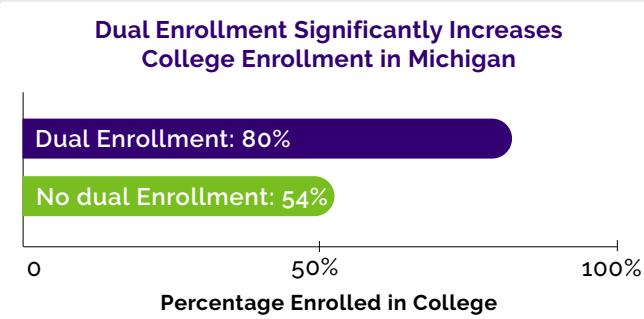
The Power and Promise of Dual Enrollment

The case for investing in dual enrollment is not speculative. It is grounded in a substantial and growing body of research spanning decades, student populations, and program types. That evidence points consistently in the same direction: students who participate in dual enrollment do better, by nearly every measure that matters, than comparable students who do not. Understanding what the research shows, what the current landscape looks like, and how the field has grown over time is essential context for the federal investment argument that follows.

Research Evidence of Impact

The most consequential finding in the dual enrollment literature is its effect on college enrollment and completion. Multiple large-scale[7] studies find that dual enrollment participants enroll in college at higher rates than their peers, persist through the critical first year at higher rates, and are more likely to earn a degree. These effects hold even after controlling for prior academic achievement and family background, meaning the benefits cannot be explained away as simply a reflection of who chooses to participate. The programs themselves appear to produce the gains.

State Spotlight: Michigan



Data source: MI School Data: College Opportunities for High School Students

Researchers offer several explanations for why this is the case. Students who take college courses in high school arrive at college having already demonstrated to themselves that they can do the work. They are less likely to experience the shock of academic demands that derails many first-year students, and they are more likely to have a realistic sense of what college demands. For students who are the first in their families to pursue higher education, this experiential foundation can be especially important. Dual enrollment provides not just credits but confidence, a familiarity with college culture, and tangible expectations that first-generation students have not encountered and that no orientation program can entirely replicate.

The financial benefits are also well-documented and meaningful. College credits earned through dual enrollment typically cost families far less than the same credits would cost once a student is enrolled in college, and in some states with key legislation and investments, they are free entirely. For a student who completes a year's worth of transferable college credit before graduating from high school, the savings can amount to tens of thousands of dollars over the course of a degree. At a time when student debt is a defining financial burden for multiple generations, the ability to enter college with credits already completed provides a significant, tangible advantage.

Beyond college outcomes, dual enrollment also strengthens high school engagement. Students who participate may find greater motivation and a stronger sense of purpose in their academic work. For students who have become disengaged from a high school experience that no longer feels challenging or relevant, the opportunity to take on college-level work can revive their interest and investment in further learning. This effect is particularly important for students on the margins, for whom dual enrollment may function as a retention tool as much as a college preparation strategy.

Current Landscape

Despite the strength of this evidence, the dual enrollment landscape in the United States today is marked as much by inequity as by growth. Access to dual enrollment is shaped profoundly by where a student lives, what school they attend, what counseling they receive, and what resources their family, district, and state can bring to bear. The result is a program that reaches millions of students but does not reach them equally.

State policies governing dual enrollment vary enormously. Some states have comprehensive systems with statewide credit transfer agreements, dedicated funding streams, and explicit equity goals. Others have left the structure of dual enrollment largely to individual districts and colleges to negotiate, producing wide variation in quality, availability, and who benefits. In states without clear credit transfer policies, a student's dual enrollment credits may or may not count toward their college degree, depending on which institution they attend, creating uncertainty that discourages participation and erodes trust in the program.

Participation data makes the equity gap concrete.[8] Black and Latinx students, students from low-income families, students with disabilities, and students in rural communities all participate in dual enrollment at rates significantly below those of their white, higher-income, and suburban peers. This is not because these students are less capable of succeeding in college-level coursework. It reflects barriers such as financial constraints, inadequate counseling, eligibility requirements, and a shortage of qualified instructors in under-resourced schools. The students who stand to gain the most from dual enrollment are the least likely to access it under the current system.

State Spotlight: **Wisconsin**

Statewide Credit Transfer Policy

In Wisconsin, the **Universal Credit Transfer Agreement** guarantees that **79-88 general education credits** transfer between UW universities and WTCS colleges.

