POLICIES PAVED THE WAY: EARLY COLLEGE INNOVATION IN NORTH CAROLINA

By Joel Vargas,
with Jason Quiara

JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL INITIATIVE

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ABOUT JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

Jobs for the Future identifies, develops, and promotes new education and workforce strategies that help communities, states, and the nation compete in a global economy. In over 200 communities in 41 states, JFF improves the pathways leading from high school to college to family-sustaining careers.

THE EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL INITIATIVE

Early college is a bold approach to high school reform, based on the principle that academic rigor, combined with the opportunity to save time and money, is a powerful motivator for students to work hard and meet serious intellectual challenges. Early college schools blend high school and college in a rigorous yet supportive program, compressing the time it takes to complete a high school diploma and the first two years of college.

The schools are designed so that low-income youth, first-generation college goers, English language learners, students of color, and other young people underrepresented in higher education can simultaneously earn a high school diploma and one to two years of transferable college credit—tuition free.

Today, the Early College High School Initiative includes more than 200 schools serving more than 42,000 students in 24 states.

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COVER: Courtesy of David Binder, 2008

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Joel Vargas is a program director at Jobs for the Future. He studies and advises on state policies that promote improved rates of high school and postsecondary success for underserved students. He focuses on new education pathways that blend high school and college, such as early college high schools and comprehensive dual enrollment programs. Dr. Vargas has directed, initiated, and studied a variety of middle school and high school programs designed to help more underrepresented students get into and through a postsecondary education. He also has been a teacher, editor, and research assistant for the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, as well as coeditor of *Double the Numbers: Increasing Postsecondary Credentials for Underrepresented Youth* (Harvard Education Press) and *Minding the Gap: Why Integrating High School with College Makes Sense and How to Do It* (Harvard Education Press). He was featured in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* as one of "Higher Education's Next Generation of Thinkers." Dr. Vargas received a B.S. in journalism from Boston University and an Ed.D from the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Jason Quiara is a senior project manager working on the research, development, and implementation of state policies to promote college and career readiness. His primary focus is on creating innovative secondary school designs and pathways that are scalable and sustainable, particularly those that feature college-level coursework in high school. Mr. Quiara comes to JFF from the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE), where he served as director of policy and research. There, he directed a six-state initiative called College Ready New England, which partnered with various organizations including The College Board, Data Quality Campaign, TERI, New England Council, and Nellie Mae Education Foundation. The goal of this initiative was to advance state policies and promote programs that increase educational attainment and "college-readiness" for underserved student populations across New England. Prior to his position as director, Mr. Quiara worked as a policy fellow with NEBHE. Before NEBHE, he served as a residential counselor for two years with Boys Hope Girls Hope of Southern California, where he helped to guide college-access and family-support services for first-generation college goers and low-income students in Orange County, California. Mr. Quiara holds a Master's in education policy and management from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Bachelor's degrees in history and philosophy from Boston College.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 2004, the state of North Carolina has started over 100 innovative high schools, including 70 early college high schools. Although the schools are young, they show early outcomes that are better than those of other high schools in the state: lower grade-to-grade dropout rates and higher scores on end-of-course exams than those at schools with comparable student compositions. A substantial number of early college students are also completing college courses before high school graduation.

This brief describes how North Carolina has spurred and supported this successful educational innovation. It is told from the perspective of leaders of early college schools who were asked about the state policies that have supported their success. It provides a model to other states for creating effective, financially sustainable pathways from high school through the first critical years of postsecondary education.

School leaders said that formal state processes and policies—such as waivers for early college schools and similar efforts—have helped them. But even more emphatically, they believed the foundation for innovation is laid in the strong signals that state leaders sent to local superintendents, school boards, and college leaders encouraging innovation in cooperative programs between high schools and colleges.

By taking at least three key steps, state leaders cultivated a climate for colleges and schools to work together creatively:

- Enacting the Innovative Education Initiatives Act;
- Supporting the North Carolina New Schools Project; and
- Granting start-up funds to early-colleges that supported the costs of high school-college coordination among other important activities.

Several preexisting state policies also paved the way for the creation of early college schools. These policies and processes, combined with a supportive climate for innovation, helped forge a "can do" attitude among local education leaders in creating North Carolina's early college schools.

However, early college leaders cited remaining barriers to innovation that are indicative of larger misalignments between the expectations of high school and college in North Carolina. This suggests that North Carolina must bridge such fissures in order to sustain and expand the innovative practices that early college schools have demonstrated can improve college readiness and completion for all students.

To do so, the state could consider two future directions that build on the success of the early college innovation:

- Take what is best about the early college innovation to seed the development of similar school designs and strengthen other secondary-postsecondary connections; and
- Identify how policies affect early college, and use this understanding to improve policies that affect the transition of all students from high school through college.

Continued commitment by North Carolina leaders to sustain innovations like early college schools and to remove remaining obstacles can pave the way for making successful innovation the norm.

INTRODUCTION

This brief describes how North Carolina has spurred and supported educational innovation to raise high school graduation and college-readiness rates. It is told from the perspective of leaders of early college schools that are supporting more students to become ready for college. The schools, numbering 70 in North Carolina, are designed so that students—especially those with traditionally low rates of high school and college success—can graduate high school with an Associate's degree or up to two years of transferrable college credit at no cost.

