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Credit Where Credit is Due?

District Policies on College Credit and High School Graduation Requirements

By Career Ladders Project

CLP

Career Ladders Project

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Introduction

“In the Bay Area, residents who don’t have a college degree are five times more likely to be in or live near poverty. Tipping Point is working to ensure all students, especially first generation, low-income students have the support they need to earn their degrees.” – Tipping Point Community

Dual enrollment allows a student to enroll in both high school and college at the same time, serving as a potential acceleration strategy for college completion. Across California, dual enrollment is viewed as a powerful equity strategy to accelerate college access and success, especially for first-generation, low-income students (EdTrust-West, 2025; Friedmann et al., 2024; Rodriguez et al., 2023). Among students historically underrepresented in postsecondary education, those who participate in dual enrollment in high school are more likely to enroll in and complete college than their non-dual enrollment peers (Velasco et al., 2024).

California has worked to create a more inclusive vision of who can be served through dual enrollment. This began in 2016 when the state created College and Career Access Pathways (CCAP), which was designed to provide underrepresented students with dual enrollment opportunities, followed by a number of legislative refinements in subsequent years. This series of legislative reforms extended dual enrollment to students who wouldn’t otherwise attend college or who are underrepresented in higher education, and it sparked growth in dual enrollment embedded in pathways and offered during the school day at the high school site.

These policies have led to results: more students accessing dual enrollment, more equitable participation in CCAP dual enrollment, and more students continuing in postsecondary education after high school. Dual enrollment in California more than tripled since 2010 (Fink, 2025a) and grew 20% from 2022-23 to 2023-24 (Fink, 2025b). One recent study found that, in dual enrollment offered at the high school like CCAP, “gaps in participation by racial and ethnic subgroups are smaller and closing over time” (Kurlaender et al., 2021). A study by the Public Policy Institute of California found that 82% of CCAP students (from the graduating classes 2015-16 through 2019-20) continued in postsecondary education directly after high school compared to only 65% of their non-dual enrollment peers. Students who had participated in CCAP also completed transfer-level math and English in their first year at higher rates than those who did not participate in dual enrollment (Rodriguez et al., 2023).

Another study found that students who participated in structured, equity-centered dual enrollment programs such as CCAP had higher success as measured by several indicators including high school GPA and graduation, going directly into college after high school, and success and retention in their first college year (Cooper et al., 2023). Similar outcomes were found in a longitudinal study that followed high school students who enrolled in college courses in feeder schools to the Kern Community College District and who graduated between 2016 and 2021. This study also found that post-high school college attendance increased with the number of dual enrollment college units earned (Career Ladders Project and Kern Community College District, 2022).

To build on this success, California has made big investments supporting continued expansion of dual enrollment. In 2022, the legislature authorized \$200 million for dual enrollment and \$500 million for K-12 districts to develop college and career pathways that include at least 12 units of early college credit such as CCAP dual enrollment. The state's 2024 Master Plan for Career Education prioritizes development of career pathways with built-in dual enrollment opportunities as part of its goal to "shorten the time to a career, alleviate financial pressures, and empower individuals to actualize their dreams, all while contributing to social and economic mobility within communities." The California Community Colleges Board of Governors incorporated this charge in the 2025 update to its strategic plan, Vision 2030, which "envisions a future where every California high school student is on a clear path—whether transfer, career, or apprenticeship—and graduates with at least 12 units of college credit."

Yet we may be falling short of gaining the full value of dual enrollment because of one neglected policy area: dual credit. For dual enrollment to realize its full potential as an equity and acceleration strategy, students must receive college credits for the courses they take and apply the college credits they earn toward high school graduation requirements. This practice is known as dual credit.¹ Unlike many other states, California law does not address dual credit. This effectively leaves local school boards to decide whether to award students with credit toward high school graduation for the college credits they earn. Failure to grant dual credit shortchanges students, but the scope of the problem is largely unknown. To date, there is no published landscape documenting school district policies and practices for dual credit in California.

To develop a better understanding of the scope and nature of this problem, Tipping Point Community funded Career Ladders Project (CLP) to conduct a study of dual credit policies and practices at local education agencies (LEAs) in the San Francisco Bay Area, including school districts and county offices of education, from the six counties of the Tipping Point Community service area: Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, San Francisco, San Mateo, and Santa Clara.

Dual enrollment in the San Francisco Bay Area region has grown rapidly. Student participation expanded from just under 15,000 students in 2015 to over 27,000 in 2024, an 80% increase in nine years. Statewide growth was much higher; overall student participation in dual enrollment went from about 50,000 to over 138,000, a 176% increase in the same time period (CCCCO, 2024). Across California, dual credit policy and practice has the potential to touch the lives and academic careers of many students.

This report details the study findings and recommendations to support students to benefit from dual credit.

1 Across the U.S., dual credit is a common feature of dual/concurrent enrollment state programs. Many of these state programs are named "dual enrollment" programs, which may lead to conflating the two terms. In a 2022 [review](#), the Education Commission of the States found that almost 90% of state programs have a policy that provides for both high school and postsecondary credit.



The Missing Piece: Dual Credit

In dual enrollment, a student is enrolled in two educational systems at once—most commonly, the student is enrolled in high school and working toward high school graduation requirements while also enrolled as a college student taking postsecondary courses. After successfully completing the postsecondary course, the student will receive college credit. But how will that credit be applied to the student's high school graduation requirements?

In California, the answer may vary depending on how the student's school district recognizes college credit. Unlike most other states, California doesn't mandate that students who take college courses offered through dual enrollment earn credit that also applies to high school graduation requirements (Education Commission of the States, 2022). Instead, in the absence of explicit state policy, the decision about dual credit is left to local school boards, potentially resulting in a patchwork of policy and practice across the state.

