



Taking the Long View:

Sustainability Lessons from the Early College Expansion Partnership

JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

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Educate Texas, an initiative of Communities Foundation of Texas, has established a robust public-private partnership that has aligned key stakeholders within the K-12 public and higher education systems. With the goal of increasing the number of low-income, minority, and first-generation students who will graduate from high school and attain a postsecondary credential (two-year, four-year, or technical postsecondary education), Educate Texas is pursuing the following vision: strengthen the public and higher education systems so that every Texas student is prepared for educational and workforce success. Educate Texas's mission is to increase postsecondary readiness, access, and success for all students by building partnerships, leading innovation, and scaling practices and policies.

With Texas workforce projections suggesting that 60 percent of adults will need a postsecondary credential by 2030 to be gainfully employed, Educate Texas has identified four areas of focus: college and career readiness, higher education, regional collaboration, and effective teaching. By implementing a collaborative approach with both public and private partners, Educate Texas identifies high-potential innovations, pilots the efforts to determine which strategies could benefit the entire education system, and then replicates and scales those found to be most impactful.

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ABOUT THE EARLY COLLEGE EXPANSION PARTNERSHIP

The ECEP is a five-year initiative funded by an i3 grant from the U.S. Department of Education. The grant, now in its final year, has two main goals: (1) to scale up early college designs as systemwide secondary school improvement and college readiness strategies for all students in three school districts in South Texas and Denver; and (2) to position early college designs for sustainability and further scale-up within South Texas, metropolitan Denver, and beyond.

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INTRODUCTION

Five years ago, the Early College Expansion Partnership (ECEP) set out with an ambitious goal: take a bold school improvement model that had increased success of low-income youth in small high schools and scale it to 30,000 more students across three districts. Early college high school students earn significant college credits, a postsecondary certificate, or even an associate’s degree, for free, while still in high school. This head start on higher education dramatically improves the chances that young people—some of whom never thought they would attend college—will enroll and succeed.¹

The ECEP partnership, led by JFF and Educate Texas, included Denver Public Schools and two districts in South Texas: Brownsville Independent School District and Pharr- San Juan- Alamo Independent School District. All three had existing early college programs of varying sizes. But preparing thousands more students for college coursework required comprehensive change systemwide: new instructional strategies, new leadership approaches, and new college partners, to name a few.

Each district has made considerable progress in implementing early college designs in traditional high schools. Enrollment in college courses has steadily climbed, instruction has steadily improved, and college partnerships have thrived. Yet as time began to run out on the five-year, \$15 million federal grant that supported the partnership, the districts faced a familiar dilemma: how to sustain hard-won progress after the money is gone. The Investing in Innovation Fund (i3) grant had paid for strategic advising for district leaders, instructional coaches to mentor teachers, leadership coaches to guide principals, and counselors or liaisons to manage college partnerships. Without dedicated funding, the partners feared early college might once again become an isolated program rather than a district-level priority—and that would mean lost opportunity for thousands of students each year.

The districts, JFF, and Educate Texas realized that

achieving the full potential of the important work underway requires more than simply identifying new sources of external funds to extend the original grant-funded activities. The partners started to think about sustainability in a deeper way, exploring questions such as: What does it take to institutionalize a large-scale reform? What essential practices, staff positions, and governance structures must be in place to maintain momentum? How can schools and districts develop a culture of continuous improvement that supports expansion of early college to all students for years to come? And, are there broader lessons that can inform others aiming to scale and sustain similar reform initiatives?

This brief is part of a series on lessons learned from the ECEP.² Earlier publications examined leadership practices and staffing models that support early college expansion. Here, we take a closer look at how three districts serving predominantly low-income students are moving successfully toward not only sustaining but also expanding and improving a major early college initiative. This brief draws on external evaluations, insights gathered during partner convenings, and interviews with senior district administrators, project managers, school administrators, and higher education liaisons from each of the three districts.



An Ambitious Proposition

The ECEP was one of 20 initiatives to secure a highly competitive grant from the U.S. Department of Education’s i3 program in 2012. The grants were designed to provide significant, multi-year funding to expand educational innovations with demonstrable success in improving student achievement and school completion rates. Early college—a carefully designed course of study that blends and accelerates high school and college for traditionally underserved populations—had proven successful in a number of demonstration sites nationally.

First introduced in the early 2000s, hundreds of schools nationwide have implemented variations of the early college approach. Along with a rigorous academic program, students receive extensive academic support and scaffolded opportunities to build their skills in navigating the non-academic aspects of college, such as course selection and enrollment policies. With this combination of rigor, support, and authentic postsecondary experiences, early colleges have shown a marked impact on high school graduation and college-going rates for historically underserved student populations (see box: “Why Early College?” on next page).