This is primarily a success story, one that should encourage North Carolina to hold its course and illustrate how other states can support the creation of better pathways through high school and college. Schools and colleges that partner in early college schools are both empowered to innovate and accountable for producing results.

Early college students have made steady progress toward graduation, and they also have completed substantial college coursework *while in high school*. Particularly impressive is that many of these students would typically not be expected to start or complete college, perhaps not even graduate from high school.

On average, dropout rates in early college schools are significantly lower (0.78 percent) than statewide rates for traditional schools (4.97 percent).[1] More than 60 percent of early college schools outperform other schools in their districts on state end-of-course exam growth targets.[2] Early college students also complete significant amounts of college coursework; most students enroll in college courses as early as the ninth grade, and they complete several courses in their first two years of study. Over 90 percent of students receive passing grades in their college courses: over 82 percent receive a C or better.[3]

This success has been the product of leadership in local communities and concerted state-level action and support. For example, enactment of the Innovative Education Initiatives Act was one of several clear signals to local school boards and colleges that state leaders would support collaboration, not thwart it. Even as the state faces severe budget constraints resulting from deep recession, Governor Bev Perdue continues to support the state's early college initiative launched under her predecessor, Mike Easley. Former Governor Easley and the legislature also provided support for the start-up costs of early college schools, support that continues under the current legislature and Governor Perdue today.

Local and national businesses and philanthropies partnered with public leaders to create the North Carolina New Schools Project, an independent nonprofit organization created in 2003 to plan and support implementation of more than 100 new high schools and school redesigns, including early college schools. National support included important investments by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Local support continues today—a commitment to meet the statewide challenge of rising demands in the labor market for a highly educated, skilled workforce. On top of private support, key public agencies and institutions—including the Department of Public Instruction, the North Carolina Community College System, the University of North Carolina, and local colleges and universities—have been crucial partners in the development of early college schools.

However, although the success of early college schools has been the result of such broad state support, there remain state policies that impede practices that early college school leaders believe would benefit their students. These barriers reflect stubborn, systemic misalignments in state standards, assessment systems, and student supports between secondary and postsecondary education. For example, early college schools create a more effective and efficient course of study from grades 9 through 13 by using college courses to cover both high school and college content. This eliminates gaps and redundancies in curricula and makes the costs of the schools sustainable. The schools are prevented, however, from further streamlining because state-mandated end-of-course exams align poorly with the demands of college courses. Thus, school leaders feel compelled to enroll students in the corresponding high school courses, even when college courses serve them effectively—and more efficiently.

All told, even as North Carolina's early college schools demonstrate success at preparing students for college, they also uncover fundamental challenges to promoting college readiness broadly. Such challenges and constraints underscore the need for further changes to policies that could stand in the way of early college sustainability or the expansion of similar strategies.

North Carolina may be at a tipping point. Early college schools, including several with high percentages of low-income students, already serve nearly 10,000 students. As the schools mature and demonstrate continued success, they and other "college credit in high school" designs may prompt their wider adoption by districts and colleges and yield significant increases in high school and college success rates.

Scaling up and making successful innovation the norm will require the removal of any remaining obstacles. And in these tough economic times, it will first and foremost require sustained commitment by state and local leaders. Districts and colleges under increasing financial strain may feel pressure to sacrifice innovation for conservatism at a time when innovation is most needed. For example, the state's colleges—particularly community colleges—are absorbing large enrollment increases in a time of declining resources. It would be tempting to decrease early college access for high school students in the face of such pressures, but college and state leaders have admirably held steady in their support because of the visible success of early college students.

METHODOLOGY

The research for this report was designed to identify the state policies that have been supportive of the unique early college design. It includes interviews with principals and staff at four early college schools, pioneers who blazed trails in policy to create these new schools.

The research focused on these schools for both their similarities and their differences. They are similar in their success educating an economically and racially diverse group of students, and are chosen for the research based on the premise that we would learn the most about what it takes to innovate successfully from highly successful innovators. Each school serves students demographically representative of their districts, with slightly more low-income students than the norm.

Among the state's early college schools—which as a group outpace statewide graduation rates and achievement overall—these four schools show special success in supporting students' academic growth from year to year when compared with statewide figures. According to the Education Value Added Assessment System, which North Carolina uses to help track school performance, students in these schools are making significantly greater progress on average than their peers statewide based on end-of-course exam results for the 2007-08 school year. This is a robust indication of the value added by schools because the calculation is based on longitudinal data that compares students' present and past performance; in contrast, typical point-in-time data may merely reflect what students already know when they come to school. In all of the selected early college schools, student growth on EVAAS outpaced state averages on 40 to 82 percent of end-of-course exams.[4] On none of the exams administered did any of the four schools see student gains lower than the state average.

The schools were also selected to vary by type of college partner. This suggests how policy issues could vary depending on whether the partner was a two-year or four-year college.

The four schools also vary in the degree to which they have requested waivers from state policy, helping us understand to what extent formal policy exemptions play a role in the development of schools. National experience suggests that implementation of key early college design features hinges on exemptions from existing state policies—not just on the creation of new policies.