Effective, fair policies for dual credit reduce duplicative coursework for students, reinforce intersegmental partnership and alignment, and cultivate equitable academic acceleration. For LEAs, developing a dual credit policy first requires answering key questions: Can college credit be applied to high school graduation requirements? If so, how would it be applied—as elective credit or in the same subject area as the college course? What formula should be used to convert college credit to high school credits? Second, LEAs have a host of additional details to grapple with including: What types of dual enrollment would qualify? What limits, if any, should be imposed on the number of college credits that qualify? Should students receive a GPA boost for college courses?

Because it is a local school board decision, we suspect there is wide variability in dual credit policies across California. We know that some school districts have transparent policies for granting credit in same-subject college courses. One example is Merced Union High School District, which has a detailed [equivalency chart](#) that is publicly available. On a larger scale, Los Angeles Unified School District and Los Angeles Community College District have a [multi-campus equivalency chart](#). Other districts are less transparent about specific course equivalency, which makes it difficult for students to determine what kind of high school credit they might receive for successfully completing a college course. Theoretically, a student could successfully complete a college English course and receive only elective credits from their high school instead of English credit.

For districts that enable dual credit, it is also unknown to what extent they have formalized it via board policy versus employing it as an informal practice. Some may rely on operating procedures, historic practice, or CCAP partnership agreements and other intersegmental MOUs governing dual enrollment.

Study Design and Methodology

In this study, we employed multiple qualitative methods to examine dual credit policies. The research design included two primary components. First, we conducted a document analysis of publicly available materials, such as school board policies, administrative regulations, websites, and handbooks, to understand the official frameworks that LEAs have established about dual enrollment and dual credit. We conducted the document review from August 2024 through August 2025. We searched each LEA's website using the search terms "dual enrollment," "concurrent enrollment," "early college," and "college." Second, we conducted semi-structured focus group interviews with practitioners, including administrators, counselors, and coordinators, involved in implementing dual enrollment programs and awarding high school credit, to explore how these policies are interpreted and enacted in practice. While the document review illuminated LEA intentions and formal expectations, the interviews provided insight into how implementation unfolds in daily practice including where gaps, inconsistencies, or innovations emerge in enabling dual credit. The combined analysis provided insight into both the formal policy landscape and the on-the-ground realities of dual credit practice across LEAs. We identified two objectives for the study:

Describe and Analyze Dual Credit Policies. Conduct a review and analysis of school board policies, administrative regulations and other publicly available documents related to granting high school credit for college courses. Explore the variability and impact of dual credit policies across different LEAs in the San Francisco Bay Area. Examine and explore equity implications of dual credit policies.

Develop Recommendations. Formulate recommendations for improving dual credit policies to ensure equitable access and opportunities for all students.

Site Selection

The study focused on the Tipping Point Community service area, which covers six counties in the San Francisco Bay Area: Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, San Francisco, San Mateo, and Santa Clara. We selected 20 LEAs from all the school districts and county offices of education in the six-county region. The sample included a mix of district sizes (based on student enrollment) and locales (rural, suburban, and urban communities). We also gave priority to LEAs engaged in regional K-16 collaboratives and other state education initiatives including CCAP grants, Early and Middle High School grants, and the Golden State Pathways Program, ensuring relevance to current dual enrollment expansion efforts and cross-sector alignment work. The final selection included 18 school districts and two county offices of education.

Document Review

A primary source for our document review was local school board policies and their accompanying administrative regulations. To identify their board policies, LEAs generally follow the numbering conventions used by the California School Board Association. There is no single board policy that addresses dual credit; instead, there are five policies that relate to grades, high school graduation requirements (including alternative ways to earn credit), or college coursework and could therefore touch on dual credit. We reviewed the following board policies (BP):

BP 5121 - Grades/Evaluation of Student Achievement sets the criteria and scale for grades, gives teachers the primary responsibility as graders, outlines a process for grade changes and appeals, and sets criteria for GPA boosts such as with honors credit or for college courses.

BP 6146.1 - High School Graduation Requirements sets the LEA requirements for high school graduation, which may exceed the state requirements. In some cases, LEAs also specify alternative means to meet graduation requirements.

BP 6146.11 - Alternative Credits Towards Graduation outlines alternative ways to earn credit towards graduation such as work experience, athletic competitions, military service and college coursework.

BP 6172 - Gifted and Talented Student Program outlines the framework for identifying and supporting students who demonstrate exceptional abilities or potential in various domains. The policy emphasizes providing identified students with educational opportunities, which may include college courses, that match their advanced learning needs, ensuring they are challenged and engaged.

BP 6172.1 - Concurrent Enrollment in College Classes provides the framework for allowing high school students to enroll in college courses while still attending high school. This policy aims to enhance educational opportunities, support college and career readiness, and facilitate a smoother transition to postsecondary education.

If board policies had complementary administrative regulations, we analyzed those regulations as well. A board policy sets the LEA's official stance or requirement on an issue and is formally adopted by the local school board. An administrative regulation provides the detailed steps and procedures for how staff will carry out that policy, and it is developed by district or school administrators. Policies provide guidance for decision making and regulations serve to guide day-to-day implementation.