Growth in Dual Enrollment Over Time

Against this backdrop of inequity, dual enrollment programming experienced remarkable growth. The number of students participating in dual enrollment programs increased steadily over the past two decades, rising from a relatively niche offering concentrated in a small number of states to a widely recognized college access strategy with national reach. Today, millions of students across all 50 states take at least one college course while enrolled in high school, and the number continues to grow.[9]

State investment is following demand. Legislatures in states across the country are allocating dedicated funding for dual enrollment, creating or expanding teacher credentialing programs, and building articulation agreements needed to make credit transfer reliable. National organizations, philanthropic funders, and higher education associations are adding momentum by documenting best practices, convening state leaders, and making the policy and research case for expansion.

This growth is encouraging, but it is not uniform or equitable. The states and districts that invest most heavily in dual enrollment tend to be those with the administrative capacity and political will to do so, which does not always correlate with where student need is the greatest. The result is a field that is expanding, but it is expanding in ways that risk widening the disparity between students who have access to high-quality dual enrollment and those who do not. Federal leadership has the potential to change this trajectory, directing resources and policy requirements toward the students and communities that growth alone has not reached, ensuring that a zip code does not define a student's ability to access experiences and opportunities.

Barriers to Equitable Access

For all its promise, dual enrollment programming remains out of reach for too many students, not because they lack ability or ambition, but because the systems were not designed with them in mind. The barriers to equitable access are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. A student who cannot afford course materials may also attend a school without a qualified dual enrollment instructor, in a district that lacks the resources to hire a qualified counselor trained to navigate college partnerships. Understanding these barriers in full is a prerequisite to designing federal policy that actually addresses them.

Financial Constraints

The most visible barrier to dual enrollment participation is cost. While a growing number of states have adopted provisions to make dual enrollment free for students, the reality on the ground is more complicated. Even in states with no-cost policies, the definition of "no cost" may only cover tuition, leaving families responsible for textbooks, course materials, lab fees, test fees, and in some instances, transportation to a campus. For a student from a low-income family, these costs can be just as prohibitive as tuition itself.

State Spotlight: Ohio

College Credit

In Ohio, students may take up to **30 credit hours free of charge** per academic year.

Location is a particularly significant burden. Dual enrollment programs that require students to take courses on a college campus are effectively inaccessible to students who cannot get there, whether it is because their family lacks reliable transportation, or because bus routes do not connect their neighborhood to a campus, or because a student from a rural area lives an hour or more from the nearest participating institution. The cost is not solely financial; time away from their high school, work, or family obligations compounds the practical difficulty of participation.[10]

At the state and district levels, limited resources constrain the programs themselves. Many under-resourced school districts cannot afford to pay college tuition on behalf of students, fund instructor training, or build the administrative infrastructure that a quality dual enrollment program requires. When districts must choose between dual enrollment and other urgent priorities, dual enrollment often loses, particularly in communities where it is needed most. This is further compounded by rising costs coupled with state budget crises.

Systemic Barriers

Beneath the financial constraints lies a set of systemic barriers that are less visible but equally consequential. Chief among them is the shortage of counseling support. Research reliably shows that students are far more likely to participate in dual enrollment when they have an adult at school who understands the program, actively encourages them, and helps them navigate the application process. In many under-resourced schools, counselor-to-student ratios[11] average 376:1 nationally, far above the recommended 250:1, making individualized guidance on dual enrollment simply not possible. Students who would benefit most from the program often never learn it exists. Addressing this gap requires dedicated pathways counselors in every high school, particularly in under-resourced communities where the need is greatest.

Eligibility requirements present another significant structural obstacle. Many dual enrollment programs set minimum grade point average thresholds

or require students to demonstrate college readiness through standardized test scores. These requirements are not inherently unreasonable, but in practice, they disproportionately screen out students from communities that are historically underserved by schools: students who are capable of succeeding in college-level coursework but whose academic records reflect the inequities of their K–12 experience rather than their potential. When eligibility criteria are applied rigidly and without alternative pathways, rather than utilizing multiple measures, they replicate existing inequities rather than disrupt them.[12]

Teacher certification requirements, while important for maintaining program quality, also limit course availability in the schools that most need expansion. To teach a dual enrollment course, instructors typically must meet higher-education credentialing standards, which frequently require a master's degree in the relevant subject. Many teachers in under-resourced schools do not meet these requirements and lack the time or financial support to pursue the additional credentials needed. The result is that dual enrollment course offerings are concentrated in better-resourced schools, where teachers are more likely to be already qualified, while students in lower-resourced schools have access to fewer options or none at all.

Credit Transfer Policies

Perhaps the most structurally damaging barrier is the inconsistency of credit transfer policies.[13] A student who earns college credit through a dual enrollment program reasonably expects that credit to follow them when they enroll in college. Too often, it does not. Without statewide articulation agreements, credit transfer is left to negotiation between individual high schools and colleges, resulting in wildly inconsistent outcomes. A credit earned in one district may transfer seamlessly to the state flagship university; the same credit earned in a neighboring district may not transfer at all or may transfer but not count toward any major or graduation requirement. When students and families learn that dual enrollment credits may not count, participation declines, and the program's core promise of cost savings and accelerated completion is undermined.