FINDINGS

WHAT MATTERS: CLIMATE FOR INNOVATION

In 2003, North Carolina enacted the Innovative Education Initiatives Act, bold legislation that established cooperative education programs between local school boards and community colleges for students who would benefit from accelerated instruction or were at risk of dropping out. The act also created a structure for local high schools and colleges to innovate as they cooperate. Because the North Carolina Board of Education designates early college schools as "cooperative innovative high school programs," they have received a number of waivers from state policies that would otherwise stand in the way of their creation. As expected, school leaders said that approval of waiver requests is important and has enabled high schools and colleges to work in concert to make the transitions between them seamless; in contrast, education policies typically incent secondary and postsecondary education to act as isolated enterprises.

However, the most surprising discovery of the research was what leaders cited most often as important for innovation. Formal state processes and policies mattered, but even more emphatically they believed the foundation for innovation was laid in the strong signals that state leaders sent to local superintendents, school boards, and college leaders encouraging innovation in cooperative programs between high schools and colleges. The Innovative Education Initiatives Act created not only a structure but also a climate for colleges and schools to work together creatively. School leaders also said that the state's investment in start-up funds for early college schools and support for the New Schools Project contributed to a climate for innovation.

In essence, local leaders who wanted to build new pathways from high school through college said they trusted that state leaders would stand behind them. One principal said:

> YOU CAN APPLY FOR ALL OF THE WAIVERS YOU WANT. IF YOU DON'T HAVE VISIONARY LEADERSHIP [LOCALLY], PEOPLE WHO ARE THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX AND ARE WILLING TO ALLOW YOU TO DO THOSE THINGS, THEN WE CAN'T EXIST. . . . AND THAT HAS ALLOWED US TO THINK OUTSIDE OF THE BOX AND DO THE THINGS THAT WE THINK ARE NECESSARY TO MOVE OUR STUDENTS FORWARD. . . . [NORTH CAROLINA LEADERS] STATED VERY CLEARLY THAT IF YOU DECIDE TO TAKE ON THIS RESPONSIBILITY AND NEW INITIATIVE, IT SHOULD NOT LOOK LIKE WHAT WE HAVE IN NORTH CAROLINA CURRENTLY. IT STARTED AT THE VERY TOP, TRICKLED DOWN TO US, AND WE WERE JUST FORTUNATE ENOUGH HERE TO HAVE THE TYPE

OF LEADERS THAT WERE RECEPTIVE TO THINKING OUTSIDE OF THE BOX.

—EARLY COLLEGE PRINCIPAL

Comments by principals about the latitude they enjoy were often accompanied by references to accountability. School staff are acutely aware that continued local and state support depends on their ability to improve student outcomes. And they assume their relative autonomy will be curtailed if outcomes are not promising.

This implicit understanding among school, district, and state leaders is complemented by the awarding of waivers to early college schools—important exemptions from rules that would otherwise present barriers. Yet principals clearly viewed the waivers as a technical matter, a detail (albeit an important one) against a backdrop of trust and permission created by the state to set the stage for innovation and improved performance. Some principals even noted that they could not precisely remember which waivers permitted them to do what; they were more aware of being able to do things differently because of the state's role in catalyzing the latent initiative of local leaders.

KEY STATE POLICIES ARE CONDUCIVE TO THE EARLY COLLEGE DESIGN

Several preexisting policies in North Carolina paved the way for the creation of early college schools across the state. Additionally, the state invested in human resources, enabling colleges and high schools to work in concert, and provided an exemption process for overcoming policy barriers, including those stemming from disconnects between K-12 and postsecondary education. These policies and processes, combined with a supportive climate for innovation, helped forge a "can do" attitude among local education leaders in creating North Carolina's early college schools.

Dual Enrollment Policies

Before the Innovative Education Initiatives Act, North Carolina policy was favorable to college-course taking by high school students in many respects. The state has two long-standing dual enrollment policies:

- *The Huskins Bill* enables college courses to be delivered specifically to high school students, whether at a high school or a college. "Huskins courses" are based on agreements between the high school and the college. The agreements must be approved by the North Carolina Community College System.
- *Concurrent enrollment* enables high school students to take college courses at the college and along with other college students.

Although not instituted to promote college and career readiness, both policies have made dual enrollment a state-accepted practice and could be adapted for use by early college schools. For example, national research by JFF shows that early college schools and similar designs are helped when both colleges and high schools can claim enrollment-based funding for students who are "dual enrollees" in high school and college at the same time—as they can in North Carolina. Another enabling condition is when the state covers college tuition fees for students—as North Carolina does for community college courses—or covers them with financial aid.[5]

THE [COLLEGE] WILL LIKELY PAY OUR COLLEGE LIAISON'S SALARY, BECAUSE THEY CAN'T REALLY AFFORD NOT TO. THE CURRENT [PRESIDENT] UNDERSTANDS THE IMPORTANCE OF THIS ROLE, AND THE SCHOOL'S ABILITY TO GARNER POSITIVE PRESS IS AN ADDITIONAL ASSET TO THE [COLLEGE].

—EARLY COLLEGE PRINCIPAL

In our interviews, early college leaders did not discuss these policies directly. We asked about the need for exceptions and the interviewees required none. Nevertheless, the policies are important, given that national research has shown how state dual enrollment policies can be incentives for leveraging college courses to increase the postsecondary success of underrepresented students.[6]

The High School–College Partnership: Key Waivers and Resources

Early college differs in critical ways from North Carolina's preexisting dual enrollment programs. For example, the purpose of Huskins courses is to supplement the limited course offerings at many rural high schools, and concurrent enrollment is designed as an addition to the school day for students who want the enrichment of a college course.

