



# CLP

Career Ladders Project

## *Credit Where Credit is Due? District Policies on College Credit and High School Graduation Requirements*

### Executive Summary

#### Background

Dual enrollment—where high school students take college courses—has emerged as a key acceleration and equity strategy in California to improve college access and success, particularly for first-generation and low-income students. Research shows that dual enrollment participants are more likely to enroll in and complete college compared to peers who do not participate. California has invested heavily in expanding these opportunities, including \$700 million in 2022 for dual enrollment and Golden State Pathways grants. However, a critical gap remains: **dual credit**—the practice of granting students credit toward high school graduation for college courses. Unlike most states, California does not mandate dual credit, leaving decisions to local school boards. Failure to grant dual credit shortchanges students and blunts the impact of the state’s investment in dual enrollment, yet the scope of the problem is unknown.

#### Study Purpose and Design

Tipping Point Community funded Career Ladders Project to examine dual credit policies in 20 local education agencies (LEAs) across six counties in the San Francisco Bay Area. The study included two parts: 1) a document review to analyze board policies, administrative regulations, and LEA/school informational materials (e.g., websites, handbooks) related to graduation requirements and dual credit, and 2) focus groups with counselors, administrators and coordinators to understand how policies are interpreted in practice. The study objectives were to describe and analyze dual credit policies and develop recommendations for improving dual credit policies to ensure equitable access for students.

For the full report and related resources, visit <https://careerladdersproject.org/report/credit-where-credit-is-due>

# Findings

Four themes emerged from our document review and analysis of focus group responses: **applicability** of LEA policies to dual credit, **alignment** of policy and implementation, **policy awareness and development**, and **equitable implementation**.

## Applicability

The policy review found that many LEA policies were missing, ambiguous or outdated. Only one out of 20 LEAs had policies and regulations in all five policy areas relevant to dual enrollment. Seventeen LEAs had outdated policies, with only three updating all relevant policies after equity-focused legislative reforms in 2016. Existing policies fell into three categories: **Silent** (no mention of dual credit), **Ambiguous** (vague language), and **Clear** (specific guidance). Only one LEA clearly specified subject-area equivalencies for college courses. Thirteen LEAs explicitly offered some high school credit for college courses, although in some cases it was limited to remediation rather than acceleration. The study found variation in how LEA policies addressed GPA boosts, credit limits, and conversion formulas, with some LEAs imposing caps or differing rules based on the type of dual enrollment involved (e.g., CCAP vs. individual/concurrent enrollment).

## Alignment

The study found misalignment between formal policies and actual practices for awarding dual credit, creating the potential for confusion and inconsistent application within LEAs. In some cases, board policies conflicted with information in student handbooks or on websites, which sometimes provided detailed guidance on earning high school credit for college courses. Focus group participants reported similar inconsistencies, noting that implementation often varies by school site. They emphasized the need for clearer, updated policies and consistent communication to ensure uniform application of dual credit within LEAs.

## Policy Awareness and Development

Focus group participants emphasized the need for clear and consistent dual credit policies to support equity and strategic goals like expanding access and ensuring credits are transferable. Several participants noted the lack of formal board policies at their LEAs. Participants described efforts to draft or revise policies, often involving diverse stakeholders such as administrators, teachers, union representatives, and students. These efforts aim to standardize practices, support equitable access, and clarify details like credit limits and conversion formulas.

