

GLOSSARY

UNDERSTANDING COLLEGE IN HIGH SCHOOL PROGRAMS



College in high school programs such as dual enrollment, concurrent enrollment, and early college high school are effective models for promoting postsecondary access and success, particularly for low income students, students of color, and other students who are historically underserved and underrepresented in higher education.

The modern version of college in high school programs have existed in some form since at least the 1980s, and have expanded rapidly in many parts of the country. According to the U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection, in school year 2017–2018 approximately 10 percent of high school students took a college course, though in some states participation is as high as almost 40 percent of high school students.

However, because the proliferation of college in high school programs was not coordinated by a single entity, the organic growth of programs and models across the United States has led to significant variation in what we call them, how they operate, and who they serve.

A 2013 analysis by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), for example, found 38 different terms used in state policy across the country to describe college in high school programs. Not all of the terms collated by HLC describe a distinctive college in high school program, but this illustrates that the meanings and applications of each of these terms can change from state to state.

In an effort to more fully explain the continuum of college in high school programs, this resource will unpack and explain each of the most popular terms used to describe these programs and how those terms are typically applied in states. However, while these definitions will align with the most common uses of these terms nationwide, they may not exactly match up with terms used in your state or locality, because usage of terminology can vary significantly.

We hope this resource will be useful to anyone who is new to college in high school program policy, those who wish to better understand this complex field, and researchers looking to examine the field from a national perspective.

A COMMON DEFINITION

While there can be significant variation among college in high school programs in terms of modality, structure, and terms, the College in High School Alliance has developed a definition of the core elements that all college in high school programs share, regardless of their differences in program structure or nomenclature:



College in High School Programs are partnerships between school districts and accredited institutions of higher education that provide high school-age students an intentionally-designed authentic postsecondary experience leading to officially transcribed and transferable college credit towards a recognized postsecondary degree or credential.

In addition to highlighting what unites all college in high school programs, regardless of their structure or what they call themselves, this definition also distinguishes college in high school programs collectively from credit by exam models such as Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB). This differentiation is important as college in high school programs are authentic college courses through which students will always receive transcribed postsecondary credit if they pass the course, rather than on the basis of a single examination for a course taken at the high school level.

WHERE PROGRAMS DIFFER

In addition to situations where different terms are used to describe the same type of college in high school program in different states, there are also a number of substantive structural differences between program types that contribute to the multiple terms in use to describe the act of a high school student taking a college course.

Common structural differences may include:

- Location of instruction (whether the student receives instruction at the high school or on the college campus).
- Type of instructor (whether the student receives instruction from a high school teacher or college faculty).
- Whether the student receives high school credit for the course in addition to college credit.
- Whether the program is a whole-school model or offered as part of a suite of available options for students at that high school.
- The level of support services offered to students.
- Whether the program is tuition free or tuition charging.
- Which entity is funding the costs of the program beyond any tuition charged to students, such as the high school, college, other entity, or some combination.
- Whether the program caters to a specific population of high school students.
- The length of the program (whether the program ends at the conclusion of 12th grade or extends to additional years).

FEDERAL DEFINITIONS

The Every Student Succeeds Act provides federal definitions for the terms “Dual or Concurrent Enrollment” and “Early College High School,” which are the terms used in federal statute to describe these programs.

► Dual or Concurrent Enrollment

A dual- or concurrent-enrollment program is offered by a partnership between at least one institution of higher education and at least one local educational agency through which a secondary school student who has not graduated from high school is able to enroll in one or more postsecondary courses and earn postsecondary credit that:

- Is transferable to the institutions of higher education in the partnership
- Applies toward completion of a degree or recognized educational credential as described in the Higher Education Act of 1965.

▶ Early College High School

The term ‘early college high school’ means a partnership between at least one local educational agency and at least one institution of higher education that allows participants to simultaneously complete requirements toward earning a regular high school diploma and earn not less than 12 credits that are transferable to the institutions of higher education in the partnership as part of an organized course of study toward a postsecondary degree or credential at no cost to the participant or participant’s family.

STATE & NATIONAL TERMS

In addition to the federal definitions, which apply for policy provisions authorized and funded through the United States Congress, there are a number of terms that are used either nationally or at the state level which can have specific meanings. Though very few of these terms have universally accepted definitions, many have commonly understood definitions that will apply in most places and under most circumstances. Below are the most common terms used in more than one state.

▶ Dual Enrollment

The most commonly used term for college course-taking by high school students, dual enrollment is used in many national and state contexts to speak generically about programs in which high school students accrue college credits through partnerships between school districts and colleges.

However, in a number of states the term can be used to specifically refer to programs that choose not to participate in the state funding mechanism and policy requirements governing college course-taking in high school (such as Colorado, where programs in the state funding system are called “concurrent enrollment,” and all other programs are “dual enrollment”) or programs in which students only receive college credit for a course rather than receiving both high school and college credit (such as Nebraska).

As a result, while this term is used most frequently by national stakeholders discussing the issue, it is not always the most accurate term to apply in specific state contexts.

▶ Dual Credit

Another generic term used in many states to describe programs in which high school students take college courses. “Dual credit” is often specifically used to indicate programs of any type in which students are receiving both high school and college credit for completing the course. In a limited number of states, such as Washington, “dual credit” is used to refer to the wider set of advanced coursework programs, which include the credit by exam programs like AP and IB. Though in most states, “dual credit” only refers to the college in high programs.

▶ Concurrent Enrollment

This term is most commonly understood nationwide — including by the [National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships \(NACEP\)](#) — to refer to the specific subset of dual enrollment programs in which courses are taught by college-approved high school teachers in a secondary environment.

The concurrent enrollment model is the most common type of college in high school program in use across the country. In several states (such as Colorado and Utah), the term is also used in statute as a generic term to describe college in high school programs as a whole.

▶ **Early College High School**

The early college high school model, which initially expanded in the early 2000s with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, is a specific whole-school model in which high school students have the opportunity to earn up to an associate's degree by the time of high school graduation at no cost. Early college high schools provide additional support services to students, and intentionally recruit students who are underrepresented in higher education. "Early college" is often used as a shorthand for referring to early college high schools, though that term can also be used generically to refer to college in high school programs generally in a state. It is also important to note that, while this may be the nationally understood meaning for "early college high school," the term may be used by programs and states that do not explicitly meet these criteria.

▶ **Middle College**

This term is used in a number of states and localities as a substitute for early college high school. Historically, there were program and model differences between the early college and the middle college models, but there has largely been convergence around those issues such that middle colleges and early college high schools are functionally identical.

▶ **Pathways to Technology Early College High School (P-TECH)**

First launched in 2011, P-TECH is a six year program from grades 8–14, in which students graduate with both a high school diploma and an associate's degree. The model is a public-private partnership between a school district, an institution of higher education, and an employer. IBM pioneered the model as the first industry partner engaged, but the model has expanded across the country and now includes a number of business partners.

Other terms used in more than one state, but whose definition may vary significantly from state-to-state, include **Running Start**, **Early Postsecondary Opportunities**, **College in the High School**, and **Postsecondary Enrollment Options**.