Early college, however, is not an add-on or supplement. Rather, it is designed to make college an integral part of the high school experience, particularly for low-income students and other underrepresented groups. Just one manifestation of this is that almost all early college schools in North Carolina are located on college campuses.[7] The course of study at early college schools is also carefully designed collaboratively by high schools and colleges to guide students along a pathway toward graduation and a college degree or credential.

All this means that early college requires a strong partnership and some synchronization between high schools and colleges. Indeed, policy waivers and other forms of state support appear to have been crucial in enabling these high school–college relationships in North Carolina.

WE'VE BEEN GIVEN THE FLEXIBILITY TO CHANGE SCHEDULES AND CLASS STRUCTURES IN WAYS THAT WOULDN'T BE ALLOWED IN A TRADITIONAL SETTING. WE'RE ALWAYS LOOKING AT CHANGES, LOOKING AT OUR INCOMING COHORTS AND PLANNING AROUND THEM. IN OTHER SETTINGS, WE'D LIKELY BE TOLD THAT A LOT OF WHAT WE DO HERE WON'T WORK, BUT WE HAVE THE FLEXIBILITY TO DO WHAT WE FEEL WORKS BEST.

—EARLY COLLEGE PRINCIPAL

Calendar

One important waiver permits early college schools to adjust their calendars to correspond to the schedule of the partnering college. Because all early college students take college courses, it is important that they begin the school year at the same time that college courses begin. This is no small exemption given a 2006 North Carolina law barring K-12 public schools from starting the academic year earlier than August 25—two or three weeks later than the start of fall classes at most community colleges.

High School–College Liaison

State support for early college partnerships also comes in the form of resources for employing a liaison to coordinate the high school–college relationship. Early college principals say that this position is critical for coordinating student schedules, facilitating the design of the course of study as a joint effort of high school and college staff, and developing training for and facilitating communication between high school and college faculty in support of students. The liaison is integral to early college, so much so that a number of principals expressed concerns about how to preserve the position

after state start-up funds expire. Some speculated that the college would eventually ensure sustainability of the position, based on the success of the school.

FLEXIBILITY FROM SEAT-TIME REQUIREMENTS: BUILDING AND SUSTAINING EARLY COLLEGE PATHWAYS TO COLLEGE READINESS AND SUCCESS

The early college design is ambitious. Over the course of five years or less, students complete high school requirements, prepare for college-level work, and succeed in a substantial number of college courses leading to a college credential or degree. This requires substantial support for the traditionally underprepared students whom the schools target.

Traditional high schools are not designed to enable the seamless movement of students between high school and college. As a prime example, "seat time" is a driving factor in how almost all schools organize themselves. High school graduation requirements in most states are tied to the completion of Carnegie Units—standardized units of the amount of time students are to spend studying specified subject matter—rather than to evidence of what students have learned and whether that learning meets the expectations colleges have of entering students. Moreover, state and local policies may prescribe when and in what order students can take specific courses, and states typically tie funding to the number of hours students spend in these courses.

North Carolina requires students to complete four years of math and four years of English in order to receive a "College/University Prep" high school diploma. Moreover, all students must pass end-of-course exams in five subjects to demonstrate what they have learned.[8] Some districts, including those cosponsoring the schools in this study, require even more. And in recent years, state policymakers have raised the number of course requirements in an attempt to raise the academic preparedness of graduates for college-level coursework. This is a sensible strategy for raising standards in traditional schools: state-mandated course requirements are clearly a fundamental policy lever for influencing the academic rigor of high schools.

However, early college schools are not traditional schools. These schools have required flexibility in regard to state and district seat-time requirements in order to help all students prepare for and complete college courses. North Carolina has allowed many schools to alter the prescribed sequence of courses. School staff explained that they do so in order to help students meet prerequisites for college courses more efficiently.

Another reason school staff said that seat-time flexibility has been important is that they can make courses more relevant by facilitating connections between key concepts across subject areas and applying concepts to real-world problems. For example, some schools have created cross-disciplinary courses—what some call "blended" courses or curricula. A North Carolina early college school has implemented a World Dynamics Forum curriculum that combines course requirements for English 2, civics, and economics into one comprehensive course. The curriculum is a continent-to-continent study, focusing on the development of each continent's civilization, earth dynamics, and environmental factors that shaped its unique economy and culture. Reading materials for English correspond with the topic and region under study.

Because blended courses simultaneously cover multiple course requirements, they have the added benefit of making more time for college courses in students' schedules. Early college staff cited the important flexibility that districts give them to offer such courses.

Another example of how schools are using flexibility from seat time and reordering courses is for the purpose of better preparing students for entrance assessments for college-credit-bearing courses. At one early college school, many of the first students struggled to pass the COMPASS placement exam—a test that focuses heavily on algebraic concepts—by tenth grade. After the school rearranged its math sequence so that Algebra 2 immediately followed Algebra 1—instead of the state norm of having geometry follow Algebra 1—the COMPASS passing rates rose from less than 50 percent to a range of 80 to 90 percent.

Another important type of seat-time waiver centers on dual crediting, in which college courses can count for both college credit and high school credit in applicable subjects. Dual credit is critical to the early college design: it enables students to graduate high school and complete several college courses within five years. Many early college schools have received waivers from North Carolina's usual policy not to allow college courses to count toward nonelective high school course requirements. The waivers have been essential in designing the early college course of study, even though schools generally avoid using dual credit for high school courses that have end-of-course exams.