Focus Group Interviews

After completing the document review, we conducted two virtual focus groups with counselors and administrators who are responsible for implementing dual enrollment. To recruit focus group participants, we made public announcements at dual enrollment professional development gatherings in the region and followed up with direct invitations to individuals from the selected sites who were in attendance. There were five focus group participants; each participant was from a different LEA and one participant had experience implementing dual enrollment in two different LEAs in the study. Each of these LEAs offered multiple forms of dual enrollment opportunities including middle college high schools, CCAP partnerships, and individual dual enrollment (sometimes referred to as concurrent enrollment).² Focus groups were approximately one hour long and included questions about the type of dual enrollment opportunities available to students, how and to what extent students can apply college credit to their high school graduation requirements, along with questions related to dual credit decision making and policy implementation (see interview protocol in the Appendix).

Emergent Themes

We found that LEA policies related to dual credit varied widely according to two themes:

Applicability. Do the LEA's policies address high school credit for college courses? How do the LEA's policies address dual credit? Are they clear and specific, particularly about any restrictions? Are policies up to date? Do they address the full range of dual enrollment opportunities currently available under California law, such as CCAP?

Alignment. How do the LEA's policies on dual credit connect to day-to-day practice? Are informational materials, such as student handbooks and websites, consistent with policies?

In our analysis of the focus group responses, we used a hybrid coding approach with the focus group transcripts. We applied a deductive framework based on the themes of applicability and alignment to understand how practitioners implemented dual credit policies or engaged in practices that enabled students to apply college credit toward high school graduation requirements. At the same time, we remained open to inductively identifying additional themes grounded in participant responses. Through this process, we identified two additional themes that we integrated into the overall analysis:

Policy Awareness and Development. What is the LEA doing to address dual credit through its policies or procedures? What are its priorities in approaching this work?

Equitable Implementation. How do the LEA's policies support equitable implementation of dual credit? How do its policies support equitable implementation of dual enrollment in general?

² Multiple types of dual enrollment are available under California law. For more information, see [Dual Enrollment Structures in California](#) and [Dual Enrollment Policy to Practice Guide: Policy Table](#).

Findings

Applicability

Only one LEA had both board policies and administrative regulations in all five policy areas that touch on dual enrollment. The other 19 LEAs lacked policies and/or regulations in one or more of the five policy areas. Fifteen LEAs had policies that lacked the complementary administrative regulation. In reviewing the existing LEA board policies and administrative regulations, we found that they could be grouped into three categories: *Silent*, *Ambiguous*, and *Clear* (see the chart on the next page for results by LEA). These are defined by the following criteria:

Silent. The policy or regulation does not mention dual credit/high school credit for college courses.

Ambiguous. The policy or regulation references the possibility of dual credit/high school credit for college courses, but it uses vague or subjective language.

Clear. The policy or regulation affirms that dual credit/high school credit for college courses is available and provides necessary specifics for implementation.

In reviewing each LEA's existing board policies in the five policy areas, we also found that 17 LEAs had at least one policy that was outdated. One board policy dated back to the 1970s; other LEAs had policies that did not reflect legal updates allowing for more equitable access to dual enrollment. For example, one of the most substantial changes to dual enrollment access occurred in 2016 with the creation of CCAP dual enrollment. Since then, California has legislated many other equity-focused changes to dual enrollment including clarifying exemption of fees for non-resident students, authorizing adult dual enrollment, and defining "underrepresented" to be more inclusive. We found only three LEAs that had post-2016 updates to all their existing policies in the relevant areas.

K-12 Policies Impacting Dual Credit

Dual Enrollment

Board Policies (BP): The official position or rule on an issue, adopted by the school board. It explains *what* the district will do and *why*.

Administrative Regulations (AR): The detailed instructions created by administrators for *how* staff will carry out a board policy.

- Clear**
 - Explicit mention of college courses
 - Dual credit available
- Ambiguous**
 - Explicit mention of college courses
 - Possibility of dual credit
- Silent**
 - No mention of HS credit for college courses
- NA**
 - There is no policy at all
Note: This is rare for BPs, as they deal with issues other than dual credit, but less rare for ARs.

Policies and Regulations		Grades/ Evaluation of Student Achievement [5121]	High School Graduation Requirements [6146.1]	Alternative Credits Toward Graduation [6146.11]	Gifted and Talented Student Program [6172]	Concurrent Enrollment in College [6172.1]
District	K-12 District Total					
1	BP - AR	2 3 5	I A	V V	A I	A A
2	BP - AR	1 1 4 4	I A	I NA	A I	V A
3	BP - AR	1 4 2 3	I NA	V V	V V	A A
4	BP - AR	1 1 3 5	I A	I V	A I	A NA
5	BP - AR	2 4 1 3	V V	V V	A I	A A
6	BP - AR	2 4 2 2	V V	I V	A A	V I
7	BP - AR	2 3 4 1	I I	V V	V I	NA NA
8	BP - AR	2 4 4	I V	V V	NA NA	I V
9	BP - AR	3 4 3	I A	I NA	A I	NA NA
10	BP - AR	3 3 3 1	I A	V V	V NA	NA NA
11	BP - AR	3 2 3 2	V I	I NA	A A	V NA
12	BP - AR	3 2 2 3	I NA	V V	A A	I A
13	BP - AR	3 2 4 1	I V	I NA	A I	I V
14	BP - AR	3 3 1 3	V A	V NA	A NA	V NA
15	BP - AR	4 3 1 2	V V	V NA	A NA	I NA
16	BP - AR	5 5	V NA	V V	NA NA	V V
17	BP - AR	5 3 2	I NA	I NA	A NA	I NA
18	BP - AR	6 3 1	I A	I NA	NA NA	I NA
19	BP - AR	8 1 1	I NA	V NA	NA NA	NA NA
20	BP - AR	9 1	NA NA	V NA	NA NA	NA NA

Notable findings from the applicability review are below.

