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WELCOME TO HIGH SCHOOL. NOW GO TO COLLEGE.

Dual-enrollment programs, in which high school students take college classes, are gaining steam despite little research into long-term impact

By Melissa Korn
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More high school students are taking college classes as districts push low-cost paths to higher degrees.

The classes, often referred to as **dual-enrollment programs**, are expanding nationwide, with some states posting stunning growth in response to policy changes and legislative directives to increase the educational attainment levels of their residents.

In California, nearly 70,000 high school students were enrolled in a college class last spring, double the count from fall 2014. More than 65,000 Ohio high school students participated in dual enrollment offerings last year, based on preliminary tallies. And in Texas, the number of dual-enrollment students jumped by one-third since 2012, to about 150,000 last Fall. The classes are generally taught via area community colleges.

“Dual credit can be a tremendous boon for students. It reduces the cost of higher education; [students] can save 15, 20, 30 hours of college credit,” said Raymund Paredes, Commissioner of Higher Education for Texas and head of the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.

School districts, which typically pay for the programs, are increasingly pitching them to young people with middling academic records, or who may be undecided on college. The goal is to make more students marketable in an economy where more well-paying careers in fields including technology and health care often require more credential beyond a high-school diploma.

They also attract academically advanced students looking to shorten their path to a two- or four-year degree or gain an advantage in admissions, though **some experts question their rigor** as compared to **Advanced Placement courses** capped by standardized exams.

Classes range from vocational offerings suited to individuals who want to earn associate’s degrees and become automotive technicians straight out of high school, to general education math and English classes that fulfill basic requirements at most public colleges.

Research has found that earlier groups of students in dual-enrollment programs got better grades, stayed in college and ultimately graduated at higher rates than those who didn’t participate. But outcomes for more recent cohorts, which include a more diverse set of students and not just academic stars, are still unknown.

“There are some elements of the rapid expansion that concern me,” Mr. Paredes said. “We can expand as rapidly as the pool of high school students that are college-ready grows. I think we’ve outstripped that.”

Mr. Paredes said Texas has roughly 120,000 high school students meeting its “college-ready” benchmarks, below the 150,000 now taking dual-credit classes. A 2015 law in that state allowed high school freshmen and sophomores to join upperclassmen in taking dual-enrollment courses.

Texas officials are awaiting results of a third-party study to determine outcomes for students included in that expanded pool.

Colorado, meanwhile, said this month it received a \$400,000 federal grant to study the benefits of its increasingly popular dual-enrollment programs.

“We need to be sure we understand how well the programs are functioning,” said Kim Hunter Reed, executive director of the Colorado Department of Higher Education.

For example, prior research there showed participants ultimately earned more college credits than other students. But racking up credits doesn’t necessarily equate to obtaining a degree if the courses don’t count toward a major.

More than 30 percent of Colorado’s 11th and 12th graders, or roughly 38,500 students, participated in some type of dual enrollment program in the 2015-16 academic year. That was up nearly 8 percent from the prior year and participation grew again last year, according to state officials, though exact figures aren’t yet available.

The number of students at Gateway High School in Aurora, Col., who are signed up for what they call concurrent enrollment courses nearly doubled this fall from last year.

“We want every student to have credentials that open doors,” said Charles Dukes, director of college and career success at Aurora Public Schools. The state has set a target for 66 percent of its adults to hold postsecondary credentials by the year 2025.

Monae’ Bishop is optimistic about being on the right track for a quick credential.

She earned about 15 college credits last year, while a senior at Gateway, by spending afternoons taking general education and a world mythology class at nearby Community College of Aurora. “When I first walked in, it was intimidating. I was surrounded by a bunch of adults,” recalled Ms. Bishop, 18 years old.

Ms. Bishop is now enrolled full-time at the community college – still on the district’s dime – and is on pace to earn her associate’s degree by next summer and then pursue a bachelor’s degree in nursing.

“I wanted to work harder and push harder,” she said of her first foray into higher education. “Just because I’m in high school doesn’t mean I can’t be here as well.”