North Carolina's standard policy against dual credit probably arose because the state intended to supplement course offerings at rural high schools and wanted to avoid paying both the high school and the college for the same service, which could be perceived as "double dipping." Far from double dipping, dual crediting in early college schools improves efficiencies because it is one fewer course that the high school has to offer. These savings are reinvested in the instruction and supports that students need to catch up academically, prepare for college courses, and ensure that they succeed in them. All schools in this study discussed the critical support services they offered, such as AVID, extended-day instruction, college foundation skills courses, and "wraparound" courses that provide students with supplemental instruction from a high school teacher while taking a college course.

BECAUSE WE ARE A DIFFERENT SCHOOL, WE HAVE ADVANTAGES IN RECRUITMENT OVER TRADITIONAL SCHOOLS. WHEN I WAS FIRST HIRED HERE, DOZENS OF PEOPLE THAT I WORKED WITH TOLD ME THAT WHEN I HAVE OPENINGS TO PLEASE GIVE THEM A CALL. WE CAN BE MORE SELECTIVE IN MAKING SURE THAT EACH NEW TEACHER HIRED IS A GOOD FIT FOR OUR SCHOOL.

—EARLY COLLEGE PRINCIPAL

SUPPORT FOR SMALL SCHOOLS: CREATING AN APPEALING, EFFECTIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

One key aspect of North Carolina's strategy for raising high school graduation and college-ready rates is to create small schools that establish conditions for personalized support and differentiated instruction. Early college is just one of several small-school redesigns supported by the North Carolina New Schools Project as part of its

EVERY TEACHER HAS A SIGNIFICANT BLOCK OF TIME EACH MORNING THAT CAN BE USED TO MEET WITH PARENTS. WE'VE HAD AT LEAST 25 TO 30 PARENT CONFERENCES THIS PAST SEMESTER. WE DON'T DO THIS AT THE SAME POINT THAT MOST SCHOOLS DO. WE PROACTIVELY SCHEDULE THESE MEETINGS IF STUDENTS ARE FALLING OFF JUST A LITTLE BIT. IF ONE OR TWO TEACHERS OBSERVE SOMETHING THAT DOESN'T SEEM RIGHT WITH A KID (WHETHER IT BE EMOTIONALLY, BEHAVIORALLY, ETC.), OUR LEVEL OF PERSONALIZATION ALLOWS US TO FOLLOW UP ON THESE ISSUES AND SPEAK TO PARENTS TO SEE IF ADDITIONAL SUPPORT IS NEEDED.

—EARLY-COLLEGE COUNSELOR

mandate to manage the public investment in creating new schools and to provide those schools with technical assistance.

School staff say that support from the New Schools Project, along with policy waivers allowing schools to operate at a smaller-than-usual size, have been essential. It has enabled early college schools to attract and keep strong teachers, encouraged teacher collaboration and ongoing professional development, and created a highly supportive environment that helps students stay engaged in their education.

Small schools run counter to decades of mainstream educational thinking. State policies have long reflected the vision of James Conant Bryant, president of Harvard University from 1933 to 1953, for the comprehensive high school: schools that through economies of scale could offer an array of curricular offerings based on student abilities and interests. The push for these economies of scale is embodied, for example, in a North Carolina policy that requires schools to have a certain number of paid teachers and students as a condition of using state funds to employ a school principal. Many early college schools are too small to reach that threshold as they start up with their first class of students, and they would be unable to start without a waiver to subsidize the cost of a school leader in the first year.

Smallness is a feature of the early college design that school leaders frequently cite as central to success. Principals and teachers at every school stressed that the design is predicated on personal knowledge of each student, an understanding of his or her needs, and the ability to pay more attention to meeting those needs. They surmised that many students would fail to reach their potential—or would even drop out—if they remained in a traditional school. These perceptions are supported by data showing that a strong majority of early college schools in North Carolina have higher ninth-to-tenth-grade promotion rates than traditional schools.[9]

Smallness also supports teacher recruitment efforts and the collaborative culture that contributes to teacher job satisfaction and retention. Principals, who reported being heavily involved in teacher recruitment, said the small-school setting gave them an advantage in bringing in the best candidates. And they said that teachers stay for similar reasons: the small size and flexible schedule allow teachers to collaborate, work closely with principals and other administrators, and participate in many professional development opportunities.

Indeed, surveys of teachers in North Carolina's early college schools indicate that they are more satisfied with their jobs. In early college schools, 48 percent of teachers strongly agree that their school is "a good place to work and learn," compared with 26 percent of teachers in schools statewide.[10]

Principals cited the New Schools Project as a key resource supporting the professional development and innovative practices that are the hallmarks of early college. The New Schools Project supplements the professional development of school leaders and teachers provided by districts and the state. It also provides instructional coaches who help schools implement best practices within the classroom. One principal said that the New Schools Project continually pushed schools to innovate—and provided commensurate support. The high quality of early college implementation throughout the state is largely a function of the New Schools Project's aggressive support for innovation, based on a clear framework of early college design principles.

EARLY COLLEGE HIGHLIGHTS FISSURES IN ALIGNMENT BETWEEN HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE

Early college leaders cited two barriers to innovation: restrictions on access to developmental courses in colleges by high school students, and the challenge of reconciling end-of-course exam content with the demands of college courses. These are indicative of larger misalignments between the expectations of high school and college in North Carolina.

