



ENABLE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS TO EARN FREE COLLEGE DEGREES

Luis Silos has clocked hundreds of clinical hours over the past two years on the path to earning his associate’s degree in nursing. This semester, in addition to his classes, he spends his days from 6:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. in rotation on the hospital floor, experiencing what the work is like in different roles and departments as he completes the requirements to graduate this coming May. For Luis, becoming a registered nurse practitioner is just the first step toward a career in the medical field. He has his sights set on becoming a surgeon. And he’s got plenty of time, because Luis is a just a senior in high school. This year, he’s preparing to graduate from Pharr–San Juan–Alamo North with both his high school diploma and an associate’s degree that he’s earned completely free of charge.

Luis attends an early-college high school, a model made possible through collaboration between high schools and local college and university partners. The high schools, located on or near college campuses, provide high school students with exposure to real college coursework at no cost. In Luis’s school district in southwestern Texas, where almost 90 percent of students are considered economically disadvantaged, the opportunity to earn those credits without the burden of the price tag is invaluable.¹ “They take care of the transportation, meals, books—everything

is provided by the district,” explains Luis. “All you have to worry about is getting the grade.”²

Early-college high schools like Luis’s offer an environment that not only motivates and pushes students but also equips them with habits—like time management and study skills—needed for future academic success. Most fundamental, it provides students with the opportunity to earn an associate’s degree or college credits that will pave the way for a dramatically better financial future.

For Luis, that means medical school. For Orlando Ochoa, a student at nearby Memorial High School, the vision includes Yale Law School and a career in public-interest law, advancing his passion for social justice. Orlando is preparing to graduate with eighty-six college credits and an associate’s degree in sociology. “The idea of college always seemed at arm’s length—not quite within reach, but in sight,” he says. “This program left me with a new confidence in myself and in my future educational and career goals.”³

Luis and Orlando share that assured outlook, about both the experiences they’ve gained in high school and what the future may hold. “By the time we get to college,” explains Luis, “we already have the experience of what that life is like. We know how rigorous the programs are, so we’re more prepared—we’re not really even freshmen.”⁴

If not for the opportunities provided by the early-college high school model, their stories might have gone differently. The odds for successfully getting a college credential are alarmingly stacked against young people like Luis and Orlando. Since 2008, the rates of college enrollment among low-income students, white, black, and brown, have declined more steeply than any other group, down to just 45 percent.⁵ This problem is exacerbated by the fact that postsecondary education is becoming a requirement for more and more of today’s stable, well-paying jobs—particularly in fast-growing fields like STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), information technology, and health care.

Each year of education past high school adds approximately \$250,000 to an individual’s overall lifetime earnings.⁶ The impact of this is visible in the labor market statistics, as well. The unemployment rate stands at 5.2 percent for people with only a high school diploma, compared with

3.6 percent and just 2.7 percent for those with an associate's or bachelor's degree, respectively.⁷

By 2020 it's estimated that a full 65 percent of jobs will require some form of postsecondary degree.⁸ There are two sides to that coin. That statistic tells us that we must double-down on efforts to prepare young people with twenty-first-century skills and credentials. But it also means that if we don't, we'll be facing a worsening skills gap, which will threaten our overall economic growth and prosperity.⁹ That's why early-college high schools are so extraordinary. They equip students early on with the credentials and skills that they and our economy desperately need, and they build pathways to bridge the gap between high school and college.

The story began in 2002, when a group of philanthropic institutions led by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation collaborated with Jobs for the Future, a nonprofit working at the intersection of education and economic opportunity, to launch the Early College High School Initiative. With \$100 million in funding from these foundations, 280 high schools across the country—from California to North Carolina—were either established or redesigned to implement this new, blended model.¹⁰

The design specifications for an early-college high school vary from district to district and school to school, but there are a few unifying elements. The first key feature is partnership. Early colleges hinge on a close relationship with local universities, community colleges, or other community partners so that institutions have a shared sense of responsibility for student success. Second, early colleges provide students with opportunities to earn from one semester up to two years of transferable college credit at no cost—whether that takes place on a college campus, with an accredited professor in the high school classroom, or online. Finally, these schools foster a college-oriented culture, building in the necessary personal and academic support systems to ensure that students are managing the more challenging coursework and to prepare them for the rigors of college.

The goals of the initiative have always been centered on the success of low-income youth, English-language learners, first-generation college attenders, and students of color. Overwhelmingly, these are the students whom the education system is systematically failing; they are overrepresented among high school dropouts and underrepresented among the ranks

of college graduates.¹¹ The early-college model is based on the conviction that such students—young people like Luis and his classmates—are capable of not only meeting but exceeding traditional college-ready standards. What they lack more than anything is opportunity.

