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Early College High School

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Summary Points

- The Early College High School Initiative (ECHSI), launched in 2002, has resulted in the creation of 280 early college high schools nationwide.
- Early college high schools are small schools designed to enable students to earn both a high school diploma and up to sixty college credits, including a possible Associate's degree.
- Each early college high school has a postsecondary partner institution (a 2-year or 4-year college or university) which provides college credits.
- A 2013 lottery-based, random assignment study found that 63% of Early College students were enrolled in college at the end of high school, compared to 23% of the control group.
- Early College Designs attributes this success to four factors: 1) a college-prep track for all students, 2) immersion in a college environment, 3) personalization of instruction, and 4) support services.

Early College High School

In the past decade, there has been a growing trend of offering opportunities to high school students to earn college credit. These opportunities have come in many forms: Advanced Placement (AP) courses, International Baccalaureate (IB) courses, dual enrollment, and concurrent enrollment. Early college high schools have developed in the wake of this trend. This policy brief examines Early College High Schools, small schools designed to enable students to earn both a high school diploma and an Associate's degree or up to two years of college credit, tuition free.¹

Introduction

By the year 2020, it is projected that 65% of the expected jobs available in the U.S. will require some type of postsecondary educational credential.² Forecasts such as this one have prompted the need for and development of programs that provide opportunities for high school students to earn college credits and get a head start on credentials that will be needed for their future success. This policy brief will explore one of these opportunities, the Early College High School model. It will explain the difference between this model and others, share research on its effectiveness, and evaluate issues related to its implementation.

What is Early College High School?

The Early College High School Initiative (ECHSI) is a national effort coordinated by Jobs for the Future and

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launched by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in 2002. Since its inception, 280 schools have been started or redesigned using this model, serving more than 80,000 students in 28 states and the District of Columbia.³ The early college high school model described in this brief is based on the ECHSI model and may not be generalizable to all early college high schools.

An important purpose of the early college model is to give high school students an early taste of college. When this happens, there are expected benefits for all parties involved. First, students are better prepared for the demands of college. Second, postsecondary institutions benefit from lower remediation costs and higher retention. Last, high schools expand their course offerings, and faculty members better understand how to prepare students for college.¹

Other pre-college programs such as Advanced Placement (AP) courses and dual/concurrent enrollment may, at first glance, appear to provide the same benefits. However, what sets apart early college high schools from these programs is a blended academic program.

Whereas students may take AP courses or participate in concurrent enrollment in a piecemeal fashion, early college high schools are whole school programs. In order to provide college credits, early college high school blends the curriculum to include both high school and college-level courses in a single program that meets the requirements for both a high school diploma and a potential Associate's degree.¹

In addition, while AP courses are typically taken by the highest-achieving high school students, the early college model emphasizes a “college for all” culture³. These college credits are provided through a postsecondary partner institution. After graduation, many students continue coursework at the partner institution, or they may also transfer credits to another college.¹

Other characteristics that all early college high schools share include:

- Small class sizes (100 or less per grade)
- Learning takes place in small learning environments that have high expectations for rigor and high quality work. Within this context, students are provided with academic and social supports such as tutoring and advising to help them succeed.
- Middle grades are included in the school or an outreach program is in place, letting these students know about the early college option
- Elimination of the physical transition between high school and college, a point at which many students discontinue their education
- Providing an affordable college option for students and their families, who can save up to two years worth of college tuition¹

Variations of the Model

Early college high schools may differ significantly from one another. For instance, some are traditional public schools and others are public charter schools. They may have different types of postsecondary partners (two-year or four-year colleges, university). Some are located on the campus of the postsecondary partner while others are housed on a high school campus. They may also differ in the grades they serve, some serving students as young as 6th grade. Some may also serve different target student populations (e.g., former dropouts, African-American students, Native-American students, English Language Learners). Some early college high schools also have a thematic focus.¹

Locations of Early College High Schools

According to the Early College High School Initiative, a national organization coordinated by Jobs for the Future and launched by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, since 2002, 280 schools have been started or redesigned using this model, serving more than 80,000 students in 28 states and the District of Columbia. According to this source, Arkansas is not represented in these figures.³

However, we have Arkansas Early College High School, located in Monticello. This can be confusing, because this program does not use the particular early college design described in this policy brief. Instead, it is a program that was developed to provide high school students at several different schools with access to college-level courses. The development of this school shows that educational leaders in Arkansas are motivated to provide a “jump start” into college for secondary students.