> WE'RE DEALT AN ACCOUNTABILITY MEASURE THAT IS A CHALLENGE TO OUR TEACHERS IN THEIR ABILITY TO ALSO FULFILL OUR MISSION OF PROVIDING STUDENTS WITH TEAM-BUILDING, TECHNOLOGY-RICH, PROJECT-BASED, AND HIGHER-LEVEL THINKING SKILLS. THAT'S WHY OUR TEACHERS COME IN AT 7:00 AND DON'T LEAVE UNTIL 6:00, BECAUSE WE'RE TRYING TO FIT ALL OF THESE THINGS IN AND BE CREATIVE WITH THE WAY WE TEACH. WE'VE BEEN SUCCESSFUL THOUGH, AND WE'RE PROUD OF THAT.
>
> —EARLY COLLEGE TEACHER

In both cases, early college—a design that ambitiously tries to align high school and college—highlights policy barriers that all secondary schools and colleges face in bringing their standards into greater alignment. For example, it is paradoxical—but telling—that early college staff see students succeed in college courses and yet worry about ensuring that those students pass state-required assessments in the same subjects. The schools accomplish both, but as result of special and inefficient efforts that would not be necessary in a more seamless, aligned system. This suggests that North Carolina must bridge such fissures in order to improve college readiness and completion for all students, not just those in early college schools.

Reducing Remediation: Preparing Underprepared Students Early for College-Level Coursework

One problem with which early college leaders grapple is how to build pathways to college courses for students who do not initially meet the courses' placement exam "cut scores." Because developmental courses at the college are designed to prepare students for college-level work, many principals reason that these courses could help. Indeed, the North Carolina Community College System provides access to developmental courses for high school students within limits; up to 10 percent of any given high school's grade-level cohort may enroll.[11]

The policy is rational given the high demand for developmental courses by regular students at the colleges and the growing enrollment pressures in the system overall. But principals of early college schools that are based at community colleges viewed the limitation as a barrier.

In many ways, the problem is indicative of a fundamental question that arises in a system where the requirements of high school differ from the preparation needed for college. Whose responsibility is it to support students in the ill-designed secondary-to-postsecondary transition? The high schools feel that the colleges are best positioned to make their expectations clear and attainable through developmental courses. And while colleges have tried to support underprepared students—in part, by offering developmental courses—they do not have the capacity to provide these services for all high school students.

Fortunately, early college schools and partnering colleges did not stop at identifying the problem. Some have jointly developed strategies for helping such students prepare for credit-bearing courses. At least one early college has created a "bridge" course, taught by high school faculty and codesigned with college faculty, based on the skills students are expected to gain in developmental courses. Others have brought together high school and college faculty to determine how to better embed college expectations into high school coursework across curricula. One school is exploring the possibility with its college partner of using computer-based tutorials during and outside the school day and school year to bring students up to speed and qualify them for credit-bearing coursework in targeted subjects.

What is especially noteworthy about these approaches is their emphasis on high school–college collaboration and joint responsibility for students' college readiness. These approaches are similar in many respects to promising statewide early-assessment programs in California and several other states. College readiness is assessed early in a high school student's career, and high school and college faculty codevelop strategies for helping students address gaps between existing and needed preparation.[12]

In one of the best-known programs, the California State University system has worked with the state board of education and the California Department of Education to add diagnostic college-readiness questions to the California Standards Test, the state's eleventh-grade English and math exam. The questions are optional for students, and those who choose to complete them are advised of their results—and their college readiness. Those considered proficient on the augmented tests can bypass developmental courses and placement tests upon admission to either a CSU or California community college campus.[13] Those who do not score high enough may have access to "bridge courses" in twelfth grade. Much as the North Carolina early college faculty worked with college faculty to create a course preparing students for college-level work while in high school, CSU and K-12 faculty codesigned California's bridge courses to improve students' academic preparation before leaving high school.

Aligning End-of-Course Exams with College Expectations

Early-college principals cited end-of-course exams as a barrier to helping students complete college courses. While the state holds early college schools accountable for student performance on end-of-course exams, school staff feel that preparing students for the exams is not necessarily consistent with preparing and supporting them for success in college courses. In addition, staff feel pressure to make tradeoffs—or to expend additional resources—when determining how to ensure that students both pass the exams and succeed in college courses.

This teacher saw end-of-course exams as unrelated to teaching the "higher-level" skills that are at the core of the early college design. Some interviewees said that the end-of-course exams stressed skills such as taking multiple-choice tests and reciting memorized facts, rather than demonstrations of deep understanding of content and critical thinking.

Even though the degree to which the teachers are correct in their perception is outside the scope of this study, we found a number of indications that schools have trouble squaring the expectations of end-of-course exams with what is expected of and taught to students in college courses. For example, some early college schools have received waivers from the restriction on dual crediting for nonelective high school graduation requirements, including for courses with an end-of-course exam requirement. However, they have not used those waivers because they are uncertain that mastery of a college course will equate with success on an end-of-course exam in the same subject. One principal noted that students would need to take two years of college chemistry at the partnering community college to cover enough of the content in the end-of-course exam for high school chemistry. In a system that aligned secondary and postsecondary standards, passing a college-level course would offer assurance that a student had mastered high school content in the same subject.