That's one thing that distinguish this model from advanced-placement classes, the International Baccalaureate, or other more widespread programs geared toward already high-performing students. "These are kids in high school who, in many cases, were hanging on by a thread," explains Marlene Seltzer, the former president and CEO of Jobs for the Future. "We wanted to show that a degree was not only possible, but probable for these students."¹²

From the start, the Gates Foundation and its fellow funders committed to tracking data over time to understand whether they were getting desired results and to determine how to change course if they were not. When the initiative launched, the partners commissioned a ten-year project to collect, store, analyze, and report out on data that would help them in that process. The Early College High School Student Information System, supported by Jobs for the Future, maintains this information, including evidence and documentation of student progress in schools across the country.¹³ It also captures demographic data to help identify whether students benefit in equal measure.

The partners used this information to conduct a study over time aimed at answering a pretty basic question: Are students getting better outcomes, and if so, is the impact felt equally by all types of students? What they found was that the model was changing the trajectory of overall academic performance in the schools. Ninety percent of students enrolled in early-college high schools were graduating successfully, significantly greater than the national rate of 78 percent.¹⁴

On top of that, the average early-college student was earning thirty-eight college credits by graduation day; for context, that has the potential to shave off about one-third of the cost of a bachelor's degree.¹⁵ Finally, the study found that 30 percent of graduates from early-college high schools had earned an associate's degree or a college certificate along with their diploma.¹⁶

When I spoke with Seltzer about this model, she remarked how audacious their goals have become, now that they've seen what's possible. "Along the way, you start to hear people looking at the stats and saying, 'Well, only 30 percent of the kids get an associate's degree,' and you have to encourage them to take a step back and recognize how crazy that is, in and of itself. That 30 percent is kids who may not have even finished high school, much less earned a degree!"¹⁷

The Pharr–San Juan–Alamo Independent School District (PSJA-ISD), where Luis and Orlando will receive their diplomas, is one outstanding example of an entire district implementing this approach. Situated about ten miles north of the Rio Grande near the border between Texas and Mexico, the PSJA-ISD serves 32,000 students across three cities.¹⁸ Ninety-nine percent of students in the district are Hispanic, 90 percent are considered economically disadvantaged, and the vast majority of their parents did not attend college.¹⁹

In 2007 the district's dropout rate was twice the average of the rest of the state.²⁰ That year, the district committed to radically altering those statistics and testing out new interventions that would ensure that all students could graduate ready for college. Driving these efforts was a new superintendent, Daniel King.

King came from the neighboring Hidalgo Independent School District, a substantially smaller district representing just 3,300 students.²¹ Under King's leadership, it had transformed from one of the lowest-performing districts in the state into a vanguard of the early-college model. In PSJA-ISD, the challenge was going to be determining whether that success could be scaled. Fortunately, he had a sympathetic ally and natural partner in Shirley Reed, the founding president of nearby South Texas College, who had long been deeply committed to the success of students across the region. That relationship made it possible to hit the ground running with dual enrollment opportunities.

King's initial approach probably baffled some of his colleagues. In partnership with South Texas College, his first step was to launch a new district academy, the College, Career, and Technology Academy, specifically for former dropouts. The academy offered a tailored curriculum that

allowed students to simultaneously complete requirements for high school graduation and begin taking college coursework. By starting with a program that targeted high school dropouts, King was able to take advantage of already available state funding meant to encourage districts to reach out and reengage this demographic.

The recovery campaign was high-touch, designed to increase the chances that students would see the message everywhere and remember it. Billboards and brochures were placed around town advertising the new academy. Superintendent King himself joined other members of the district in going door to door to potential participants to spread an attention-grabbing message: You dropped out of high school? Come take college courses today, for free.

By piloting the program at a small scale with existing designated funding, King cleared an easier path to implementing the early-college model more broadly. When his gamble worked—when nearly 900 former dropouts ended up graduating—all he had to do was point to the data to rally the political will necessary for scaling up.²² If those disengaged students were able to achieve such high rates of success, argued King, how can we refuse the same opportunity to the rest of our students?

Today, all four high schools in the district offer an early-college program. In three years, the graduation rate rose from 62 percent to 87 percent, and it has remained around 90 percent in the years since.²³ The curriculum is not always easy, as the students will be the first to attest. Karina Quintana, a senior at PSJA-ISD who will soon graduate with associate's degrees in interdisciplinary studies and mathematics, is quick to remind that they're still high school students, "so in addition to having essentially the full workload of college students, we also have other classes as part of the high school curriculum. Time management is incredibly important, especially with extracurriculars."²⁴ It is a sentiment echoed by Luis and Orlando, both of whom credit the high level of personalized support they received from counselors and administrators with keeping them balanced and on track.