State Spotlight: Minnesota

Educators

Minnesota concurrent enrollment instructors must meet the credentialing standards set by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC). Instructors teaching dual credit course must hold either:

- A Master's degree in the subject they teach, or
- A Master's degree in another discipline plus 18 graduate credits in the subject they teach.

These credentialing standards apply only to instructors teaching liberal arts courses. CTE instructors are exempt from the liberal arts credentialing model.

The seven public universities of Minnesota State created the Pathway to 18 initiative, which provides affordable graduate coursework to help teachers meet HLC requirements. Educators may also receive credit for prior learning (**up to six credits**) for qualifying professional experiences.

This problem compounds when courses are not aligned with programs of study, whether or not those programs are formally designated as "pathways."[14] Even when credits do transfer, they often land as a scattershot of elective credits that do little to move a student closer to graduation. The issue is especially acute in career and technical education (CTE) dual enrollment, where Black students are disproportionately enrolled.[15] Because these courses are frequently housed on the workforce side of community colleges, they often generate credits that were never designed for transfer in the first place. Students and families, and often the K–12 educators advising them, rarely have the granular knowledge of higher education's internal distinctions needed to recognize that not all "college credit" is created equal.[16] What looks like a straightforward win on paper can turn out, on closer inspection, to be a navigational trap as much as a design flaw.

Geographic and Resource Challenges

Geography compounds every other barrier. Students from rural communities face a distinct and severe set of challenges that urban and suburban policy frameworks frequently fail to account for. In many rural communities, there is no college nearby. On-campus dual enrollment is not a viable option, and even hybrid models require travel that is impractical on a daily basis. Course offerings are limited because

there are fewer qualified local instructors and fewer institutional partnerships to draw from. Students in these communities frequently have access to a narrower range of dual enrollment courses than their urban peers, if they have access at all.

Technology infrastructure gaps make virtual dual enrollment a partial solution at best. Online course delivery has expanded the geographic reach of dual enrollment, but it depends on reliable broadband access that remains uneven across rural America. A student attempting to participate in an online college course from home without consistent internet access, or from a school with outdated technology, faces an entirely different experience from that of a student in a well-connected suburban school. The digital divide translates directly into an access divide.

Core Components of Federal Support

The evidence is clear that dual enrollment works, and the barriers to equitable access are well understood. What has been missing is a federal commitment commensurate with the opportunity. A well-designed federal dual enrollment program would not seek to displace the state and local infrastructures that already exist. The most effective state systems were built over years through deliberate policy choices and sustained investment. Federal policy should build upon that foundation, closing gaps that states cannot fill on their own, setting a floor of quality and equity that no learner falls below, and creating the conditions for the most effective state models to spread.

Formula Grants to States

State Spotlight: Indiana

Dual Credit

Indiana **requires** every public high school to expand access by offering at least two dual credits. Schools must also offer the **Indiana College Core.**

The backbone of a federal dual enrollment program should be formula grants distributed to all states based on the size of their high school population and weighted to account for the share of students from low-income families. Formula funding ensures that every state receives a baseline level of support and creates a predictable, sustainable funding stream that states can plan around. It also creates the mechanism through which the federal government can attach meaningful policy requirements, something that is not possible when dual enrollment is funded only through the indirect redirection of per-pupil allocations, as is the case in Ohio and a number of other states today.

To receive formula funding, states should be required to meet a set of minimum policy conditions as defined below.

1. States must establish statewide articulation agreements guaranteeing that credits earned through dual enrollment transfer to all public colleges and universities within the state, including both two- and four-year universities, technical colleges, and community colleges. Credit transferability and alignment are essential promises of dual enrollment; without them, students and families have rational reasons to doubt whether participation is worth the effort. Federal policy should make this guarantee a condition of funding, not a best practice that states may or may not choose to adopt.
2. States must ensure that dual enrollment is available at no cost to students. This means covering not only tuition but also the fees, materials, and other direct costs that are historically left to families. For students from low-income families in particular, the difference between a program that is technically free and one that is genuinely free can determine whether participation is possible.
3. States must create or extend pathways for high school teachers to earn the credentials needed to teach dual enrollment courses. The concentration of qualified dual enrollment instructors in better-resourced schools is a primary driver of inequitable access. Federal formula funding should support teacher credentialing at scale, including grants and loan forgiveness for teachers pursuing the additional qualifications required, with priority for teachers in high-need schools and rural districts.

