Advancing College in High School Programs During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Due to COVID-19, our K-12 and higher education systems face serious, in some cases existential, challenges. Many students are experiencing significant learning loss during this period of distance learning, and the digital and resource divides are exacerbating achievement gaps. Students have less access, not only to basic education, but also to the accelerated learning opportunities that engage them and help them prepare for college and the workforce. This situation is likely to worsen because of anticipated budget cuts. The disadvantaged populations in our public schools are the hardest hit, at a time when education is more important than ever for economic success and social mobility.

Research continues to demonstrate that college in high school programs such as dual enrollment, concurrent enrollment, and early college high school have substantial benefits for students of color and other populations underrepresented in higher education. These programs are a crucial strategy for states to achieve their postsecondary equity, access, and completion goals. At the same time, these programs continue to receive significant attention from policymakers at both the state and federal levels.

COVID-19 has not changed the fundamental need for students to enter the workforce with a postsecondary degree or credential. In the months and years ahead, it will be essential that states continue to advance their work and continue to support making college in high school programs available to all students to ensure this generation of students can thrive in our modern economy.

CHSA recommends that states should:

- Use Data Systems to Set a Clear Equity Goal to Close COVID Disparities
- Help Students Transfer Credits from COVID-19 Disrupted Semester(s) or Quarter(s)
- Facilitate Improved District/Postsecondary Collaboration
- Fund College in High School Programs that Provide Access for Low Income Students
- Support Students’ Technology Needs During Remote or Hybrid Instruction
- Prohibit Programs from Charging More for Online Courses
- Adopt Multiple Measures to Demonstrate Student Eligibility
- Prioritize Planning for Lab Time for CTE Dual Enrollment Courses
- Conduct Focused Outreach to Students Underrepresented in Higher Education
- Expand Incentives for Teacher Recruitment and Credentialing
- Develop Virtual Navigational Supports
In addition, it is essential that policymakers intentionally focus on ways to expand access to low-income and underrepresented students in higher education. Increased student interest will likely only benefit White students of privilege unless policymakers expand focused investments in these program opportunities for low-income students, Black students, Latinx students, Native American students, and students from other populations underrepresented in higher education. By way of example, White students are currently more than twice as likely to participate in dual enrollment compared to Black students; COVID-19 has the potential to exacerbate these gaps without sustained engagement.

This is not just a moment of crisis; it is also a moment of opportunity. The COVID-19 crisis offers an opportunity to rethink our traditional grade system and extend access to high-quality college courses for many more high school students. Doing so will allow students to accelerate rather than fall behind and will result in significant academic and workforce preparation gains as well as financial benefits for students and taxpayers as more prepared students enter the workforce and will enjoy greater lifetime earnings.

COVID-19 has already accelerated a number of promising strategies to create more seamless pathways for students between secondary and postsecondary, creating an opportunity to be seized as well as a challenge to be managed. As a result of the crisis, for example, states like Florida and Louisiana have already been revisiting their eligibility criteria for college in high school programs to make them more equitable. Even in the most resource constrained states, real progress to advance equitable access to high quality college in high school programs is not just possible, it is imperative.

The following policy recommendations use the framework for developing equitable access to high quality college in high school programs detailed in Unlocking Potential: A State Policy Roadmap for Equity and Quality in College in High School Programs. Many of the recommendations below, whose urgency has only heightened because of COVID-19, are also included in that roadmap, alongside examples of states that have put into place the recommended policies. In addition, where CHSA has published additional resources relevant to that specific recommendation, links have been provided for more information.
In order to support students’ access to college in high school programs during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to continue the critical mission of advancing equitable access and success to high quality programs, states should take the following actions:

**EQUITY GOAL & PUBLIC REPORTING**

*From Unlocking Potential:* States set an equitable, statewide public goal for increasing the participation and success of traditionally underserved student groups in college in high school programs, with clear, disaggregated public reporting and accountability for progress toward the goal.

Use Data Systems to Set a Clear Equity Goal to Close COVID-19 Disparities

Given the disparities in education that are only growing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, now is the time for states to set an intentional equity goal aligned with the state’s existing goals and strategies specifically for college in high school programs, to include student access, participation, and success, targeted specifically at student populations who are at risk due to the pandemic.

To understand any disparities to access and success experienced by different populations of students as a result of the pandemic, states should ensure that their data collection and reporting system for college in high school programs is collecting data on student access, participation, and success for all student subgroups included in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and special populations included in Perkins V. That data should then be publicly reported to show progress against the state’s equity goal.

**PROGRAM INTEGRITY & CREDIT TRANSFER**

*From Unlocking Potential:* States support and promote high-quality college in high school programs through effective oversight and cross-sector collaboration between the K-12 and postsecondary sectors, as well as ensuring credit articulation.

Help Students Transfer Credits from COVID-19 Disrupted Semester(s) or Quarter(s)

Policymakers should work with institutions of higher education across the state to ensure transfer of student credits successfully earned during semesters or quarters with COVID-19 disruptions (e.g. spring 2020, fall 2020), given inconsistent grading policies across school districts and institutions of higher education that resulted from closures in the spring semester of 2020.