In addition, what King and other administrators have learned about this model is that the most successful instances offer multiple pathways to success. Some students may benefit most from sampling only a few college-

level courses during their time, to gain exposure to the demands of college slowly without diving into an entire course load. Others are ready and willing to take steps to complete the degree. Some students may thrive in schools that focus on a STEM-intensive curriculum, designed to prepare students to pursue high-skilled, in-demand jobs in health, information technology, and advanced manufacturing. “Part of the potential power of the strategy,” says Joel Vargas of Jobs for the Future, “is that you can create multiple routes to postsecondary attainment, that aren’t unidirectional and that meet the needs and interests of all young people and lead them to a destination of value.”²⁵

This model has been implemented successfully all over the country, from southwestern Texas to rural Georgia to postindustrial Rust Belt cities in Ohio. Jordan Brown, a second-year medical student working toward his doctorate in osteopathy, earned his associate’s degree while at Lorain County Early College High School. There, he was exposed to an array of college-level courses that allowed him to explore and hone his interests. Jordan had always known that he wanted to go into the medical field, so while in high school he took advantage of opportunities to receive certifications in emergency response and as a state-trained nurse aide.

But rather than the certifications and the degree, Jordan cites his increased confidence as the most valuable offering of the school. Being able to start small and ramp up, taking a few college-level courses at a time and developing good study habits along the way gave him leeway to learn through trial and error about how to be successful. The risk was low; counselors and school administrators provided a supportive environment, and he wasn’t shouldering any of the cost—or debt—associated with the courses. “I remember being told that there would be more obstacles in college, especially if you didn’t develop a system around to support you,” explained Jordan. “But I still felt that I was at an advantage, because through this program I had developed the confidence to move forward through those challenges, instead of just getting paralyzed with stress and staying stagnant.”²⁶

Nine early-college high schools across the state of Ohio are part of a network supported by the education enterprise KnowledgeWorks.²⁷ Across those campuses, 79 percent of students earn at least one year’s worth of

college credits, and 95 percent continue on to higher education after graduating.²⁸ In Youngstown, often the poster child of a city grappling with postindustrial decline, the early-college high school is at the top of rankings, both statewide and nationally, with a 100 percent graduation rate.²⁹

Across the country, students like Jordan, Orlando, Karina, and Luis are proving the extent of what's possible when students are given the resources and chances to succeed. "I know that sometimes people think we're not prepared for it. People didn't believe that it's possible," says Luis. "But I believe that we are prepared. Most of the students are mature enough to know what we want, and know how to do the work. Most students are ready and willing to take advantage of the opportunity."³⁰

With college attainment among all Americans still hovering around 40 percent and incomes staying stagnant, early colleges provide us with a proven path that can help those Americans who need it the most.³¹ Yet of the 26,000 public high schools across the country, only 280 offer an early-college program, which means there is huge untapped potential to reach hundreds of thousands more students across the country. By 1918, every state in the union had made free public education the law. By 2018, every state should be well on its way to making early-college high school a reality.

A NEW NORMAL: GETTING A COLLEGE DEGREE AND A HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA, TOGETHER

With attention to a few key components, high schools could make getting a college degree along with a high school diploma the new normal in America. The first component, having postsecondary institutions in close proximity to high schools, can already be found in every part of the country—rural and urban. That means communities need to focus on the following three elements to make this approach a success.

Coordination across Institutions

Put simply, this model is about partnership. Although high schools, community colleges, and universities each play a role in ensuring students' success, these institutions rarely operate as an integrated system. The early-

college model requires collaboration among actors that are accustomed to working in isolation. For one thing, that can mean aligning curriculum. When San Diego Community College launched a new partnership with the local school district, it established an Early College Curriculum Committee with faculty from the high school and college to map out optimized course pathways to help bridge gaps between the school systems.³² It also may involve sharing human resources—like in PSJA-ISD, where the district has made a number of guidance counselors available to high school students on college campuses—or taking measures to ensure that college credit hours earned in high school will transfer seamlessly to local universities.

Rigid funding structures also pose a barrier to coordination and help to create the sense of a zero-sum game. School districts are generally funded from sources different than higher education and vice versa. In fact, in many states that want to restrict double-dipping, school districts actually lose funding when students enroll in college-level courses.³³ Implementing the early-college model requires blurring lines between systems that often disincentivize cooperation. Marlene Seltzer of Jobs for the Future describes the challenge best: “Somebody’s got to pay for it. And everybody looks at the price tag and says, we don’t have that in our budget.”³⁴ But the case of PSJA-ISD demonstrates that it doesn’t necessarily require a lot of new money. What it does require is a willingness to view resources in any given region as more fluid, whether that means pooling and redistributing funding streams, campus space, faculty, or student data to make cooperation possible.

