

Three Ways to Advance Dual Enrollment and Close College Attainment Gaps

CONFERENCE LEARNINGS AND HIGHLIGHTS

Fall 2024 Illinois Center for Education Equity Conference

SUMMARY

There is an education crisis in the state of Illinois. While 47% of white adults have a post-secondary degree, only 29% of Black and 20% of Latina(o) adults have one. Enrollment and completion gaps exist across the state, county by county, between rural and urban areas, and particularly in low- to moderate-income (LMI) communities.¹ In Fall 2024, conference attendees heard from education, policy, and philanthropic leaders about how dual enrollment and dual credit programs work to achieve better outcomes.

Dual enrollment programs allow high school students to earn college course credit. Research clearly shows that dual enrollment programs work to advance students and improve degree attainment. In Illinois, 79% of dual enrollment students enrolled in either a community college or a bachelor's degree program within a year of high school graduation. Four years after high school, dual enrollment students obtained higher bachelor's degree completion rates than their non-dual peers (39% vs. 34%). However, completion rates for Black (26%) and low-income (37%) students remained below the overall average.² To close equity gaps in Illinois, we must prioritize more students entering dual enrollment programs for the opportunity to earn credits and get exposure to college-level work, subsequently supporting enrollment in a post-secondary institution. Furthermore, dual enrollment programs should reflect best practices, including aligning courses with academic programs in high-demand employment fields, as well as providing wraparound supports that students need to thrive in college-level courses.



INTRODUCTION

There is an education crisis in the state of Illinois. While 47% of white adults have a post-secondary degree, only 29% of Black and 20% of Latina(o) adults have one.³

Percentage of Illinois Adults with a Post-Secondary Degree³

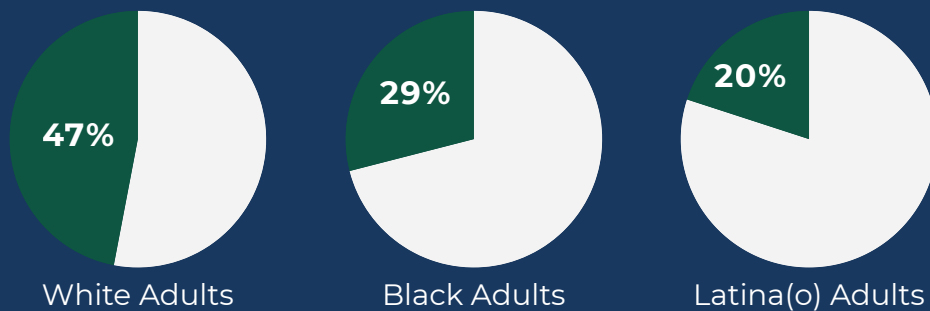


Figure 1
Illinois Board of Higher Education, *A Thriving Illinois: Higher Education Paths to Equity, Sustainability, and Growth* (2023), <https://ibhestrategicplan.ibhe.org/>.

Share of Black College Student Population⁴

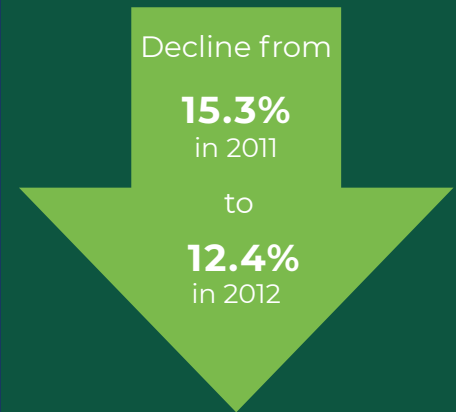


Figure 2
Ibid.

Black student college enrollment is down, and the Black share of the college student population has declined every year from 15.3% in 2011 to 12.4% in 2022, even though the percentage of the state population that identifies as Black has remained steady. Almost half of the students in the K-12 system come from low-income families, but only 53% of low-income Illinois high school graduates are supported to attend college within six months of graduating.⁴ This is a problem for the economic vitality of Illinois. Dual enrollment programs are an important intervention for reversing Illinois' widening postsecondary inequities.

Historically, dual enrollment programs (earning college credit while still in high school) were considered viable only for traditional “top performers” in high schools, giving them a head start on their (presumed) college goals. To close equity gaps, the next step is to change the narrative that only top academic performers thrive in dual enrollment and attract more students to these programs. These programs must also be effective for students to earn transferable college credit and enroll in a post-secondary institution.

Creating equitable access to dual enrollment coursework requires a three-pronged approach. All of the methods listed below require better data and collaboration among statewide stakeholders throughout the educational continuum.



Cross-Cutting Measures to Advance Dual Enrollment:



INTENTIONALLY REACH ALL

Implement policies and programs that ensure universal access.



INVEST IN BEST PRACTICES

Target funding to better serve more students of color.



IMPACT

Highlight dual enrollment as an impactful part of the continuum for success in the state.

LEARNINGS ON DUAL ENROLLMENT

What are dual enrollment programs?