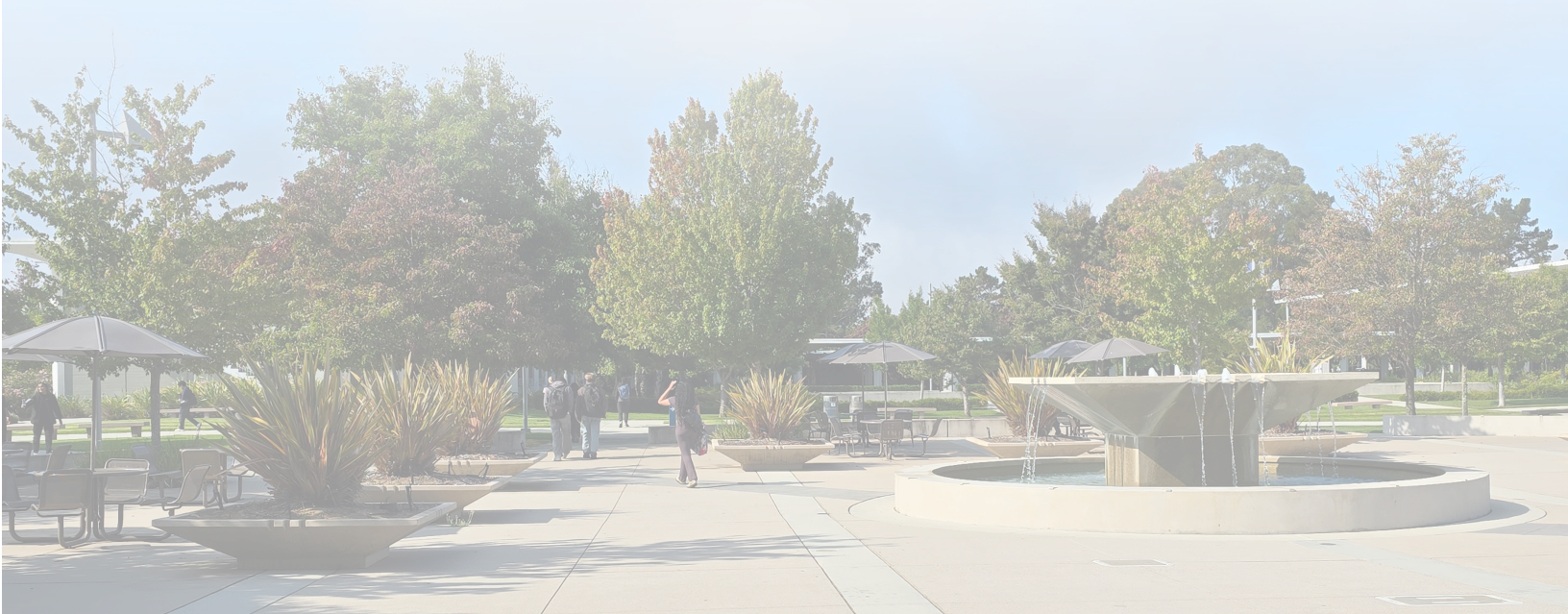
## Equitable Implementation

Focus group participants described how dual credit policies are applied inconsistently and inequitably. Some LEAs award dual credit differently based on the type of dual enrollment (e.g., individual/concurrent enrollment vs. middle college), and others restrict it to credit recovery. Participants also expressed concern about equitable access to dual enrollment in general, noting that systemic challenges such as scheduling and weak coordination between K-12 schools and colleges, along with lack of student and family awareness of dual enrollment opportunities, could disproportionately affect underserved students. To address these gaps, participants stressed the need for policies that promote equity in access to dual enrollment.

# Discussion and Consideration

Dual enrollment offers students the chance to accelerate their education by earning college credit while in high school, but dual credit is not guaranteed. Because the state lacks clear policy on dual credit, local school boards set policy in this area. Yet many recent state legislative and regulatory changes affecting dual enrollment have made it challenging for LEAs to keep their policies up to date. Key findings from the study of 20 LEAs in the San Francisco Bay Area:

- Policies vary across LEAs due to lack of a state standard. Many of the LEAs in our study had missing, ambiguous or outdated policies relevant to dual enrollment or dual credit.
- Ambiguous or outdated policies can lead to misalignment of policy and implementation. This can lead to situations where dual credit recognition varies between schools in an LEA and other inconsistencies.
- The absence of coherent policy combined with inconsistent implementation can create a lack of transparency about dual credit for students and families. A high school student who succeeds in a college course should not be surprised to learn they won't receive dual credit and might therefore have to "double up" on course work to meet graduation requirements. When students don't receive dual credit, they don't gain the full benefit of acceleration through dual enrollment.
- Failure to grant dual credit undermines the state's effort to utilize dual enrollment as an equity strategy to promote college and career success.



# Recommendations

## For State Education Leaders

- Establish a statewide vision affirming the importance of dual credit.
- Provide clear guidance, policy templates, and implementation tools for LEAs.
- Consider legislation or regulations to ensure consistent and equitable dual credit practices statewide.

## For LEAs and School Sites

- Define a district vision for applying college credits to graduation requirements.
- Update board policies and regulations; create equity-focused accountability measures.
- Align practices with policies through updated materials and staff training.
- Communicate policies clearly and consistently to staff, students, and families.
- Specify dual credit terms in CCAP agreements and other MOUs.

## For Researchers

- Study other states' dual credit models for lessons applicable to California.
- Expand policy reviews to more LEAs statewide.
- Analyze factors influencing credit application and conduct transcript reviews.
- Examine impacts of dual credit policies on graduation and equity.
- Identify and share effective practices as exemplars.