



Early College Schools: A Powerful Acceleration Strategy

Written Testimony to the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions

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Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Enzi, and the honorable members of the United States Senate HELP Committee, thank you for inviting me to speak with you today. I'd also like to thank you for your tireless commitment to ensuring that every student and worker in our country has the education, training, and opportunity they need to be successful in today's economy. The work of this Committee is critical to the current and future success of our communities and our nation.

As the Vice President of Jobs for the Future's High School through College team, it is an honor to share with you our work and experience accelerating the college readiness and success of low-income students and other students underrepresented in higher education.

Jobs for the Future identifies, develops, and promotes education and workforce strategies that expand opportunity for youth and adults who are struggling in the U.S. today. Our mission, in concert with our partners, is to double the number of low-income youth and adults who attain postsecondary credentials. In this pursuit, our organization, in collaboration with great partners, has developed and sustained a national network of early college high schools for more than a decade.

Early College: A Powerful Acceleration Strategy

The early college high school movement is one of largest and most successful secondary school reform initiatives in the United States. Since 2002, early college high schools have achieved a record of success in increasing student achievement, high school graduation rates, college enrollment, and college credit attainment. There are now more than 270 early college high schools across the nation, preparing low-income youngsters, students of color, and first-generation college-goers for college success. Early college high schools serve approximately 75,000 students and are thriving in many states including:

- Alaska
- Arizona
- California
- Connecticut
- Colorado
- Georgia
- Kentucky
- Maryland
- New Mexico
- North Carolina
- Oregon
- Ohio
- Pennsylvania
- Tennessee
- Texas
- Utah
- Washington

The early college design blends high school and college in a rigorous and supportive academic program that culminates in the completion of key college courses by all students. These schools transform the lives of young people, who historically haven't had the financial ability, academic preparation, and college knowledge necessary to earn a postsecondary degree or credential. Students at early college high schools have the opportunity to earn up to two years of free college credits or an Associate degree while in high school. As detailed later in this testimony, students from these schools are graduating at higher rates, completing college prep and college courses by graduation (many times with a college degree), and entering and persisting in college. As one early college high school student with multiple college credits to her name explained, “[before early college], I had never thought college was remotely possible.”

The Pressing Need for Successful Acceleration Strategies

The urgency for innovative models that propel underserved youth to college readiness and success cannot be understated:

- In the US today, fewer than 75% of young people earn a high school diploma.ⁱ For low-income, African-American, and Hispanic youth, the picture is much bleaker: one national estimate places their rate of on-time high school graduation at just 50%.ⁱⁱ
- Among those students who enroll in college, only about half earn a diploma within six years. For low-income students, the college completion rate drops to 25%.ⁱⁱⁱ
- America's low graduation rates threaten our country's global competitiveness and economic vitality. The U.S. ranks only 12th among 36 developed nations in college graduation rates, when only a generation ago the U.S. ranked first.^{iv}
- Georgetown University researchers recently estimated that the U.S. needs to increase college-educated workers by 20 to 25 million by 2025 to be first in the world again.^v The U.S. cannot achieve this outcome without significantly increasing the number of low-income and other high-need students who complete high school and go on to earn postsecondary credentials.^{vi}

Early college schools are uniquely equipped to meet this very challenge, and help students who face the biggest barriers to educational success beat the odds. Research has shown that early college high schools help students surpass peers attending traditional high schools in achieving milestones on the pathway to college completion. And early college is a reform that can reach students no matter where they go to school in the nation. This acceleration strategy has successfully increased the college readiness of rural, urban, and suburban high-need students in low-income communities across our country.

Early College Schools Achieve Results and Make a Compelling Impact

The impact of early college is substantial. With a student population primarily composed of students of color, low-income youth, and first-generation college goers, early college schools are overcoming historically low education attainment levels. Early college high school students achieve milestones towards a college degree at rates that far exceed national and local averages:

- Progress in college-preparatory courses: Rigorous studies have shown that early college high school students in Texas are two times more likely to pass state exams in all four core subject areas than peers in comparison schools and more than two times more likely to pass the next math courses in the college prep sequence.^{vii} Another study found similar results and demonstrated that early college high schools reduce high school dropouts.^{viii}
- Graduation rates: 93% of early college students graduate from high school compared to 76% of students in their respective districts.^{ix}
- College credit attainment in high school: By graduation, early college students earn 23 college credits on average, and 56% of the graduates of 2011 earned two years of college credit or an AA degree.^x
- College enrollment: At least 72% of early college high school students enroll in postsecondary education upon graduation compared to 55% of graduates nationally from schools where a majority of students, like early college schools, receive free or reduced price lunch.^{xi}
- Persistence rates: Upon enrollment in college, at least 82% of early college high school graduates persist to their second year, compared to 69% of low-income students or first-generation college goers nationally.^{xii}