Policymakers should also work with colleges and universities to understand how courses (including dual enrollment courses) graded on a pass/fail basis should count towards the completion of pre-requisites, and issue guidance accordingly. Moving forward, college in high school programs should also ensure there is alignment on grading built into the partnership agreement to avoid any future confusion or misalignment.
Facilitate Improved District/Postsecondary Collaboration

Policymakers should ensure systems exist to foster close collaboration between school districts and colleges in the operation of their college in high school program partnerships. This could be accomplished by issuing best practice guidance to programs or formalizing cross-sector collaborative forums (such as a standing advisory committee of multiple sectors engaged in college in high school programs.)

FINANCE

From Unlocking Potential: States design funding mechanisms that remove financial barriers for low-income and moderate-income students to participate and excel in college level work in high school.

For more information on state financing mechanisms for dual enrollment, see Funding for Equity: Designing State Dual Enrollment Funding Models to Close Equity Gaps.

Fund College in High School Programs that Provide Access for Low Income Students

At a time when students are more at risk of disengaging, falling behind, and becoming off track for college, states should continue or ideally expand investment in access to tuition and fee-free college in high school programs for students who are low-income. States should utilize their federal COVID-19 stimulus funds (e.g. the CARES Act) to supplement state funding. States should ensure that their funding mechanisms for college in high school programs are supporting both the school district and college partners in the program, particularly given both sectors are expected to be hard hit by declining funding and revenues.

The Need for Additional Federal Support

Federal support for secondary and postsecondary education is essential to supporting both school districts and institutions of higher education through the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences. In March, 2020 President Trump signed into law the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, which provided $30.75 billion for an Education Stabilization Fund that served as a vital lifeline for districts and colleges to end the 2019–2020 school year. However, with the 2020–2021 school year now underway, a significant new investment of federal funds is essential to avoid devastating cuts to secondary and postsecondary education, and to support COVID-19 expenses, including connecting students with the technology and internet access necessary to participate in a school year that is still expected to have remote instruction. Under the CARES Act, school districts, colleges, and universities could use their Education Stabilization Funds to support their college in high school programs; we encourage this allowable use in any future stimulus package.

Moreover, in any additional stimulus package to support school districts and institutions of higher education, Congress should explicitly encourage the investment of stimulus funds in supporting college in high school programs — either to ensure continued access for their existing student populations, or to expand access to low-income and underrepresented students in higher education to support their transition from high school to college during this unprecedented crisis.
Support Students’ Technology Needs During Remote or Hybrid Instruction
States should dedicate funding toward ensuring students have the appropriate technology access where remote instruction remains the primary form of learning.

Prohibit Programs from Charging More for Online Courses
States should require that college in high school programs that do charge tuition or fees hold those costs steady for students and not increase them to cover the costs of transitioning to online instruction.

**COURSE ACCESS & AVAILABILITY**

*From Unlocking Potential:* States ensure that students are able to access college in high school courses, regardless of geography, with pathways that maximize opportunities for students to earn multiple college credits, and facilitate students exploring academic and career areas of interest while ensuring that those courses count toward high school graduation requirements.

Adopt Multiple Measures to Demonstrate Student Eligibility
States should adopt multiple measures of entry to demonstrate student eligibility for accessing college in high school programs — both as a strategy to advance equity and also as a response to the disruption to standardized testing and changes to grading policies in the 2019–2020 academic year and anticipated disruptions to the 2020–2021 academic year. For more information, see Improving Eligibility Requirements for Dual Enrollment.

Prioritize Planning for Lab Time for CTE Dual Enrollment Courses
As school districts and colleges prepare reopening plans, or consider limited re-openings under specific circumstances, priority should be given to student access to labs for required coursework and for CTE dual enrollment courses requiring hands-on learning.

Conduct Focused Outreach to Students Underrepresented in Higher Education
States should encourage proactive programming designed to prepare and recruit students of color and low-income students for college in high school opportunities, who are most at risk from COVID-19 related learning loss. States should encourage institutions of higher education and school districts to adopt culturally specific programs, outreach materials in languages spoken by families of students from non-English speaking households, and college readiness courses for first-generation college students.

**INSTRUCTOR CAPACITY**

*From Unlocking Potential:* States develop strategies to recruit, support, and diversify the pool of instructors with the qualifications to teach college in high school while encouraging collaboration between K-12 and postsecondary partners as college in high school programs are scaled.

Expand Incentives for Teacher Recruitment and Credentialing
COVID-19 is likely to expand teacher shortages in key subjects. States should consider expanded incentives to recruit teachers into the profession — particularly teachers from underrepresented
backgrounds in the teaching profession — and help teachers complete the necessary coursework and credentials to teach in a college in high school program.

**NAVIGATIONAL SUPPORTS**

*From Unlocking Potential: States prioritize the student navigational supports and advising needed to ensure student success in college in high school courses, particularly for those students historically underserved by these programs.*

Develop Virtual Navigational Supports
States should support the development and dissemination of student supports that can be delivered online and tailored to that medium, given the high number of students currently engaged in remote instruction. These supports should have an emphasis on addressing the social-emotional learning needs of students.