All this testifies to the need for greater efforts to align high school standards and accountability systems with college-level expectations. In schools that have made great strides helping a broad range of students succeed in a significant number of college courses, school staff say traditional high school assessments do not correlate to college success.

POSSIBLE FUTURE DIRECTIONS

With its 70 early college schools, North Carolina is not only reaching significant numbers of the state's low-income high school population; the innovative use of dual crediting, combined with student supports in these schools, provides a model for creating effective, financially sustainable pathways from grades 9 to 13. However impressive the impact, though, many more North Carolina students could benefit from successful innovations like early college. The state is in a unique position to accelerate successes, tip statewide college-ready graduation rates for underrepresented populations, and make the best innovations the norm for all high school students. To pursue this opportunity, North Carolina can:

> Take what is best about the early college innovation to seed the development of similar school designs and strengthen other secondary-postsecondary connections; and

> Identify how policies affect early college and use this understanding to improve policies that affect the transition of all students from high school through college.

TAKE WHAT IS BEST ABOUT THE EARLY COLLEGE INNOVATION TO SEED THE DEVELOPMENT OF SIMILAR SCHOOL DESIGNS AND STRENGTHEN OTHER SECONDARY-POSTSECONDARY CONNECTIONS.

Use early college successes to promote other "college credit in high school" designs adaptable to local contexts.

The Innovative Education Initiatives Act as enabling legislation, combined with promising practices of early college schools, can serve as a basis for expanding schools that feature early preparation for and access to college-level courses. Unlike that of an early college, the college-credit attainment goal in these schools might not be a full two years or an Associate's degree, and the high school may not be located on a college campus. But like an early college, the schools would be designed to ensure that students—especially those who are underrepresented in postsecondary education—earn some college credit. An underlying principle of the schools, as it is with early college, would be that completion of a quotient of key college coursework in high school gives students momentum toward completing a postsecondary degree or credential. Common, essential design features for these schools would include those that have been fundamental to the success of early college schools in North Carolina and nationwide. This paper has elucidated on some of these points because they surfaced in interviews with school leaders:

> An untracked academic program aligned to college-ready standards;

- College-level coursework as part of the core curriculum for all students—comprising either transferable academic courses that meet core curriculum requirements or technical courses that meet Associate's degree requirements in high-demand, well-paying occupations;
- Explicit instruction of successful academic and social behaviors for college;
- Adequate instructional time and catch-up support for students who enter with weak academic skills;
- Consistent use of engaging instructional practices across all content areas that scaffold students toward college readiness;
- Formal tutoring and supports for students in college courses;
- Organizational practices that reinforce an effort-based, college-going culture; and
- Shared responsibility between secondary and college partners for the delivery of college-ready instructional programming and support.

Expansion of such schools should be accompanied by the assistance of an organization like the North Carolina New Schools Project that has a track record of success with early college schools. Its success results from providing a common platform of support and training for principals and teachers to ensure the implementation of essential and innovative design features. Examples of this support include NCNSP's provision of coaches, on-going training, and other resources for school leaders and teachers that stress the evidence-based instructional strategies that help students prepare for and master college-level work. This support has helped to ensure consistent quality across schools.

North Carolina's dual enrollment policies would be supportive of these new designs. The reinstitution of funding for dual enrollment courses in areas beyond math and science would make these policies even better; such funding was ended in the FY2010 budget. The legislature exempted early college schools from these new limitations on funding for dual enrollment, recognizing the special nature and successes of these schools in raising educational attainment. Similar provisions would need to be considered for other designs having similar goals, features, and outcomes.

Use early college schools as a vehicle for strengthening the relationship between secondary and postsecondary education.

Early college's innovative collaborations between colleges and high schools are resulting in impressive outcomes. As such, they can provide a basis for informing and strengthening other natural relationships between K-12 and postsecondary education that bear on student achievement, including:

- The alignment of high school standards, curricula, and assessments with college placement tests and expectations;
- Joint review by high school and college faculty of student work and placement test results to identify areas of curricular disconnections and potential strategies for filling the gaps;
- Joint professional development where high school and college faculty share techniques for supporting the success of underprepared students; and
- The design of new teacher preparation programs.

IDENTIFY HOW POLICIES AFFECT EARLY COLLEGE, AND USE THIS UNDERSTANDING TO IMPROVE POLICIES THAT AFFECT THE TRANSITION OF ALL STUDENTS FROM HIGH SCHOOL THROUGH COLLEGE.

Rethink and Redesign End-of-Course Assessments

One barrier to innovation, cited by a number of early-college leaders, is the misalignment of end-of-course exams with college-level rigor and coursework. North Carolina designed its end-of-course tests in an effort to measure students' knowledge of subject-specific concepts designated in the state's Standard Course of Study. North Carolina holds schools accountable for student performance on these exams, but many early college staff claimed that preparation for the tests diverges from preparation for success in college.

Such accounts underscore a well-known need: standards and assessment systems need to be better aligned between high school and college. To help improve that alignment, the state should engage postsecondary leaders and faculty from two-year and four-year institutions. Moreover, high school and college faculty from early college schools would offer a valuable, unique perspective in deliberations about how to better align secondary and postsecondary expectations.