Leadership is a powerful ingredient in this process. In PSJA-ISD, King was able to galvanize the entire district around a commitment to preventing dropouts and encouraging college readiness. Together with Shirley Reed, founding president of South Texas College, these two leaders were willing to use some political capital, and were able to steer their institutions to look toward the big picture, into partnerships that would maximize each of their roles in promoting a college-going culture. In each case, those institutions realized that they could modestly change the way that they did their work yet contribute to getting rapid and transformative outcomes for local students.

One of the most powerful things about the early-college model is that it provides a tangible way for all the actors in the local education system, K–12, community colleges, and universities, to hold a mirror up to their own institutions and ask how they need to change to achieve student success, not just to meet enrollment goals. Local leaders can lead the charge, and those who aren't willing to work together for the best interest of students need to be held accountable.

Willingness to Pilot and Experiment

Established institutions aren't always comfortable or adept at experimentation. But often, that's the best way to build a successful early-college high school program in a new place. That's because the model won't look the same everywhere. Rather, it can and should be built in a way that takes advantage of unique local conditions and makes the approach more likely to gain acceptance in that environment. In Minnesota, for example, the state has a requirement that 2 percent of school revenue be set aside for staff development.³⁵ Districts creatively have allowed teachers to put this money toward classes that will certify them to teach college-level courses in high school classrooms.³⁶ In North Carolina, early-college high schools are mandated to be located on a college campus so that students get an immersive experience; whereas in Missouri, dual-credit instructors can teach in high school classrooms as long as they are subject to the same supervision and evaluation process as typical college instructors.³⁷

The flexibility of this model also allows for easy adaptation for different environments and local needs. It's provided the blueprint for a number of STEM-intensive schools. One such example, Pathways in Technology Early College High School (P-TECH) in New York, actually involved a partnership between the City University of New York, the New York City Department of Education and IBM to design a curriculum that would prepare students for high-tech industries.³⁸ Chicago is now exploring a similar partnership with some of their major employers.

Pilot efforts can also serve as proofs of concept, as they did in the case of King's dropout academy. By demonstrating measurable results at a manageable scale, pilots can build confidence that change is possible, surface

unforeseen barriers, show how resources will have to be shifted among institutions, and lay the groundwork for permanent change. Sometimes that means piloting in one school as a way of transforming an entire district. In Dayton, Ohio, Dunbar Early College High School recently welcomed its first class of 500 students.³⁹ As the first early-college high school in the Dayton public school district, they hope to use it as a model for pursuing other partnerships and redesigning the rest of the local high schools.⁴⁰

Like so many of the examples in this book, this experimentation was often made possible by local or national philanthropy. Time and time again, I have found that a very modest amount of philanthropic dollars can help actors try something new to see if it works. They are often willing to disrupt old ways of working (and the resources dedicated to those approaches) once a new way is proved—but not before then. Funding pilots like these often become highly leveraged investments on the part of philanthropy.

More Conducive Policies

Local institutions must work together differently, but certain changes to state and federal policies would help make scaling this work even easier. States like California, North Carolina, Ohio, Texas, and Colorado have helped pave the way by reducing policy barriers that restrict dual enrollment, cap the number of credits students can earn in high school, or stymie the transfer of credits between institutions.⁴¹

Beyond just reducing road blocks, states can also enact policies to incentivize innovation. Simply offering policy language that defines the model, as has been done in North Carolina, Ohio, and Texas, helps set the stage for its spread and maintains high-quality implementation from district to district. In North Carolina, the state's openness to experimentation has spawned partnerships between the North Carolina Community College System and the State Board of Education, which have resulted in the growth of seventy-five early-college high schools serving 15,000 students.⁴²

Less common but no less interesting is the growth of performance-based funding, which allocates money for education systems based on outcomes or improvement toward goals as opposed to enrollment numbers. In

states like Indiana and Texas where this is being experimented with, advocates hope that the funding model will incentivize collaboration between institutions rather than competition.⁴³ With all of the unmet demand for early-college programs, these are steps that should be on every legislative agenda in the coming session.

At the federal level, one of the biggest barriers to scale is that Pell Grants—the most prominent source of federal financial aid—can't be used by students in high school. The Department of Education is now exploring alternatives through the Experimental Sites initiative, which is granting forty-four pilot colleges across twenty-three states the ability to offer Pell Grants to high school students taking dual-enrollment classes.⁴⁴ This moderate policy shift could go a long way toward helping the model scale by opening up another significant funding stream to cover the costs of early-college course work.