Only one of the LEAs had policies that specified in which subject areas students could receive dual credit.

- That one LEA listed criteria for college courses to meet high school credits for graduation. Here is an example:

“Up to ten (10) credits for a course that is NOT offered at a student’s school can be taken at the community college to satisfy one (1) year of this two (2) year requirement. Community college courses beginning with English 1A or above can be used to meet up to year or 10 of the required 40 high school English credits.”

- For all the other 19 LEAs, even if they had policies addressing dual credit, the policies were vague about how college credits would apply to specific high school subject area graduation requirements. In this group, many board policies and administrative regulations used similar language such as:

“The student receives the same letter grade for the high school credit as is granted by the college.” However, this does not explain if the credit for the college course can be applied to the student’s specific subject area high school graduation requirements.

Thirteen LEAs had policies that offer some high school credit for college classes (i.e., at least one board policy rated as *Clear*).

- Five of these 13 LEAs had only one or two *Clear* board policies or administrative regulations. These *Clear* policies and regulations offered students and families clarity about procedures for earning dual credit and the presumption that, by following those procedures, credit would be applied toward high school graduation requirements.

“This board policy example presumes dual credit for pre-approved courses: “Prior to registering for a college or private school course, a student shall submit the course for approval for credit toward high school graduation using the district form.”

- This administrative regulation example ensures a student will know exactly how their college courses will count toward high school graduation before taking the course:

“A written agreement regarding the student’s enrollment in postsecondary courses and the credits to be awarded for successful completion shall be signed by the student, parent/guardian, principal, and college representative. The student shall be informed whether the credits to be earned are considered academic credits or elective credits, whether the credits count towards high school graduation requirements, and whether the course would need to be completed again during the college years to satisfy college graduation requirements.”

One focus group participant stated: “When students are approved by their counselor to take a college course, we do put that on the transcript.³ And so that applies to all of our students who take courses, community college courses while they’re still in high school, both concurrent and dual.”

- Some *Clear* policies addressed dual credit only within the context of remediation, not acceleration. Here is an example of dual credit in a remediation context that we found in several policies:

“

“Students who, by the time of high school graduation, have deficiencies due to D or F grades in certain ‘A-F’ subjects⁴ may clear those grades in the summer immediately following high school graduation by enrolling in appropriate high school or college courses. Both grades received will be entered on the student’s transcript. The highest grade received will be the permanent grade on the student’s transcript.”

Seven LEAs had no *Clear* board policies; all their existing board policies were *Ambiguous* or *Silent* on dual credit. These LEAs may offer high school credit for college classes, but the policies are vague.

- Some board policies used subjective language that leaves practitioners to determine conditions for awarding dual credit to students. Here are examples:

“

“High school credit may also be issued for these dual enrollment courses as appropriate.”

“When it is determined that the postsecondary course in which the student intends to enroll is substantially equivalent to a course provided by the district, the student may receive credit toward high school graduation requirements in addition to credit received from the college.”

The board policy area in which the most LEAs addressed dual credit clearly and specifically was Alternative Credits Towards Graduation (6146.11). One possible reason for the clarity in this area is that school boards are required by law to adopt alternative credit options “with the active involvement of parents, administrators, teachers, and pupils.” (see Ed Code section 51225.3 (b))

- In this policy area, 12 LEAs had board policies that we categorized as *Clear*. Of those 12 LEAs, three also had administrative regulations that we categorized as *Clear*.

We also found policy distinctions regarding GPA boosts for college credit; limits on the number of college credits that may be applied toward high school graduation; dual credit applied differently based on the type of dual enrollment (e.g., students in CCAP vs. a middle college program); and graduation credit restricted to remediation for failing grades.

³ Practitioners often use general terms like “college credit applied to high school transcripts” to describe dual credit. College courses can be recorded on high school transcripts in a number of ways including as a separate course with no bearing on graduation requirements.

⁴ A-F subject areas referred to in policies should reflect the 1997 update to A-G subject areas. See California Department of Education reference that can be found at: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/gs/hs/hsgtable.asp>.

LEA policies varied on students receiving a weighted GPA or “GPA boost” (grade bump) for college courses applied toward high school credit.⁵

- Three LEAs clearly offered a GPA boost for college courses.
- Nine LEAs had policies that used ambiguous language indicating that a GPA boost may apply.
- One LEA had policies that contradicted each other; one policy used ambiguous language indicating that a GPA boost may apply, while another policy explicitly stated that no GPA boost would be granted.
- One LEA stated explicitly that no GPA boost would be granted.
- For six LEAs, we could find no reference to a GPA boost in any board policies or administrative regulations.

Seven LEAs had policies that set limits on the number of college credits that may be applied toward high school graduation. Among these seven LEAs, we found further variation in how their policies described the way limits would be determined:

- **Conversion formulas or equivalencies.** Three of the seven LEAs in this group did not specify how college credits would convert to high school credits. The other four LEAs included specific conversion formulas or equivalencies⁶ in their policies to translate college to high school credit. Three of these four LEAs used formulas that granted 10 high school credits for three college credits (i.e., a one-year high school class for a one-semester college course). The fourth LEA provided course equivalencies.
- **Maximum credit limits.** The most common credit limit we found in this group was 40 high school credits that could be earned from college courses. However, there was also variation. One LEA limited high school credit earned from college courses to 10 credits per semester (up to 80 credits throughout high school); another LEA set the limit at 20 high school credits in total.
- **Variation by type of early college credit opportunity.** In some cases, LEA board policies set different credit limits for different types of early college credit opportunities (e.g., early or middle college programs, CCAP, high school articulation).⁷ Some focus group participants also reported that their LEAs applied credit limits.