Studies have also shown that early college high school is a cost-effective proposition that reduces the expense of remediation in college for students who are not college-ready. With the help of school finance experts, Augenblick, Palaich, and Associates, JFF has developed a financial model that projects the cost-benefit to states graduating more students college ready.^{xiii} For example, students who graduated from an early college in Texas with an average of 40 college credits will save the state an estimated \$6,800 per student completing an Associate's Degree and \$10,500 per student completing a Bachelor's degree.^{xiv}

The Common Elements of Early College

In contrast to many selective programs that provide accelerated work only for advanced students, early college high schools are focused on preparing all students for success at the postsecondary level. While specific programming may vary from school to school, early college high schools are all committed to preparing low-income youngsters, students of color, and first-time college goers for college through:

A rigorous college-prep academic program aligned to college-ready standards.

Through a program of demanding college-preparatory and college courses, early college schools challenge students to reach new academic heights while providing appropriate support. The introduction of college coursework into the high school program provides students with direct evidence of their readiness for college and motivates them to improve their skills. As one early college student at Lincoln Hostos Academy in New York put it: “college makes you a better high school student.”

A sequence of free key college courses as part of the high school program of study.

Early college high schools offer aligned course sequences that result in students taking transferable college credits that lead to a postsecondary degree. These carefully constructed pathways remove cost barriers for low-income students and set them on a direct path to completing college. In some cases, students begin their college coursework by taking stretch courses that transform a college semester course into a yearlong course, while in other cases, such as at Ohio’s Metro Early College, students are placed in their college courses with a cohort of peers so that students can provide support to each other. In all cases, the courses that early college students enroll in meet rigorous academic standards and are taught by full-time college faculty or adjunct faculty certified by partner colleges.

Significant exposure to the college environment and culture. From orientation to college classes, the experience at early college is structured to raise expectations and increase knowledge about college for all students, and particularly those students who lack the tradition of college going in their family and community. Many early college high schools reside on college campuses and students benefit from being immersed in a college-going culture. Early college schools that are not at college sites help students develop college-going identities by exposing students to campus life regularly and organizing a range of programs to demystify the process of applying to, attending, and succeeding in college. For example, at Alameda Science and Technology Institute in California, early college juniors take part in a summer bridge program that includes a seminar-style college class on campus.

Wraparound supports focused on high school and college completion. Early college schools accelerate all students to greater achievement, even those entering with significant skill gaps, by relying on high-quality instructional practices and academic supports. Early college schools use instructional approaches that help students access advanced content

even as they are mastering more basic skills. Early college schools also employ intensive tutoring, strong peer and adult support systems, and scheduling that maximize time for college connections and academic support. For instance, at Buncombe County Early College in North Carolina, staff arranged for students to have an extra support period with a high school teacher in the content area of their college course.

Early college schools work for low-income students, students of color, and first-generation college goers because they are designed to remove multiple barriers in attending and completing college. The philosophy behind this approach is grounded in decades of research that show that the most effective college access and success strategies for these students address the academic, financial, and social challenges they face in a concerted fashion. Early college schools do just that.

Expanding and Scaling Early College

Early college's track record of success with high-need students and its ability to reduce costs has made it a popular acceleration strategy even in tough economic times. Despite the severe cuts in state budgets in recent years, a number of states have continued significant investments in early college high schools and even appropriated new investments. North Carolina now leads the nation with 74 early college high schools and Texas is close behind with 49. New York State established a program to create 23 early college high schools and Massachusetts is developing six STEM-focused early college high schools. Kentucky has invested in six new early college high schools and has plans to create six more in the coming year while Ohio is adding six new schools to its early college portfolio.

At the local level, the growth of the original Early College High School Initiative network has had a ripple effect with many communities embracing the philosophy of the early college high school and independently launching their own such schools. Throughout the country, there are now dozens of these schools including Arrowhead Park Early College High School in New Mexico. And Chicago recently asked Jobs for the Future for our help supporting its new initiative to create five Early College STEM High Schools.

The opportunity for early college, however, is not limited to school-level reform. At Jobs for the Future, we've found that incorporating key college courses and supports in high schools for all students is a powerful strategy for catalyzing district reform and extending the benefits of the early college approach to many more students. We are now working with partners to develop a range of designs that apply the lessons of the original early college movement – composed largely of small high schools to date -- to entire school systems in the future.