State Spotlight: **Illinois**

Not Either-Or, But Both-And

High schools across Illinois are integrating academic and career preparation through dual credit CTE courses. In fiscal year 2023, CTE courses accounted for 37% of all dual credit offerings statewide, with 62,884 students earning college credit while building real-world career skills. Notably, the **top five CTE dual credit courses** alone represented **10%** of all dual credit enrollments across the state.

4. States must develop counseling and navigation support that ensures each high school student has access to a dedicated pathways counselor who can provide informed, relationship-based guidance across the full range of college and career options available to them, including dual enrollment, from early in high school and through key transition points. This support should begin before students enter high school, continue through senior year, and be connected with postsecondary advising systems, with intentional touchpoints that help students explore options, develop plans, and access the information they need in formats and languages accessible to them and their families. Counselor capacity is not a soft support service or one that can be performed solely through technology.[17] It is a structural determinant of who participates in dual enrollment and who does not, and federal policy should treat it accordingly.
5. States should be permitted to set aside a portion of their federal formula allocation for technical assistance provided to local partnerships between school districts and institutions of higher education. This technical assistance should be informed by best practices collected by the U.S. Department of Education, be tailored to meet local needs, and address issues ranging from credit transfer to data collection across systems.

Competitive Grants to Districts

States should use their federal formula funding to allocate competitive grants to partnerships between school districts and institutions of higher education implementing dual enrollment programs, with explicit priority for high-need schools, rural communities, and districts serving large proportions of students from historically underserved populations. While formula grants build and support the statewide policy infrastructure, competitive grants allow states to direct additional federal resources to the places where the access gap is widest and the need for investment is most acute.

Competitive grants should require applicants to demonstrate a partnership between the school district and at least one higher education institution, ensuring that program development is a shared responsibility rather than something districts are expected to manage alone. Grants should fund the practical costs of building and expanding dual enrollment programs: instructor training, course development, student support services, and the administrative capacity needed to manage partnerships and track outcomes.

A portion of competitive grant funding should be directed specifically toward work-based learning integration, supporting districts that want to connect dual enrollment coursework with industry partnerships and quality industry-recognized credentials.[18] For students who are not on a traditional four-year college track, the combination of college credit and hands-on professional experience can be particularly powerful, providing both the credential and the context that make postsecondary education feel relevant and attainable. These funds could be used to enhance district capacity to facilitate work-based learning through activities such as hiring a work-based learning coordinator to build partnerships with employers and develop meaningful experiences for learners. Funds could also be used to provide students with paid work-based learning experiences, recognizing that many learners need income to support themselves and their families.

Competitive grants should also support wraparound services for dual enrollment students, including tutoring, mentoring, and transportation assistance. Both academic support and logistical support are necessary for students facing considerable barriers to participation.

State Requirements Tied to Funding

Federal investment should be paired with a clear and enforceable set of state-level requirements. The goal is not to impose a single national model on states with diverse higher education systems and policy environments. It is to establish a floor below which no state's program should fall, and to ensure that federal dollars are driving toward equity rather than simply sustaining the status quo.

At a minimum, states receiving federal dual enrollment funding should guarantee that students can earn at least 12 transferable college credits through the program,[19] enough to constitute a meaningful head start on a postsecondary credential and to demonstrate readiness for college-level work.[20] In fact, new research suggests that we should be working toward increasing the dosage beyond 12 credits for learners.[21] Credits should be guaranteed to transfer and to apply toward degree requirements, not simply to be accepted by receiving institutions as elective credit that counts toward nothing in particular.

States should also be required to report disaggregated data on dual enrollment participation and outcomes, broken down by race, income, disability status, English learner status, and geography. Accountability without data is not true accountability. The federal government cannot assess whether its investment is reaching the students it is designed to serve without the ability to see clearly who is participating in dual enrollment programs, who is completing dual enrollment coursework successfully, and whether credits are transferring and applying as promised. Data reporting requirements should reduce administrative burden on districts while ensuring that the information needed to monitor equity is consistently available.

Additionally, states should be required to establish quality assurance mechanisms for dual enrollment programs, including standards for course rigor, instructor qualifications, and student support. Federal funding should not flow to programs that lack the quality infrastructure needed to deliver on the promise of college credit. At the same time, quality standards should be designed to raise the floor, not create additional barriers to access. Eligibility requirements and quality thresholds that disproportionately exclude students from underserved communities should be subject to review, with states required to develop alternative pathways. Ohio does this—through its Statewide Innovative Waiver Pathway—for students who demonstrate readiness through means other than traditional test scores or grade point average cutoffs.