⁵ LEAs determine if students receive a weighted GPA or “GPA boost” (grade bump) for college courses applied toward high school credit. It’s worth noting that, for admissions purposes, both the UC and CSU systems automatically award an “honors point” (grade bump) for college courses completed by high school students under certain conditions; the course must meet A–G requirements and be UC/CSU transferable, and the student must complete the course with a grade of C or higher. The UC and CSU systems each limit the number of honors points that can be applied to a student’s GPA.

⁶ There is no state-defined conversion formula of college credits to high school credits. A common practice is for a three-unit, semester-long college course to be converted to a year-long high school course of 10 high school credits.

⁷ Early college credit includes all types of dual enrollment in addition to other methods such as high school articulation and Advanced Placement.

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This board policy example sets different credit limits by type of early college credit opportunity: “Students may earn up to 40 graduation credits of coursework; credit may be used towards D/F replacement. Early or Middle College program, High School Articulation doesn’t count towards 40 units.”

Focus group participants described how their LEAs applied limits:

“Well, we do have a very strong system for a credit limit in our district that’s written into the principal’s handbook, and has been the entire time that I’ve been here. That credit limit is 40 in total.... So what that means is that students can get credit from community colleges, but it’s limited.”

“We don’t really have a strict policy on that in my previous district. It was limited to 20 high school credits... and they did not give a grade bump for that.”

“The high school has a policy.... There’s only a certain number of college courses they can take outside of the school day, just to kind of help with that whole work, work-life balance, and some of our students are really go-getters in [Middle College High School].”

In some instances, when LEAs offered multiple types of dual enrollment opportunities such as CCAP and individual/concurrent enrollment, it was unclear if a particular policy applied to all types of dual enrollment or one specific type of dual enrollment. CCAP dual enrollment is designed to serve students who “may not already be college bound or who are underrepresented in higher education” (Education Code [Section 76004](#).) Non-CCAP dual enrollment is designed for students who “would benefit from advanced scholastic or vocational work” (Education Code [Section 48800](#)).

- One LEA with an active CCAP partnership did not address CCAP in its board policies. Instead, one of its policies included this reference to high school students taking college courses:

“

“The primary purpose for Concurrent Enrollment is to offer high school students courses not offered in the student’s regular high school program to allow students to make up deficient credits for graduation from high school, to give students the opportunity to acquire vocational and technical skills when the high school does not offer a comparable program, and to supplement and enrich the high school student’s educational experiences.”

Alignment

In many instances, we found a lack of alignment between policies and practices that support students to receive dual credit. For example, an LEA's policies might be unavailable or outdated, but the student/parent handbook details how a student can successfully apply college credit toward high school graduation requirements. This lack of consistency can promote inequity within an LEA if officials at one school follow the handbook, while officials at another school follow the policy.

In some cases, LEAs had outdated policies on dual credit, but information on school websites and handbooks reflected processes that enable dual credit, demonstrating a lack of alignment.

- In one example, an LEA's website provided a list of college courses, the equivalent high school courses, and the number of high school units that each college course would confer. Compared with the website, however, none of the LEA's policies mentioned college course conversion to high school units. Two policies related to dual credit, Graduation Requirements (6146.1) and Alternative Credits Towards Graduation (6146.11) did not address granting high school credit for college courses. A third policy, Concurrent Enrollment (6172.1), which was last updated in 2013, used language that applies only to concurrent enrollment and not CCAP. This policy stated:

“

“The Governing Board desires to provide opportunities for eligible district students to enroll concurrently in courses offered at postsecondary institutions in order to foster individual student achievement, increase opportunities for students to complete college preparatory course requirements or career technical education preparation, and prepare students for a smooth transition into college by providing exposure to the collegiate environment.”

When it is determined that the postsecondary course in which the student intends to enroll is substantially equivalent to a course provided by the district, the student may receive credit toward high school graduation requirements in addition to credit received from the college.”

In other cases, we found direct contradictions between an LEA's policies and its publicly available student/family handbook.

- One LEA had an administrative regulation that explicitly stated passing grades in college courses could replace Ds or Fs in high school courses, yet its handbook prohibited this, as shown in the following excerpts:

“

[Excerpt from Administrative Regulation 5121] “Students who, by the time of high school graduation, have deficiencies due to D or F grades in certain “A-F” subjects may clear those grades in the summer immediately following high school graduation by enrolling in appropriate high school or college courses.”

[Excerpt from the Concurrent Enrollment Handbook] “The High School Special Enrollment [dual enrollment] is specifically designed to accelerate the academic or vocational career of high school students. Access to the Special Enrollment Program is NOT allowed for.... Work to make up for failed high school or middle school classes.”

Focus group participants shared similar disconnects between what is stated in LEA policy and what happens in practice at school sites. Participants highlighted the need for stronger alignment and clearer, more consistent support mechanisms to ensure that dual credit is applied evenly at different schools in the same district.

“One school puts it on high school transcripts, the other school doesn’t... [resulting in] huge gaps of equity in that world.”

- One participant noted that, although their LEA has a policy enabling dual credit for concurrent enrollment, they have paused granting high school credit for college courses until they decide how to handle it for all the early college credit opportunities they offer:

“We have all of that information for some of the courses that are taken that are just concurrent. They’re looking at shifting away from that.... But that’s in the decision making process right now. Up till now we actually have been applying it to the content area and giving them double [dual] credit, and then also offering that grade bump for those students.”