One more aggressive short-term step the state could take toward better alignment would be to allow early college schools (and other approved programs) to supplant end-of-course exams with the successful completion of a select number of college courses. Schools would be accountable for student success in these courses just as they would be for student success on end-of-course exams. That is, entry into and passage of a college course would indicate students' mastery of high school standards in the same subject.

Implementing this recommendation would necessitate identifying a set of college courses that cover standards tested by end-of-course exams. This would help the state make progress on high school–college alignment issues with the additional benefit of encouraging the sustainability and growth of cost-effective strategies like early college schools.

Develop an early assessment program to provide high schools and students with timely diagnostic information about college readiness prior to the senior year.

An inventive early-college strategy may provide a model for raising college readiness in other North Carolina schools. Early college students take college placement assessments to determine their readiness for college courses. Any student who does not score high enough on the assessment is not placed in college courses. To prepare these students, some early college schools have created new courses, in cooperation with college faculty, designed to get underprepared students ready for college courses.

The act of assessing students early for college readiness and designing strategies to close the gap during high school is akin to emerging policies in other states. Known as "early assessment programs," they aim to better prepare students academically in high school to reduce remedial-level coursework in college.

The state also might study the innovation used by early college schools in North Carolina, which essentially implemented their own early assessment system and intervention. The state could consider it for adoption by higher education systems within the state, including the North Carolina Community College System and the University of North Carolina.

CONCLUSION

North Carolina's success at nurturing innovation to increase educational attainment for its young people—especially underrepresented students—can provide a model for other states. With the passage of the Innovative Education Initiatives Act in 2003, North Carolina legislators erected a platform for creating early college schools that are raising rates of high school success and college readiness. Early college schools also capitalize on two key state-policy preconditions favorable to college course-taking in high school: schools and colleges receive state funding for dual enrollees, and tuition waivers make courses accessible to low-income students.

Going further, and in return for accountability, the state has given early college schools flexibility in implementing promising new practices—creating a climate for innovation that was engendered by state policymakers, made official through the availability of waivers, and supported by the North Carolina New Schools Project. The flexibility-for-accountability deal has paid dividends: early college student dropout rates are lower and their end-of-course scores are higher than for students in traditional schools. And students' success in college courses is indicative of their future degree completion.

While a number of policy barriers must be removed to sustain and build on this success, there is an even greater number of opportunities that can be seized to scale up the practices that are making the early college innovation so successful.

ENDNOTES

[1] **See:** http://newschoolsproject.org/page.php?p=5.0.

[2] **See:** http://newschoolsproject.org/page.php?p=5.0.

[3] Unless otherwise noted, all data in this brief were collected by the New Schools Project as part of its responsibility to report to the state board of education and for purposes of supporting schools.

[4] A major U.S. Department of Education-funded longitudinal study of these schools, led by SERVE at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro and several other professional research organizations, has also shown very promising results. Utilizing random assignment, the "gold standard" in social science research, the study has demonstrated that early college students are significantly outperforming their peers in traditional schools on completion rates of key college preparatory coursework. This study has also shown other promising preliminary results, and will continue to inform policymakers as students progress further in this young program.

[5] **See: Smoothing the Path: Changing State Policies to Support Early College High School.** Jobs for the Future, 2006. Due to a projected $4.6 billion budget gap in FY2010, the legislature limited FTE funding and waivers for high school students who take college courses to math and science courses. This funding had previously been available for college courses in these and other subjects and remains unrestricted for students in early college high schools.

[6] **See:** Kirst, Michael, Andrea Venezia & Thad Nodine. Forthcoming. **Ramp-Up to College in California: A Statewide Strategy to Improve College Readiness and Comprehensive Dual Enrollment.** Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, West Ed, and Jobs for the Future; Hoffman, Nancy, Joel Vargas & Janet Santos. 2008. **On Ramp to College: A State Policymaker's Guide to Dual Enrollment.** Boston: Jobs for the Future; and Adelman, Nancy, Kaeli Keating, Viki Young, Lauren Cassidy, Kristin Bosetti & Joel Vargas. Unpublished. **Bridging the Divide: Policies That Affect Acceleration of Secondary and Postsecondary Education Programs.** SRI International and Jobs for the Future.

[7] For a handful of early colleges in particularly remote locations, the connection with the community college is "virtual," based on the Internet.

[8] **See:** NC Standard Course of Study, K-12, Department of Public Instruction. www.dpi.state.nc.us/curriculum/graduation/table.

[9] **See: Report to the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee: Learn and Earn Early College High School Initiative.** North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, January 2008.

[10] **See:** http://newschoolsproject.org/page.php?p=5.0.

[11] Legislation enacted in 2008 lifts this restriction for students in Gateway to College schools, a model that uses college courses to raise high school graduation and college attainment rates for over-age, undercredited high school students in danger of dropping out.

[12] Howell, Jessica, Michael Kurlaender & Eric Grodsky. 2009. **Postsecondary Preparation and Remediation: Examining the Effect of the Early Assessment Program at California State University.** Paper presented at American Education Research Association, San Diego, CA.

[13] **See:** California SB 946, signed on September 28, 2008 by Governor Schwarzenegger.

JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

TEL 617.728.4446 FAX 617.728.4857 info@jff.org

88 Broad Street, 8th Floor, Boston, MA 02110
85 Prescott Street, Suite 405, Worcester, MA 01605
2000 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Suite 5300, Washington, DC 20006

WWW.JFF.ORG