

# UNLOCKING POTENTIAL

A State Policy Roadmap for Equity & Quality in  
College in High School Programs



## POLICY SNAPSHOT

# State Approaches to Ensuring Quality for College in High School Programs

Growing high quality college in high school programs such as dual enrollment, concurrent enrollment, and early college high school is essential, particularly as states look to expand access to low income students and students who are underrepresented in higher education.

College in high school programs can only give students a leg up if they can be confident that the courses they complete will help move them successfully towards a degree or credential. Access without quality and alignment does not create opportunity.

The College in High School Alliance's [Unlocking Potential: A State Policy Roadmap for Equity and Quality in College in High School Programs](#) asserts:



*College in high school programs should be high-quality, providing authentic and intentionally-designed college course experiences to high school students that are equivalent to college courses in any other setting. The state plays an important role in creating mechanisms for program oversight and quality assurance of college in high school programs, as well as ensuring that there are tools in place for quality improvement, support, and technical assistance.*

States' approach to regulation, oversight, and quality assurance in college in high school programs differ by program modality. The majority of states with quality assurance mechanisms in place for college in high school programs focus on programs in which students are learning in the high school environment, taught by a high school instructor who has been credentialed as faculty by the college partner. This type of college in high school program is most commonly known as concurrent enrollment. According to the NECS HSLS:09 which describes participation characteristics for students, the vast majority (86%) of students participating in college in high school programs do so through concurrent enrollment.

In circumstances where the student is receiving instruction on the college campus from postsecondary faculty, states largely rely on the existing accreditation processes for colleges to ensure program quality, especially because in these programs the high school students learn alongside the traditional college students in the college classroom. More structured, whole-school models, such as early college, early middle colleges, and PTECHs may be addressed through a statewide approval process as a means of regulation and quality assurance.

Regardless of the specific mechanism, states address oversight and quality assurance in various ways through statute, operational policy, and other mechanisms. These approaches to ensuring program quality are summarized in this brief.

## COMMON ELEMENTS OF HIGH-QUALITY COLLEGE IN HIGH SCHOOL PROGRAMS

- **Authentic college experiences**
- **Guaranteed credit transfer**
- **Result in progression towards a degree or credential**
- **Strong partnerships across K-12 and higher ed**
- **Qualified instructors**
- **Robust student supports**
- **Program evaluation for continuous improvement**
- **Multiple measures to entry**

### Requiring Program Accreditation by the National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships

The National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships (NACEP) is the nation's sole accrediting body for concurrent enrollment programs. The organization has a 20-year history of driving program quality and alignment through their program quality standards and through program accreditation.

NACEP accreditation recognizes programs that have consistently met or exceeded rigorous, peer-reviewed standards in six areas: Partnership, Curriculum, Faculty, Student Support, Assessment, and Program Evaluation. These program standards create a quality framework to ensure that participating high school students are taking authentic college courses for transcribed college credit. This authenticity includes content, pacing, faculty qualifications, faculty collaboration and communication, rigor and student expectations.

NACEP's standards serve as a model for a statewide quality framework in 20 states. State policy in ten of these states additionally require, provide incentives, or encourage colleges to obtain NACEP accreditation.

The most recent state to require concurrent enrollment programs to receive NACEP accreditation is **Washington**. In 2019, the legislature passed SHB 1734, which requires that by the 2027–2028 school year programs “must receive accreditation by a national accrediting body for concurrent enrollment.” **Iowa** was the first state in the nation to require that all concurrent enrollment programs are NACEP accredited.

### Administering a State Quality Assurance Mechanism

In addition to or in lieu of requiring NACEP accreditation, a number of states run their own quality assurance mechanisms for college in high school programs. An example of a state mechanism existing alongside NACEP accreditation is **Indiana**, where concurrent enrollment programs must receive accreditation by NACEP or be approved by the Indiana Commission for Higher Education.

In **Oregon**, the Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC) has been tasked by law with oversight and approval of concurrent enrollment programs in the state. Each concurrent enrollment program in the state must be periodically evaluated and approved through a process developed by HECC. Programs that are NACEP accredited are exempt from the HECC approval process.

**Montana** has embedded NACEP standards into the state's operational guidance as an alternate means of ensuring statewide alignment with national quality standards. In 2019 Montana Board of Regents approved updated Operational Guidelines for Dual Enrollment (originally adopted in 2010). This document outlines the role of the Montana University System's Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education (OCHE) in the oversight of Montana's dual enrollment. It states that: “OCHE will ensure

consistency, compliance, and quality in dual enrollment programs and courses at the state, system-wide level.” These guidelines state that institutions must perform an “annual program evaluation that meets or exceeds the evaluation standards for accreditation by NACEP.” NACEP accreditation standards are further included as an appendix in the document.

**South Dakota** takes a different approach and addresses program quality through its credit transfer policy. In 2010 the South Dakota Board of Regents, which sets policy for the South Dakota University System, granted blanket acceptance of concurrent enrollment transfer credit for courses taken through NACEP-accredited programs. Credit is otherwise only accepted for concurrent enrollment if a college receives prior approval from the Board of Regents through a signed agreement process between the institution and the South Dakota Regental System.

### **Establishing Specific Standards for Programs Through Partnership Agreements**

Several states also have established specific standards that programs are required or encouraged to meet, though there may not be a specific approval process designed to enforce those standards. Though not as robust as a specific state approval process to ensure program quality, a set of agreed upon standards for programs is an important foundation upon which to build.

By way of example, in **Colorado**, the Colorado Community College System has a Statement of Standards & On Site Best Practices providing a guide for concurrent enrollment programs, which covers areas such as curriculum, faculty training and professional development, student services and advising, assessment, and facilities.

And in **Illinois**, quality standards for these programs are included in the Dual Credit Quality Act, as well as in regulation, though no formal state-level approval process exists. In lieu of the approval process, Illinois has made available a Model Partnership Agreement for dual credit programs in the state.

The agreement serves as “a default agreement for local high schools and community colleges as they negotiate dual credit arrangements for students,” and is “required only in instances where a local agreement cannot be reached.”

### **Providing a Designation Process for Whole School College in High School Programs**

A number of states have placed an emphasis on growing the early college high school (also known as middle colleges), a whole school model of college in high school program in which, typically, students have the opportunity to earn at least 12 credits (up to a full associate’s degree) at no cost with strong student supports.

CHSA’s Unlocking Potential recommends that a state “clearly defines the characteristics and components of more intensive college in high school models (such as early college high schools) and has an approval, certification, and renewal process in place for programs to achieve that designation.”

An example of this type of designation process exists in **Texas**, whose Early College High School designation process requires an annual application based on six benchmark categories (target population, partnership agreement, leadership initiatives, curriculum and support, academic rigor and readiness, and school design) as well as Outcome-Based Measures related to access, achievement, and attainment.

### **Conclusion: States Must Prioritize Quality for College in High School Programs**

Regardless of the modality or the mechanism, course quality is fundamental to equitably advancing students through college in high school programs and into postsecondary education and careers. States may take on quality assurance by leveraging existing structures for oversight and regulation, adapting them to the shared space occupied by college in high school programs, or by creating new



requirements, such as program accreditation or state designation, to ensure that students have access to a quality college in high school program.

Quality is integral to equity, as [a brief released by CHSA in partnership with The Education Trust](#) argues. States that have not yet elevated the quality conversation have missed a critical opportunity to truly harness the promise of these programs.