Policy Awareness and Development

The need for thoughtful policy development was raised repeatedly by focus group participants, especially in relation to supporting strategic goals like expanding access and ensuring credit is meaningful and transferable.

Several focus group participants noted a lack of formal board policy at their LEAs. They also noted when a practice existed without a board policy or administrative regulation.

“We don’t have a written policy right now.”

“There’s not really a policy, and it’s being implemented by need only.”

“[Policy] is an area of growth for us.”

One participant expressed a lack of awareness of their LEA’s board policy on dual credit:

“I haven’t looked at board policy yet, and now I’m making a note to do that... this is all in the principal’s handbook as the starting place.”

Focus group participants generally agreed that equity and consistency in program implementation was an important goal for policy development. Several participants shared what steps they are taking to draft or revise policies to support more equitable dual credit implementation, and some described including other stakeholders in the process such as district staff, union representatives, teachers, and students.

“

“I developed a draft policy to make it consistent across the district with a credit limit on there.”

“So our biggest concern is, how do we make sure that this happens in an equitable way, because not all kids have the access. They don’t understand how the system works... my goal is that we come up with a policy that’s consistent across the district.”

“We have a graduation committee that is made up of a bunch of different representatives from our different school sites and district office, and some students and teachers. And so that graduation committee is right now making recommendations to shift the policy a little bit to be that we would give the grade bump to the dual classes. Those are classes that are taken as part of our school day as part of our curriculum, because those are courses that we have built in strategic pathways. We know for sure that they’re transferable.”

“One of our goals over the next year is to come up with a draft policy that we can bring to the board, and we do have our union president on our team... and let’s make sure it’s more equitable in terms of what [credit] we are giving out to the students. You know, because there definitely are students who it could help immensely by giving them that credit.”

“And we’ve already trained people, counselors a little bit on that [formula for dual credit conversion], so hopefully, that will continue and be officially in the policy soon.”

Equitable Implementation

Focus group participants described how dual credit policies are actively applied inconsistently in school settings, influencing the subject areas for which students receive high school graduation credit, and how they are credited in a manner that is inequitable. From focus group participants, we observed differences in how dual credit is applied across LEAs. Some offer credit for individual (also called “concurrent”) courses that students take on their own, others do not award credit for that type of dual enrollment, and some only award high school credit for college courses taken for credit recovery. Practitioners also noted contradictions at their own LEAs, which awarded full high school credit for college courses taken by middle college students but little to none for students not in a middle college.

Many focus group participants expressed substantial concern about equity in dual enrollment opportunities more generally. There was a pervasive concern that some students benefit, while others lack the information or support to access dual enrollment. Focus group participants described that while access may theoretically be available to all, students from underserved communities are often underrepresented among dual enrollment participants, raising questions about systemic barriers. Participants identified barriers such as scheduling challenges, lack of awareness among students and families of dual enrollment opportunities, and structural disconnects between K-12 schools and community colleges.

One participant expressed concern that providing dual credit would lead college-bound students to take on too many dual enrollment courses and widen access gaps:

“

“It’s just going to deepen that divide... kids who are already doing this are gonna now... go crazy.”

Several participants shared what they’re doing to address equity concerns through implementation or policy development:

“

“What’s a downside to [dual enrollment] is that it almost becomes a little bit of a stratification where, if you look at the demographics of the school against the college XYZ Program, they don’t line up right ... you see not everybody is represented in that program for a variety of reasons, and it kind of looks like a bit of an inequitable enrollment ... everybody has access, but they’re not accessing it. And so a goal for that particular site is diversifying the enrollment of CCAP, of making sure that it’s more representative of the student body that is actually attending the school.”

“We’re not helping the kids that we need to help when we’re [increasing access for high achieving students]. So that’s our biggest concern, how do we make sure that that happens in an equitable way, because not all kids have the access ... my goal is that we come up with a policy that’s consistent across the district.”

“I feel like policy is important for us to have agreed upon, and that also backs up some of our implementation as long as the policy is written to what [the] original intent of dual enrollment was, which was not to just shift all of our high achieving kids from AP into dual enrollment ... hopefully, the policies don’t tie our hands.”

Discussion and Consideration

Dual enrollment presents high school students with opportunities to experience college courses and accelerate their educational and career journeys. But for a high school student in California, successfully completing a college course doesn't necessarily mean they earn dual credit. Local school boards set their own policies for awarding dual credit; the state currently lacks clear policy to guide LEAs in this area.

Many state policy changes affecting dual enrollment occurred in a short timeframe, making it challenging for LEAs to keep their policies up to date. Since the inception of CCAP dual enrollment in 2016, California has made changes to the various Education Code sections that govern dual enrollment almost every year. There have also been accompanying changes in Title 5 regulations, and state policymakers have issued policy documents such as Vision 2030, the Governor's Roadmap for California Community Colleges, and the Master Plan for Career Education. All these reforms have emphasized equitable access to dual enrollment.

The findings of our study of 20 LEAs in the San Francisco Bay Area suggest issues for education leaders and policymakers to consider.

Policies vary across LEAs due to lack of a state standard

Among the 20 LEAs in our study, we found wide variation in the availability of formal board policies supporting dual credit. In some cases, no formal policy exists. Where policy does exist, it is often ambiguous or outdated, not reflecting nearly a decade of equity-focused dual enrollment legislative reforms.

The flexibility to adopt and apply policies at the local level enables school boards to prioritize what is important to their students and communities. Yet in areas such as high school graduation requirements, the state sets minimum requirements. With dual credit, by contrast, local school boards control all aspects of awarding credit toward high school graduation requirements for successfully completed college coursework—including whether to recognize it at all. For students, this means that their ability to access dual credit depends on the LEA in which their school is located.