One noteworthy example is Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District, a school system with 32,000 students in a low-income Hispanic community in Texas. With Jobs for the

Future and Educate Texas (a public-private state partnership), the district is transforming its schools to enable all students to graduate from high school with at least 12 college credits and the skills to progress to a degree or credential. Initial data is very promising - the district has become a national model for dropout recovery, having graduated nearly 900 former dropouts and off-track students—and connected them to college—since 2007. Pharr-San Juan-Alamo has raised its four-year graduation rates from 62 percent to 87 percent in three years. And between 2007 and 2009, the district doubled its number of students enrolling in college after graduation.

With the widespread adoption of college-ready standards by states, it is even more critical than ever that districts have access to the structures, supports, and practices that will enable them prepare all of their students for college success. Early college is a powerful reform that has already propelled thousands of young people, not historically expected to earn a high school diploma and enroll in college, to earn meaningful college credits on the path to a postsecondary credential or degree.

The HELP Committee and Congress as a whole has an important role to play in making sure that successful approaches like early college can reach more students in communities across our nation. Already, the HELP Committee has recognized this impact and further promise by including in the ESEA reauthorization legislation the proposed Pathways to College competitive grant that will provide important support to districts implementing Early College designs.

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Higher Education Act, and the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act all provide opportunities to include policies and direct federal resources that promote secondary and postsecondary collaborations, early college credit accrual, and financial and academic supports for early college students. For example, each of these laws should include postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and credit/credential attainment in its accountability and reporting expectations to ensure postsecondary success for all students. Data, accountability, and teacher and leader preparation and supports provisions in these laws can all put a premium on partnerships facilitating innovative programming like early college high schools for low-income, underrepresented students. As an example, Perkins should encourage the development of innovations such as career pathways for students that result in early attainment of postsecondary credits in high school, with the end goal of a credential with value in the labor market. The success of our low-income students in secondary and postsecondary education is absolutely necessary for our nation to compete in the global economy, and early college high schools are one solution with a track record of meeting this goal.

One early college senior from one of the most economically depressed metropolitan areas with one of the lowest number of college-educated adults explained it best. "My classmates and I will enter the university full-time following graduation next year knowing that college will be not be a road block and will not be impossible to complete... early college brings out the best in all students."

Endnotes

- ⁱ Aud, S., Hussar, W., Kena, G., Bianco, K., Frohlich, L., Kemp, J., Tahan, K. (2011). *The Condition of Education 2011* (NCES 2011-033). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011.
- ⁱⁱ Spotlight on Poverty Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity. "Education and Poverty." *Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity*. Web. 31 July 2011.
[<http://www.spotlightonpoverty.org/education_and_poverty.aspx>](http://www.spotlightonpoverty.org/education_and_poverty.aspx)
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[<http://www.spotlightonpoverty.org/education_and_poverty.aspx>](http://www.spotlightonpoverty.org/education_and_poverty.aspx)
- ^{iv} Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development. "Education at a Glance: 2010," 26. Web 31 July 2011. <<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/45/39/45926093.pdf>>
- ^v Carnevale, A., and Rose, S. *The Undereducated American*. Washington: Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce, 2011.
- ^{vi} National Center for Higher Education Management Systems. *Adding It Up: State Challenges for Increasing College Access and Success*. Boulder: NCHEMS, 2007.
- ^{vii} SRI International. (Forthcoming). *Evaluation of the Texas High School Project: First comprehensive annual report*. Austin, TX: Texas Education Agency.
- ^{viii} Edmunds, J.A., Willse, J., Arshavsky, N., and Dallas, A. "Mandated Engagement: The Impact of Early College High Schools." *Harvard Education Review*, under review.
- ^{ix} Data are drawn from the ECHS Student Information System and based on publicly reported state data for early college schools and their home districts in 2010-11. The rates reported here are median four-year graduation rates.
- ^x These data come from the ECHS Annual National Survey 2010-2011.
- ^{xi} The national college enrollment rate is drawn from: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), "Public School Questionnaire," 2003-04. Early college data is drawn the National Student Clearinghouse.
- ^{xii} The persistence rate for low-income/first generation students is drawn from: Engle, J., & Tinto, V. (2008). *Moving beyond access: College success for low-income, first-generation students*. St. Paul, MN: Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education. Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED 504448). Early college data is drawn the National Student Clearinghouse.
- ^{xiii} Jobs for the Future and Augenblick, Palaich, and Associates (2010). Cost to Completion Calculator. Retrieved from <http://application.jff.org/costtocompletion>

^{xiv} Jobs for the Future (2011). *Making the Grade: Texas Early College High Schools Prepare Students for College*. Boston, MA.