Photo from EDUImages

States should also be required to incorporate postsecondary outcomes in their federal accountability systems under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). While 42 states use at least one indicator of college and career readiness in their federal or state accountability system, most (27 out of 42) rely on input instead of outcome measures and only one (Georgia) includes postsecondary enrollment without remediation.[22] It is not enough to only measure inputs. A primary objective of dual enrollment is opening the door to opportunities resulting from postsecondary education. Therefore, we must measure not just whether students enroll and succeed in dual enrollment, but whether they successfully transition to higher education.

Local Implementation

Federal funding ultimately reaches students through local implementation, and the design of a federal program should reflect the realities of what schools and districts need to make dual enrollment work well. At the local level, federal support should flow toward four interconnected priorities.

1. **Comprehensive student support.** Dual enrollment participation is not simply a matter of enrollment. Students taking college courses while in high school need academic support, clear and accessible communication about how their credits will apply, and support from adults in their school who understand the program well enough to help them navigate it. Federal funding should support the development of these support structures, including dedicated staff time, peer mentoring programs, and partnerships with higher education institutions that extend advising resources to dual enrollment students in high schools.
2. **Enhanced counseling capacity.** The counseling frameworks required at the state level must be matched by resources at the local level to hire, train, and retain counselors with genuine expertise in dual enrollment pathways. In districts where counselor-to-student ratios are highest and dual enrollment participation is lowest, this investment can be the single most important factor in closing the access gap.
3. **Industry partnership development.** For dual enrollment programs that connect to CTE pathways, local partnerships with employers and industry associations are essential for ensuring that the credentials students earn are recognized and valued in the labor market. Federal funding should support the development of these partnerships, including the staff time needed to build and maintain them and the program development work required to align dual enrollment coursework with industry needs.
4. **Career pathway alignment.** Dual enrollment should not be a collection of disconnected college courses that students accumulate without a clear sense of where they are headed. At its best, dual enrollment is a structured pathway that connects high school coursework, college credit, and career preparation into a coherent sequence. Federal funding for local implementation ought to prioritize programs that can demonstrate this kind of alignment, helping students see not only that they are earning college credit, but also where that credit is taking them.

Implementation Considerations

A federal dual enrollment program is only as strong as the infrastructure built to carry it out. The history of federal education initiatives offers a clear lesson: well-designed policy intentions do not automatically translate into well-implemented programs at the state and local levels. Closing the divide between policy design and program reality requires deliberate investment in the capacity of states and districts to implement effectively, as well as an accountability structure that keeps equity at the center as programs scale. The U.S. Department of Education should use a portion of the funding the U.S. Congress provides for this program to support implementation, including two key pillars: technical assistance and accountability measures. A federal dual enrollment program must take both seriously from the outset.

Technical Assistance

Many states and districts that are most in need of federal dual enrollment funding are also the ones least equipped to put it to use quickly and effectively. Rural states with limited higher education infrastructure, districts serving high concentrations of students from low-income families, and communities where dual enrollment has never existed at scale all face genuine capacity constraints that funding alone cannot resolve. A federal program that distributes dollars without investing in the human and technical capacity to deploy them well will produce uneven results and risk reinforcing the very inequities it is designed to address. There should be four core components of federal technical assistance, as described below.

1. **State capacity building.** This means supporting states in developing or strengthening the policy infrastructure that makes dual enrollment work: statewide articulation agreements, data systems capable of tracking learner participation and credit transfer outcomes, quality assurance frameworks, and administrative structures to manage a program that spans K–12 and higher education. For states that are starting from a limited base, this kind of foundational work can take time, and the federal program should be designed with enough flexibility to meet states where they are while holding them accountable for progress toward clear benchmarks.
2. **Professional learning.** Teachers who want to become qualified to teach dual enrollment courses need support that goes beyond a one-time credentialing grant. They need access to ongoing learning communities, mentorship from experienced dual enrollment instructors, and connections to the higher education faculty whose standards they are expected to meet. Counselors need training not just on the mechanics of dual enrollment programs but on how to engage students and families who may be skeptical, unfamiliar with the process, or navigating significant practical barriers to participation. Federal technical assistance should fund the development and dissemination of professional learning resources customized to both audiences, with particular attention to the needs of educators in rural and under-resourced schools who often have the least access to high-quality professional development.
3. **Data systems alignment.** One of the most persistent challenges in dual enrollment policy is the difficulty of tracking what happens to students and their credits over time. High school data systems and higher education data systems regularly do not talk to each other in ways that make it easy to answer basic questions: *Did the credit transfer? Did it apply toward a degree? Did the student who earned it ultimately complete a postsecondary credential?* Without the ability to answer these questions reliably, states and the federal government cannot assess whether dual enrollment is delivering on its promises or identify where the system is breaking down for particular groups of students. Federal technical assistance should support states in building the data infrastructure needed to track dual enrollment outcomes longitudinally and provide guidance on data sharing agreements between K–12 and higher education systems that protect student privacy while enabling meaningful program evaluation.
4. **Quality monitoring.** Ensuring that dual enrollment courses meet genuine college-level standards requires ongoing oversight, not just upfront approval. States need the capacity to monitor course quality across a large and diverse set of partnerships between high schools and higher education institutions, to investigate concerns when they arise, and to take corrective action when programs fall short. Federal technical assistance should help states develop the quality monitoring systems they need, including tools for collecting and acting on feedback from students, instructors, and higher education partners.