Lack of alignment between policy and implementation

Ambiguous or outdated LEA policies on dual credit can lead to the misalignment of policy and practice. This results in situations where dual credit recognition varies between schools in an LEA, based on how individual sites interpret and apply policy. Local practice, in these cases, may have gotten ahead of LEA policy in awarding high school credit for college courses, but the school site-specific implementation has led to inconsistent application. In effect, students who attend different schools in the same district could be subject to differences in how they access dual credit.

For LEAs that enable dual credit, the many technical aspects of dual credit also make it complicated to navigate for district leaders and staff. As our study showed, these complications can result in restrictions and credit limits for different types of dual enrollment, ambiguity around subject area credits, and other inconsistencies in how the LEA applies dual credit policy.

Impact on students

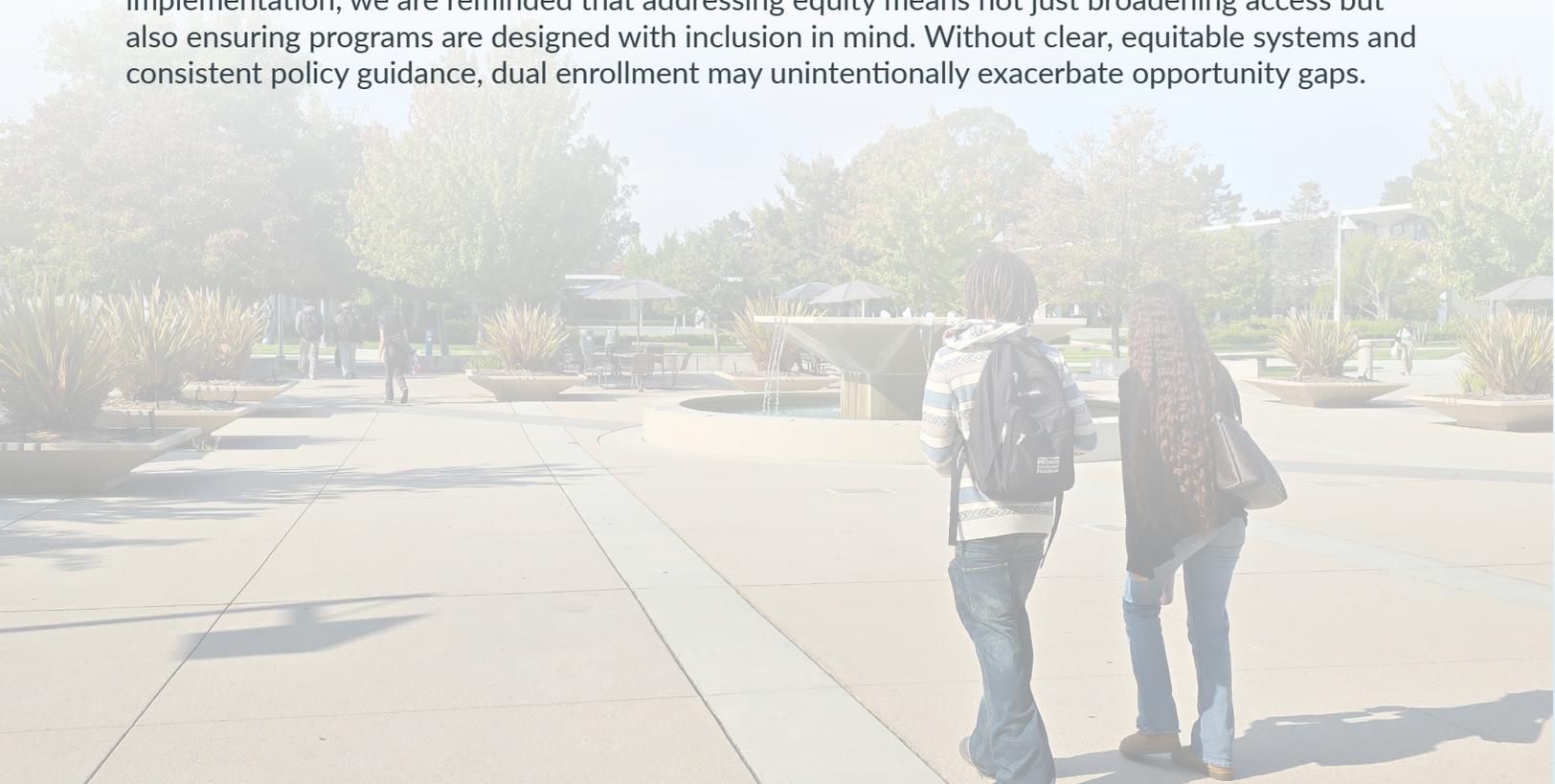
The absence of coherent policy along with inconsistent implementation can create a lack of transparency about dual credit options, making it difficult for students to know what credit they could receive for college courses. A high school student who succeeds in a college course should not be surprised to learn they won't receive dual credit and that they might therefore have to "double up" on course work to meet graduation requirements. Requiring a student to repeat material they've already mastered is discouraging, and it undermines recognition of their achievements.

At the institutional level, the lack of coherent policy to guide practitioners could lead to inconsistent determinations about granting dual credit, potentially placing a bigger burden on some students or student groups compared with others. The bottom line, however, is that when students don't receive dual credit, they don't gain the full benefit of acceleration through dual enrollment.