Research on the Model

Data from early college high schools suggests that the schools are reaching their target populations, which are students currently underrepresented in higher education. Nationally, about 3/4 of students attending early college high schools are students of color, and nearly 60% qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Most of these students will be the first in their families to go to college.¹

Additionally, a 2013 random assignment study by American Institutes for Research (AIR) and SRI International reported promising results for the model, including a greater likelihood of enrolling in college by the end of high school. In addition, one in five early college high school students graduate from high school with an Associate's degree or higher.⁴ Other key findings from the report:

- **Graduation rate:** 86% for early college high school students graduate from high school vs. 81% of comparison students.
- **Impact for Student Subgroups:** The early college impact on degree attainment was generally in favor of underrepresented groups: the impact was stronger for females than males, minority students than non-minority students and lower-income groups than higher-income students. These numbers suggest that the model is working to close the achievement gap.

Early Success for Students of “Early College” High School Initiative

Early College students were more likely to enroll in college and earn a college degree.

ENROLLED IN COLLEGE BY THE END OF HIGH SCHOOL



GRADUATE HIGH SCHOOL WITH A COLLEGE DEGREE

(Associate's degree or higher)

ONE IN FIVE
Early College students



Source: Early College, Early Success: Early College High School Initiative Impact Study, American Institutes for Research | air.org

The authors of the AIR random assignment study contend that, although the findings are only applicable to the ten early college high schools included in the study sample, the results provide strong evidence that early college high schools have a positive impact on students. In addition, they expect this impact to extend beyond the outcomes measured in their study. For example, students that attend early college high school may earn more college degrees because they are able to earn their first degree at a younger age. This could lead to beginning their careers sooner and having higher lifetime earnings compared to other students. Finally, these students may accrue less educational debt than their peers.⁴

Lastly, in March 2014, Early College Designs at Jobs for the Future released the following numbers:

- **Early college students are more likely to graduate high school:** 90% of early college students receive a diploma vs. 78% of students nationally.
- **Early college students are more likely to earn a college degree by high school graduation:** 30% of early college students earn an Associate's degree or other credential along with their diploma vs. very few students nationally.

- **Early college students are more likely to earn college credit in high school:** 94% of early college students earn college credit in high school vs. about 10% of students nationally.
- **Early college students are more likely to enroll in college immediately after high school:** 71% of early college graduates enroll in college the semester following graduation vs. 54% of low-income graduates nationally.
- **Early college students are more likely to return to college for a second year** (an important early indicator of their likelihood of college completion): 86% of early college graduates who enroll in college persist for a second year vs. 72% of college students nationally.³

While these statistics do not provide casual evidence of the model's effectiveness, as the random assignment study does, they indicate that early college students are attaining credits and credentials at a higher rate than students nationally.

According to the March 2014 report, Early College Designs attributes the success to four factors: **1) a college-prep track for all students, 2) immersion in a college environment, 3) personalization of instruction, and 4) support services**, such as having a cohort of early college high school students taking college classes together.

The immersion of students in a college environment is particularly unique to the model. Some early college high schools share a campus with their postsecondary partner and these students may use the college library, gym and join college clubs, helping to familiarize them with college life. Schools separated from their postsecondary partner use other strategies to connect students such as courses co-taught by college faculty, summer bridge-to-college programs and distance learning.³

Challenges of the Model

Although preliminary results are positive, there are still many challenges related to the early college high school model.

One common concern is disbelief that high school students are mature enough to do college coursework. Critics of the model believe that students lack the social and emotional maturity needed to succeed and that the early college experience does not adequately prepare them for college. On the other hand, proponents of the model say that until recently, only a small, privileged group of high students had access to college courses in high school. However, the early college high school model demonstrates that students from a variety of backgrounds are inspired and challenged by the rigor of college-level work, not daunted by it. Also, early college high school faculty work to provide a support structure and instructional practices that help students succeed. Specifically, some strategies used include: adopting school-wide literacy practices, focusing on inquiry-based instruction, and creating “shadow” or “lab” courses to complement college courses.¹

Other critics believe that high schools should retain their traditional role and not try to delve into a role that has historically been served by post-secondary institutions. Proponents of early college high school say argue that the changing economy necessitates that educators do a better job of preparing students for post-secondary education and careers.

Early college critics commonly argue that the college coursework for early college students is “watered down.” Critics also are skeptical about the quality of the instructors of college-level courses delivered in high school settings to high school students. According to the AIR random assignment study, early college high schools located on a college campus are preferable and are designed this way whenever possible. In their study, eight of ten sites were located on a college campus. A location on a college campus is preferred for two reasons:

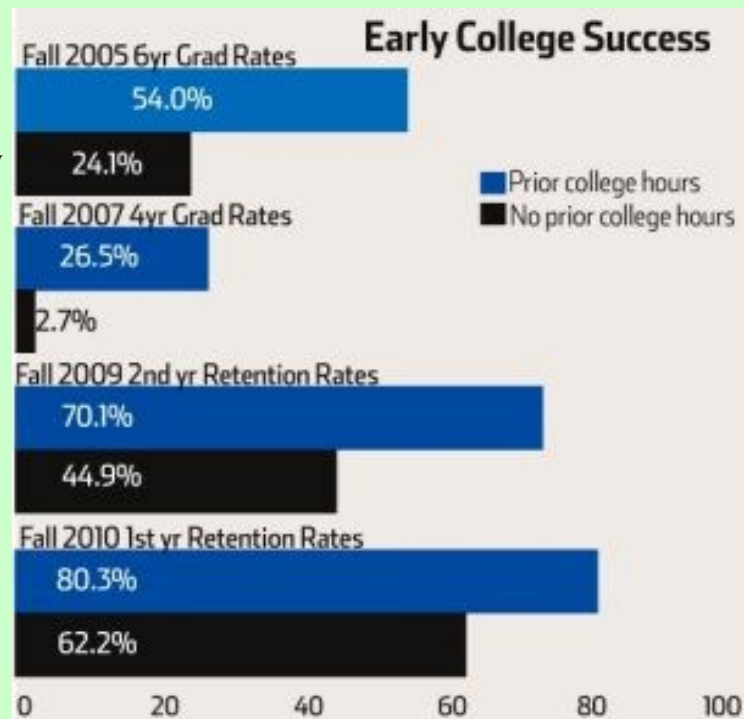
- 1) Students have the opportunity to take dual enrollment courses predominantly taught by college faculty
- 2) It is believed that students respond to “the power of site,” that when immersed in a college environment, students will take more responsibility for their education.

Finally, students at early colleges located on college campuses self-report more academic engagement, more self-confidence, fewer disruptive behaviors among their peers, greater college credit accumulation, and higher academic aspirations than students at early colleges not located on a college campus.⁴ To provide some clarity about the quality of instructors in the early college high school setting, here is the usual breakdown of college course offerings at early college high schools that are located on college campuses:

- **9th grade:** students are taught by high school staff serving as adjunct college instructors and are allowed to take up to 6 credits
- **10th grade:** students are taught by college instructors that only serve Early College students and may take up to 9 credits (which includes one summer course)
- **11th grade:** students are in classes with traditional college students; a student may take up to 21 courses; often by this point dual enrollment courses make up 75% of a student’s schedule
- **12th grade:** students remain in classes with traditional college students; students may take up to 24 credits and dual enrollment courses may make up 100% of one’s schedule⁴

Debate Over Early College High Schools in Texas

A controversy over the preparation of early college students at University of Texas– Pan American is illustrative of the uncertainty some feel about the early college high school model. A University of Texas-Pan American (UTPA) professor, Sam Freeman, observed that, in his experience, early college students do not perform well in college classes, likely because the college classes they took in high school were not as rigorous as traditional college classes. Other faculty members also spoke out at faculty senate meetings with concerns about the model.⁵ Partly in response to these concerns, the University of Texas-Pan American conducted analysis of their internal graduation rate and GPA data that showed that students who earned college credit in high school consistently outperformed their peers who did not enter college with college credit.⁶ While the report does not specifically show that earning college credit through the early college high school model leads to better results, UTPA senior vice president for enrollment argues that it demonstrates the value of college readiness programs that offer college credit. Whether early college high school is the best way to obtain college credit in Texas remains to be seen.



Results from University of Texas-Pan American study, 2012

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Conclusion

If one wishes to try an innovative high school model, there are many available to choose from. We at the Office for Education Policy believe that what sets the early college high school model apart from others is the high quality research that has been done, showing its success in terms of many different measures. In fact, the multiyear study on early college high schools conducted by AIR and SRI received the highest possible rating issued for a study by the federal government's What Works Clearinghouse (WWC), an organization that provides single study reviews on the quality of research evidence in recently released reports. The WWC's report on the AIR/SRI study stated, "This study is a well-executed randomized controlled trial. The impact estimates for high school achievement in mathematics and English/language arts, high school GPA, high school graduation, college enrollment and college degree attainment meet WWC evidence standards without reservations."⁷ Eventually, AIR plans to take this research even further, following students for four years past graduation to see if attending an early college high school leads to higher bachelor-degree completion rates.

Another reason to take a second look at the early college high school model is due to the fact that so many future jobs will require postsecondary credentials. We need to be better preparing our students for opportunities beyond high school and one way to do this may be to bring postsecondary opportunities into the high school classroom, while providing support to students and maintaining a high level of rigor. The early college high school model provides one example of how this may be accomplished.

In conclusion, it is difficult to say if the early college high school model would be a good fit for Arkansas. There is much to consider such as funding possibilities, the feasibility of creating postsecondary and high school partnerships, and how best to target our underserved populations. However, we believe that at the very least, the early college high school model warrants our further discussion and

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