Accountability Measures

Technical assistance builds the capacity to implement well. Accountability ensures that the investment is actually producing the outcomes it is designed to achieve. A federal dual enrollment

program should include a robust accountability framework built around four interconnected elements: equity metrics, outcome tracking, program quality indicators, and resource allocation monitoring.

1. **Equity metrics** should be the first and most fundamental accountability mechanism. The central premise of a federal investment in dual enrollment is that access to the program should not be determined by race, income, geography, or the resources of the school a student happens to attend. Measuring whether that premise is being honored requires disaggregated data on participation, completion, and credit transfer outcomes across student groups. States receiving federal funding should be required to report this data annually and to demonstrate progress over time toward closing participation and outcome gaps. Where gaps persist or widen, the federal program should have clear mechanisms for requiring states and districts to develop and implement improvement plans.
2. **Outcome tracking** must go beyond counting the number of students who enroll in dual enrollment courses. Enrollment is a starting point, not an end. The outcomes that matter most are whether students complete their dual enrollment coursework successfully, whether the credits they earn transfer to the institutions they attend, whether those credits apply toward degree requirements rather than sitting unused, and whether dual enrollment participation is associated with higher rates of college enrollment and completion for participating students. A federal accountability framework should define a clear set of outcome measures that states are required to track and report, and it should use those measures to assess whether the program is delivering on its core promise.
3. **Program quality indicators** provide a third layer of accountability focused not on outcomes alone but on the conditions that produce them. These include the rigor and alignment of dual enrollment courses with college-level standards, the qualifications and ongoing professional development of instructors, the availability and quality of student support services, and the strength of the partnerships between high schools and higher education institutions that anchor each program. Quality indicators should be designed to identify programs that are meeting a high standard and programs that need support and improvement, not simply to sort programs into passing and failing categories. The goal is continuous improvement, not compliance theater.
4. **Resource allocation monitoring** ensures that federal dollars are reaching the students and communities they are intended to serve. It is not sufficient to track outcomes at the state level if federal funding is flowing primarily to districts and schools that were already well-resourced and well-positioned to expand dual enrollment. The federal program should require states to report on how formula and competitive grant funding is being distributed, with particular attention to whether high-need districts (e.g., those with high schools identified for support under ESSA), rural communities, and schools serving high proportions of students from underserved populations are receiving a proportionate share of resources. Where resource allocation patterns suggest that federal dollars are reinforcing rather than disrupting existing inequities, the accountability framework should provide clear grounds for requiring corrective action.

Together, technical assistance and accountability form the implementation backbone of a federal dual enrollment program. Neither is sufficient without the other. Technical assistance without accountability can become a vehicle for well-intentioned spending that never translates into equitable outcomes. Accountability without technical assistance can become an unfunded burden that penalizes states and districts for capacity gaps that resources could have addressed. A federal program that invests seriously in both gives states and districts what they need to succeed and holds them to a standard that keeps the program's equity commitments from fading into the background as implementation pressures mount.

Return on Investment

Federal investments in education are often judged by a simple question: do the benefits justify the cost? In the case of dual enrollment, the answer is "yes," and the evidence for it runs in multiple directions at once. The returns are economic and social, individual and collective, immediate and long-term. They accrue to students, families, states, and the federal government itself. A serious federal investment in dual enrollment is not an expenditure without a return. It is one of the more efficient uses of public dollars available in the current education policy landscape.

Economic Benefits

The most direct economic benefit of dual enrollment is the reduction in college costs for students and families. A student who earns a full year of transferable college credit before graduating from high school can reduce the time and money required to complete a degree by a meaningful amount. At a moment when the average cost of a four-year degree continues to climb and student debt has become a defining financial burden for millions of American families, the ability to arrive at college with completed credits is not a minor convenience. It is a material difference in the financial calculus of whether a degree is affordable.