Dual enrollment and dual credit programs are opportunities for high school students to earn college course credit. The terms are often used interchangeably to refer to earning college credit and high school credit simultaneously while still in high school. However, the Chicago Public School system uses the term “dual credit” to describe courses taught by a high school teacher who the state has credentialed, and “dual enrollment” to describe courses taught at a college. For purposes of this discussion, we will use dual enrollment to refer to both types of programs, except if necessary to differentiate between the data.

Simply put, the primary goal is to provide students with a head start on college and enable them to save time and money. Such programs support young people to move from one phase to the next and create an access point to higher education. These programs are widely considered an effective way to increase enrollment and close attainment gaps. They also require faculty who are certified to teach college-level courses, as well as consideration for location, transportation, cost, and time spent by students and families that may be above and beyond a standard high school day.

“Dual enrollment is an opportunity to help smooth student transitions, building bridges across and partnerships across K12, college, and the workforce, supporting young people to move from one phase to the next.”

- Chibuzo Ezeigbo, Program Officer for Education and Economic Mobility at the Joyce Foundation



What does the research tell us?

According to a multi-year study from the Community College Research Center, **Illinois students in dual enrollment programs attain degrees four years after high school at a rate of 55%, versus 48% of all students. However, the study also demonstrated that low-income, Black, and Latina(o) students are consistently underrepresented in dual enrollment across the country** and have lower-than-average

award completion rates compared to students who participated in dual enrollment programs overall. Strikingly, among low-income, Black, and Latina(o) students, dual enrollees' college award completion **is stronger than that of non-dual enrollees.**⁵

Illinois Center for Education Equity Fall 2024 conference panelists **agreed that the data shows dual enrollment and dual credit programs work to better outcomes.** But Illinois lags the national average in several key statistics:

Black students made up 15% of the high school graduating class in 2018, but only 9% were supported to enroll in dual credit.⁶

Figure 3: Dual Enrollment Participation & Outcomes in Illinois vs. Nationwide

	% of Illinois Students	% of Nationwide Students
Participated in dual enrollment programs and attended four-year institutions the first year after high school	42%	51%
Did not enroll in any post-secondary program one year after high school	21%	19%
Did not enroll at all or did not complete a degree four years after high school	13%	10%
Low-income student participation in dual enrollment	24%	30%

Figure 3

Dual Enrollment Participation & Outcomes in Illinois vs. Nationwide

Note. Adapted from Velasco, T., Fink, J., Bedoya, M., & Jenkins, D. (2024, October). *The postsecondary outcomes of high school dual enrollment students: A national and state-by-state analysis*. Community College Research Center.

According to the Illinois Board of Higher Education, Black students and rural students in Illinois have less access to dual credit early college experiences. **Black students made up 15% of the high school graduating class in 2018, but only 9% were supported to enroll in dual credit.**⁶





[From left to right: Moderator: Charmell Stoxstell, Advanced Learning Programs, Illinois State Board of Education; Panelists: Chibuzo Ezeigbo, Program Officer, Joyce Foundation; Megan Hougard, Chief of College and Career Success, Chicago Public Schools; Pranav Kothari, Chair, Illinois Board of Higher Education]

What did we learn from the expert panelists?

The Fall 2024 conference panel spoke to the importance of dual enrollment programs, understanding student needs, and working to flip the narrative on who should participate in dual enrollment programs. Panelists agreed that scaling dual enrollment programs would increase college access and save students and families time and money. Panelists further noted that stakeholders across the state need to remove systemic barriers in order to get more students enrolled and scale the offerings. They offered several ways to advance dual enrollment programs.

“From programs as a privilege, to programs as a lever for equity.”

- Chibuzo Ezeigbo, Program Officer for Education and Economic Mobility at the Joyce Foundation

THREE CROSS-CUTTING WAYS TO ADVANCE DUAL ENROLLMENT



**INTENTIONALLY
REACH ALL**

Flipping the narrative – Illinois should extend dual enrollment options to nearly all students:

Historically, such programs were considered viable for traditional “top performers” in secondary school, giving them a head start on their (presumed) college goals. Panelists agreed that dual enrollment can be a powerful lever for equity if we consider it as a tool for providing access to early college coursework for first-generation college students, LMI, and non-white students to feel prepared and visualize themselves at college.



[From left to right: Moderator: Charmell Stoxstell, Advanced Learning Programs, Illinois State Board of Education; Panelist: Chibuzo Ezeigbo]



INTENTIONALLY REACH ALL (CONTINUED)

Within Chicago Public Schools (CPS), attainment in early college programs is now over 90%. Leaders of CPS have set a new “North Star” that all students graduate with a semester’s worth of advanced credit. Panelist Megan Hougard noted that this is a very different approach from how dual enrollment programs were considered in the past, as a funnel trying to weed out students who are not “ready” or “deserving.” However, panel moderator Charmel Stoxstell commented that her three children all attended the same high school, and their family received limited information on the dual enrollment or dual credit opportunities. This suggests there is an opportunity for increased outreach, even in schools that offer dual enrollment options.

