

## California

# OPINION: More Latinx students gain diplomas on time thanks to ‘early college’

*The next step? Legislative support to scale nationwide opportunities*

by **SONYA CHRISTIAN**

October 29, 2019

*The Hechinger Report is a national nonprofit newsroom that reports on one topic: education. Sign up for [our weekly newsletters](#) to get stories like this delivered directly to your inbox.*

**A**cross the United States, colleges are experimenting with new ways to increase the number of students on their campuses while helping them achieve their academic goals within a targeted timeline to ensure success.

With a student population of more than 30,000, serving a large Latinx population, [Bakersfield College](#) in Kern County, California, began to reevaluate how it could help increase high school graduation rates and serve more students at its campus locations.

Campus leaders, counselors, managers and others met with public high schools, charters schools and home-school organizations throughout the county, and out of those meetings a novel approach emerged: dual enrollment. That’s how the “early college” program got its start, as Bakersfield College built on the success of its dual-enrollment program and transformed it to reach more high school students, particularly in rural communities, on a significantly larger scale, through dual-enrollment courses in local high schools. In just five years, we’ve seen tremendous growth: from 74 enrollments in 2013-14 to 10,066 in 2018-19.

Although dual enrollment allows high school students to take an occasional college course while still in high school, “early college” involves partnering with traditional public schools, charter schools and home schools, and aims for the next step: Students, starting in the first year of high school, take their high school courses by day and college courses by afternoon or evening, with the ultimate goal of completing a two-year college certificate or associate degree in time for graduation from high school.

Early college was designed to increase high school graduation rates and bridge the gap between high school and college, leading to more frequent completion of certificates and degrees. In rural communities where high school students face even greater obstacles to postsecondary education, such a need is especially acute.

ADVERTISEMENT

Ad closed by **Google**

Stop seeing this ad

Why this ad? ▶

**Related:** [New early-college high school to pair students with neuroscientists](#)

Currently, more than 7,500 high school students are participating in early college at various stages. Results have been promising in Kern

County, in the heart of the nation's agriculture and oil industries, an area with an extremely low college completion rate. In rural areas of Kern County, 48 percent of the population 25 and older have high school diplomas, and just 9 percent have college degrees.

Since 2013, early-college students have passed their classes at a rate between 84 percent and 92 percent each term.

This success rate connects to another goal of the program: increasing college-going rates. Early college seeks to empower every high school student to graduate with at least 9 college credits and as many as 60 credits, enough for an associate degree. In this scenario, higher education becomes almost inevitable. A [study by the American Institutes for Research](#) found that students who take college courses while still in high school are between two and three times more likely to enroll in college by the end of high school, and that one in five early college students graduates from high school with an associate degree. (Note: the American Institutes for Research is among [the supporters of The Hechinger Report](#).)

In an era in which a college education is a standard expectation for workforce employment, early college can serve as a model for other higher-education institutions. The implementation of the program can be broken into various stages — from the first phase of establishing a partnership with high schools willing to offer their students dual-enrollment opportunities to the second phase where a pathway to a college certificate or degree is created and, finally, to the third phase where partner high schools embrace the primary goal of early college: that all high school students earn between 9 and 60 college credits toward a certificate or two-year degree.

While the results are promising, colleges considering such a model need to be prepared to do the following: find qualified high school instructors to teach the courses; meet the scheduling demands of after-school courses taught by college faculty on high school campuses; and address the costs of providing students with required textbooks.

**Related:** [Early-college high school graduates more likely to get degree](#)

In Kern County, six high schools have already committed to phase two, and one high school — McFarland High School — has committed to the third phase envisioned by early college. Recently renamed [McFarland High School Early College](#), the rural school is

home to a large immigrant farmworker population. Many students entering McFarland are English language learners, of low socioeconomic status and first-generation college students. McFarland welcomed each of this year's freshmen with a selection of 9 early college pathways, to complete between 12 and 60 college credits over the next four years.

McFarland High School Early College is offering students a choice of academic or career and technical education options — and the college courses are all being offered at their high school.

The early college model is already drawing attention within California. In October, a regional early college professional development conference is planned, followed by a statewide summit on the implementation of early college and the importance of intersegmental collaboration in improving degree attainment in California and across the nation.

It's clear that many students can benefit from a program such as early college, and I'm hopeful that with expansion and additional interest, state and national legislative leaders can see the transformative power of such a program. Perhaps then the interest can translate into legislative support to scale early college opportunities across America, following the lead of California state legislators, to aid students on their college pathways starting in ninth grade and enable institutions to meet the demands for college degree attainment that our nation needs.

*This story about [early college for Latinx students](#) was produced by [The Hechinger Report](#), a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education. Sign up for [our newsletter](#).*

*[Sonya Christian](#), president of [Bakersfield College](#) in Bakersfield, California, serves as vice chair and commissioner of the [Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges](#).*

The Hechinger Report provides in-depth, fact-based, unbiased reporting on education that is free to all readers. But that doesn't mean it's free to produce. Our work keeps educators and the public informed about pressing issues at schools and on campuses throughout the country. We tell the whole story, even when the details are inconvenient. Help us keep doing that.

**Join us today.**