For students from low-income families in particular, this cost reduction can be the difference between completing a degree and leaving before finishing. Research on college noncompletion consistently identifies financial pressure as one of the leading reasons students drop out, and it disproportionately affects students from low-income families who have fewer resources to absorb unexpected costs or to persist through financial difficulty. By front-loading college credit into high school, dual enrollment reduces the total cost of a degree and compresses the time a student must remain financially stable enough to stay enrolled. Both effects matter.[23]

Accelerated completion has its own economic logic beyond cost savings. Every semester a student does not have to spend in college is a semester of foregone earnings they recover, a semester of tuition and fees they do not pay, and a semester closer to entering the workforce in a role that reflects their education. At the aggregate level, a policy that moves millions of students through postsecondary education more efficiently produces a workforce that is more credentialed, more quickly, than one that does not. The macroeconomic returns to that outcome, in the form of higher productivity, stronger tax revenues, and reduced reliance on public assistance programs, are substantial and well-documented in the economics of education literature.[24]

Workforce preparation is another economic dimension worth examining carefully. Dual enrollment programs that connect to CTE pathways, and that include work-based learning components, do not just give students college credit. They provide students with a foundation of technical skills, professional experience, and industry credentials that employers recognize and value. In high-demand fields where workforce shortages are acute, the pipeline of credentialed workers that a well-designed dual enrollment system produces has direct economic value for employers, for regional economies, and for the industries that depend on a skilled labor supply. States like Ohio have built explicit connections between dual enrollment, industry-recognized credentials, and labor market priorities precisely because the workforce development returns of a well-aligned system are real and significant.

Underlying all of these benefits is the most fundamental financial return of postsecondary education: economic mobility. Students who complete college credentials earn more over their lifetimes,[25] experience lower rates of unemployment,[26] and have greater capacity to build financial security than those who do not. For students from low-income families, a college credential is not just an economic asset. It is often the primary mechanism through which intergenerational poverty can be interrupted. A federal investment that expands access to dual enrollment for these students is, at its core, an investment in mobility, and the returns on that investment compound across generations.

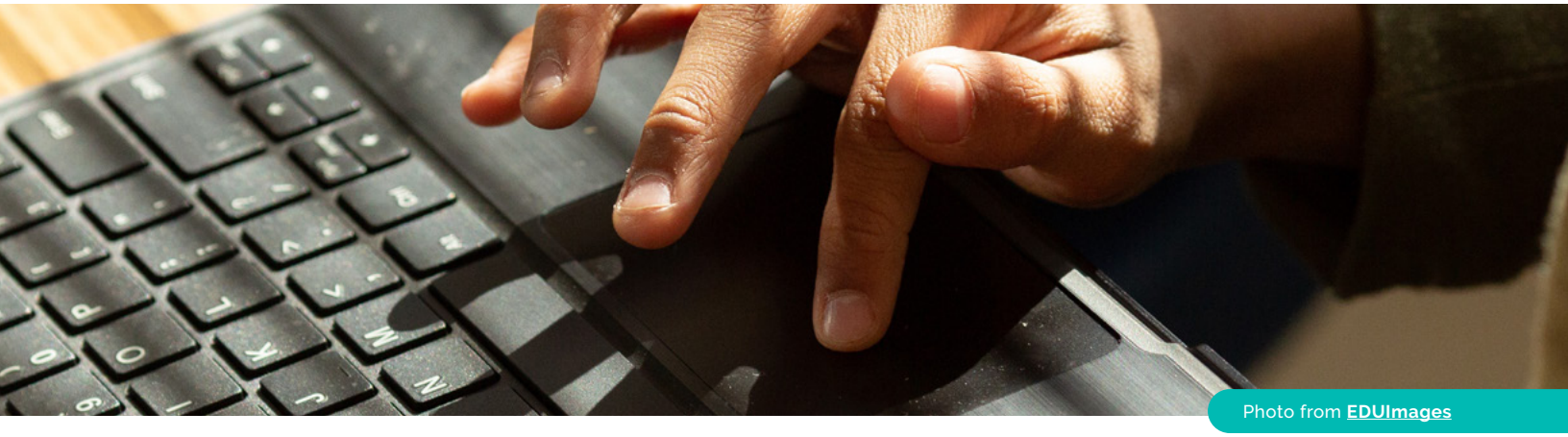
Social Impact

The social returns on federal investment in dual enrollment are inseparable from the economic ones, but they deserve to be named on their own terms. The most important is the expansion of college access for students who are historically excluded from or underserved by higher education. When dual enrollment programming reaches the students it is designed to reach, it does not simply accelerate the college trajectories of students who were already headed there. It opens a door for students who did not believe the door was open for them. The confidence, preparation, and sense of belonging that dual enrollment can provide for first-generation students, students of color, and students from under-resourced communities represent a social return that cannot be fully captured in completion rates or earnings data, but that is no less real for that.[27]