Key Learning:

Impactful policies include:

- The recent Chicago Public Schools decision to remove the cap on the maximum amount of college credits students can earn;
- Dual enrollment courses that include wraparound supports which students need to thrive in the course(s); and
- Strategies to further smooth the next step of college enrollment, such as direct admission programs and partnerships between high schools and postsecondary institutions.

“Let’s stop saying not every student wants to go to college. Let’s say all students should be ready, and then help them figure out what is best for them. We don’t talk that way to any other groups—that they don’t have to go to college, than Black and Latinx males in particular.”

- Megan Hougard, Chief of College and Career Success at Chicago Public Schools



INVEST IN BEST PRACTICES

Design to advance students’ career and academic success:

Panelists noted that these programs are highly efficient when well designed, with design elements such as early exposure, a solid support structure, and a rigorous curriculum. Students are able to try college that “isn’t camp” and start thinking about a program of study, which is useful even if they find it is not for them. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation recommends several areas of focus, including aligning courses to post-secondary areas of study and with the job market, increasing access, delivering high-quality advising and other academic support, and rigorous assessment.⁷



INVEST IN BEST PRACTICES (CONTINUED)

Design to ensure access:

Cost: Gaining college credits without cost to the student and family provides a way to save money on post-secondary coursework later. Panelists agreed that the best practice is to offer courses at no cost to families and students. One mechanism for achieving this is for states to consider financial support for institutions to offer free dual enrollment courses.

Geographic Access: Rural areas face the structural barrier of limited proximity to postsecondary institutions. Virtual learning and other flexible delivery approaches could be important tools in this case. Transportation options and time spent are often costs that may not be as visible as classroom and faculty costs; However, they must be considered if all types of Illinois students are going to enroll and succeed in dual enrollment programs.

High School Teachers' Credentials: Noted in the Illinois Board of Higher Education strategic plan, A Thriving Illinois, an important tool to increase access to dual enrollment is to create the conditions at the top that allow dual enrollment courses to be taught in the first place.



Key Learning on Limitations with AP Courses:

AP courses are another popular and growing option for obtaining college credit, yet they have several limitations.

- **Costs to Families:** Success with AP courses is connected to a student's ability to pay for test preparation courses and the test.
- **High-Stakes Testing:** Standardized tests have inequitable results, with students having a single opportunity to secure a passing score. On the other hand, dual enrollment courses provide credit with a passing grade of C and generally involve additional wraparound support.
- **High School Resources:** AP courses also rely on high school faculty resources to be available and offer the course/test.





IMPACT

Advancing the future beyond pursuing a college degree:

Dual enrollment is a part of the continuum for success in the state for developing a trained workforce. Panelists pointed out that military pay scales increase with transcripts submitted that include early credits, even without post-secondary attendance. Trade unions, which are excited to work with Illinois students, often ask for candidates with four-year degrees. **There is a clear link from dual enrollment to an educated, prepared workforce.** Dual enrollment's broad implications for our economy mean that secondary and postsecondary education institutions and employers alike should push for advancement of these programs.

Key Learning:

Dual enrollment is also an important consideration for Illinois' post-secondary institutions that are concerned about declining enrollment.



40% of students enroll in the institution at which they attended their dual enrollment; a powerful value proposition for state institutions and for Illinois in addressing enrollment in out-of-state colleges.⁸

As the Illinois Board of Higher Education clearly outlines in its strategic plan, education is the path to a thriving Illinois. This is collective work, and we all have a role to play in creating the conditions our students need not only to survive but to thrive. **Approaching dual enrollment programs with intentionality in reaching all students, ensuring investment in best practices, and highlighting impact will ensure such programs are a lever for equity and continue to be an important tool to create a more vibrant economic future in Illinois.**



THANK YOU AND ABOUT THE CENTER

This conference would not have been possible without the generous donation of time and expertise from our panelists. Thank you .

The Illinois Center for Education Equity will address the state's crisis in connecting Black communities to a college degree through research, policy, and practice driven by diverse stakeholders. The statewide initiative will convene employers, the secondary and postsecondary education systems, faculty, students, legislators, philanthropy, and community-based institutions to collect data and release research that tracks Illinois' progress with supporting Black students and to identify policies and practices that diverse stakeholders must deploy to eliminate the equity gap for Illinois' Black students.

Note on the Timing of the Research: The conference was held in October 2024, prior to the significant shifts in the federal policy landscape currently in the works in 2025. However, the issues and the desired impacts for the state of Illinois and our students are still clear and have not changed.

REFERENCES

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3. Illinois Board of Higher Education, *A Thriving Illinois*.
4. Ibid.
5. Velasco, Fink, Bedoya, and Jenkins, *The Postsecondary Outcomes of High School Dual Enrollment Students*.
6. Illinois Board of Higher Education, *A Thriving Illinois*.
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8. Velasco, Fink, Bedoya, and Jenkins, *The Postsecondary Outcomes of High School Dual Enrollment Students*.