Implications for equity

While failure to grant dual credit deprives students of the benefits of acceleration, it also diminishes the return on California's investment in promoting college and career success by utilizing dual enrollment as a strategy for acceleration and equity. The 2016 passage of CCAP legislation to support underrepresented students in dual enrollment pathways was a major milestone in the state's focus on equity. Yet only three of the 20 LEAs in our study had updated all their existing policies relevant to dual credit after 2016, which could lead to ambiguity about how students participating in CCAP dual enrollment might receive high school credit for college courses.

With the growth of dual enrollment participation and complexities identified with dual credit policy implementation, we are reminded that addressing equity means not just broadening access but also ensuring programs are designed with inclusion in mind. Without clear, equitable systems and consistent policy guidance, dual enrollment may unintentionally exacerbate opportunity gaps.



Recommendations

The problem of students having uneven access to dual credit based on the district or school in which they're enrolled cries out for a state-level response. Clear state policy could also strengthen the alignment between dual credit policies and practices, promote equitable access for students, and support California's efforts to foster a robust college-and career-focused culture.

At the local level, LEAs could focus on updating and refining policies, improving communication and training for key stakeholders, and establishing structures to ensure that dual credit opportunities are applied consistently.

Recommendations for state education leaders and policymakers

- Develop a state vision and values statement that explicitly commits to the importance of awarding dual credit for college courses that students successfully complete while in high school.
- Provide clear guidance to the field along with adaptable policy templates and procedure manuals for site administrators, counselors, and registrars. These types of tools could support LEAs in aligning policies and practices.
- Consider the appropriate state responsibility for ensuring equitable application of college credit toward local high school graduation requirements. Consider whether California should adopt stronger legislation or regulation to ensure more uniform implementation of dual credit across and within school districts.

Recommendations for LEAs and school sites

- Develop and adopt a clear vision and values statement for the LEA regarding how the college credits that students earn will be applied to high school graduation requirements.
- Update board policies and administrative regulations regarding dual credit.
 - Establish a committee to examine policies and practices that impact dual credit and provide suggested policy updates. This committee could include counselors, teachers, school and LEA administrators, students, families, and college and community representatives.⁸
 - Create accountability measures that can serve as equity guardrails for the application of dual credit policies for college coursework.

⁸ See Education Code section 51225.3(b)

- Align practices with policies for awarding dual credit.
 - Update websites, handbooks, and outreach material and provide training for counselors and registrars.
 - Train counselors, advisors and registrars in the local policy and procedures for dual credit.
- Communicate LEA policy on dual credit to LEA and high school personnel responsible for dual enrollment, including coordinators, counselors, and teachers. Communicate dual credit opportunities to students and families.
 - Ensure messaging about how students can receive high school credit for college courses is consistent in all materials and across all school sites.
 - Tailor messages for the intended audience. Messaging to students and families should use straightforward terms and be translated into languages spoken at home. Messaging to educators should be consistent with their roles (e.g., registrars, counselors, coordinators, and school administrators).
- Clarify how college credits will be applied to high school graduation requirements in formal agreements governing dual enrollment.
 - CCAP agreements and non-CCAP MOUs can be used to provide clarity around how agreed-upon college courses guarantee dual credit. Because CCAP agreements are required to include a list of specific college courses to be offered in the CCAP pathways, the partnering college and school district could also specify how each college course would count toward high school credit.

Recommendations for researchers

- Explore how other states have approached dual credit policy and how they balance state support and guidance with local control. Consider what examples could inform a California approach.
- Conduct a review of relevant policies and practices for a larger sample of LEAs across the state.
- Investigate the factors and issues that contribute to determining whether and how college credit is applied to graduation requirements in different LEAs; these may include instructor workload, fiscal considerations, school type and instructional quality.
- Consider conducting a transcript analysis from a sample of LEAs to investigate what and how much credit is applied toward high school graduation requirements to get a fuller picture of how dual credit is awarded in practice.
- Research the effects of different dual credit policies on student graduation rates, particularly for underrepresented students.
- Research and share effective policies and practices from the field that can serve as exemplars.

Appendix

Interview Protocol

[Introductions]

1. Could you please share your name, role, how long you have supported college and career/dual enrollment efforts?

[General Dual Enrollment Discussion]

Note: level set with nomenclature of types of early college credit

2. How would you describe the dual enrollment opportunities your school offers?
[types of courses/pathways; outreach efforts/description of participants; supports; general success data]
3. What have been 1-2 major advancements or opportunities to grow dual enrollment from your perspective?

[Dual Credit]

4. Does your district [or school] offer dual credit, that is high school credit for college courses? [if the answer is “no”] Why is that the case? What is the reasoning behind that decision? [skip to question 8]
5. Can you describe the process by which a student can earn high school credit for a college course in your district?
 - a. Does that vary by school? If so, how?
 - b. Does it vary by type of dual enrollment? If so, how?
 - c. Are there limits, such as the content area or the number of credits?
 - d. Who is involved in the decision-making for awarding credit?
6. How are students and families made aware of the process?
7. In reviewing the district [or school] policies that could influence/impact dual enrollment we found—
[Provide general synthesis of policies with reference to policy number(s); identify if standard or consistent with other districts, highlight bright spot] How is this policy referenced and/or used?
 - a. Do you think it’s widely used and understood by the [insert role] who award high school credit for dual enrollment?
8. If you could update the policies or practices for awarding dual credit, what would they be and why?
9. What support might you need to affect that type of change?
10. Anything else you would like to add?

[Closing, reviewing relevant elements of the protocol and next steps]

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Career Ladders Project promotes equity-minded community college redesign. We collaborate with colleges and their partners to discover, develop, and disseminate effective practices. Our policy work, research, and direct efforts with colleges lead to system change – and enable more students to attain certificates, degrees, transfers, and career advancement.

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