A federal investment structured around equity requirements would also produce measurable reductions in the postsecondary attainment gaps that persist stubbornly across race and income lines despite decades of college access efforts. These gaps are not inevitable. They reflect the accumulated effects of policy choices, resource allocation, and structural barriers that other policy choices can address. Dual enrollment, at scale and with equity at its center, is one of those choices. The social value of a higher education system that produces more equitable outcomes is not only a matter of fairness, it is also a matter of social cohesion, civic participation, and the kind of broadly shared prosperity that healthy democratic societies depend on.

Career readiness is another dimension of social impact that deserves attention. Students who participate in dual enrollment that connects to career pathways and industry partnerships do not just earn credentials. They develop a clearer and more grounded sense of where they are headed and why their education matters. For students who struggle to see the relevance of school to their lives and futures, this clarity can be profoundly reorienting. It changes how they engage with education, how they think about their options, and how prepared they feel to navigate a labor market that is changing rapidly while still valuing credentials.

Finally, the partnerships that dual enrollment requires and strengthens between K–12 systems, higher education institutions, and employers represent a social infrastructure with value that surpasses any individual program. When high schools and colleges build lasting relationships around dual enrollment, they develop shared understandings of what college readiness looks like, what supports students need, and how the transition between secondary and postsecondary education can be made less disruptive. When employers engage with schools and colleges around career pathways and industry credentials, they become invested partners in education rather than passive consumers of its outputs. These relationships, built through the practical work of running dual enrollment programs well, are among the less visible but more durable returns on federal investment in this space.



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Conclusion

A bedrock of any serious effort to close postsecondary attainment gaps is ensuring that students have real, meaningful access to the experiences and credentials that make college feel possible before they ever set foot on a campus. In our vision, every high school student in America, regardless of their zip code, the resources of their school, or the income of their family, would have access to high-quality dual enrollment programming that connects them to college credit, career pathways, and the confidence that comes from knowing they are capable of succeeding in higher education. In this vision, students would not have to rely on the luck of their birthplace to determine whether dual enrollment is available to them, affordable for them, or designed in a way that actually serves them. Access would be a right, not a privilege.

Achieving that vision will require the federal government to play a more active and deliberate role than it has played to date. It will also require sustained collective action across agencies, institutions, and sectors. Without it, we risk perpetuating a system where the benefits of dual enrollment flow primarily to students who are already advantaged, while the students who stand to gain the most continue to be left out. The current patchwork of state programs and federal funding streams is simply not adequate to the scale and urgency of the challenge. States like Ohio demonstrate what is possible when policy is coherent, investment is sustained, and equity is treated as a genuine priority rather than an afterthought. But no state, however well-designed its system, can do this alone. Federal leadership is what makes the difference between a promising model and a national reality.

The federal government must act now. Absent a comprehensive and coordinated federal response, states and districts will continue to struggle with limited resources, competing priorities, and inconsistent program quality. Students will face a lottery of opportunity, their futures shaped by the fate of where they were born rather than the depth of their potential. The economic and social costs of inaction are too high to accept. As the labor market continues to evolve and the demand for postsecondary credentials grows, the students who lack access to dual enrollment today will be the workers and citizens least equipped to compete and contribute tomorrow. The result will be widening inequality, diminished mobility, and a narrowing of the promise that education is the pathway to a better life.

We cannot afford to leave any potential learner behind. By making the investments described in this paper, structured around formula grants, competitive funding for high-need communities, clear equity requirements, and the technical assistance states need to implement well, we can build the dual enrollment system that students deserve. We can ensure that a student in a rural district has access to the same quality of college preparation as a student in a well-resourced suburb. We can ensure that Black and Latinx students, students from low-income families, and students with disabilities are not screened out of programs designed to serve them. And we can ensure that the credits students earn in high school follow them into college and count toward something meaningful when they get there.

This imperative is not only an educational and economic one; it is a moral one. As a nation, we have an obligation to ensure that every young person has a genuine opportunity to discover what they are capable of and to build a life that reflects their talents and aspirations. Dual enrollment, done well and at scale, is one of the most powerful tools we have for honoring that obligation. Federal leadership is essential to making it real. The evidence is clear, the models exist, and the students are ready. The choice of whether to act belongs to policymakers, and the stakes could not be higher.

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All4Ed is a national nonprofit that partners with leaders across K-12, higher education, and government to redesign education-to-career systems so that every young person is on a pathway to thriving. **all4ed.org**

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