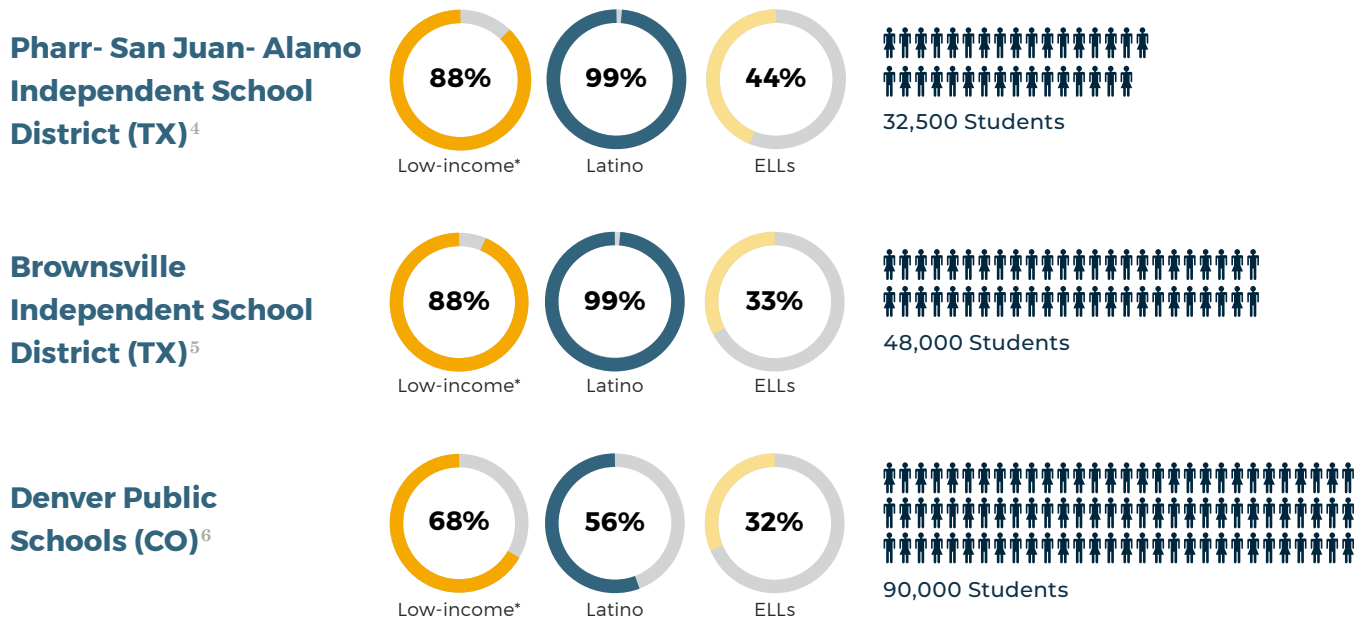
In the ECEP districts in Denver and South Texas, district leaders all had seen the positive impact of early college designs in individual schools and were ready to expand them systemwide. They believed early college would equip their predominantly low-income students with the skills, confidence, and momentum they needed to complete a postsecondary degree or certificate. JFF and Educate Texas provided technical assistance to plan, align resources, and develop effective dual enrollment³ partnerships with local community colleges. They provided on-site leadership coaching for school administrators and on-site instructional coaching for middle, high school, and college teachers. They also developed a “community of practice” for early college administrators nationwide to share resources and information.

During the last two years of the grant, leaders from the three districts met annually to discuss strategies to ensure the model continues to thrive after i3 funding ends. As their national intermediary, JFF captured these reflections and the resulting on-the-ground work. This report describes what JFF sees as the three districts’ most promising strategies—not only to ensure the longevity of their early college initiative but to further expand and improve it.



Three School Districts, Three Contexts for Change

All three districts in the ECEP enroll a disproportionately large share of students from low-income backgrounds and other groups that are underrepresented in higher education, including a high share of English language learners (ELLs). Aside from these commonalities, the districts have striking differences:



**Refers to economically disadvantaged students, whose family incomes qualify for the federal free and reduced-price lunch program.*

Why Early College?

Early college designs have demonstrated strong results in individual schools for nearly 15 years, and the evidence base is growing. Scaling up early college across an entire school district is a complex undertaking, and it will take several more years to see the full impact, but previous data from individual schools show that:

- ▶ 90 percent of early college students graduate from high school, compared to 78 percent nationally.⁷
- ▶ 30 percent of early college students earn an associate's degree or postsecondary certificate with their high school diploma compared to very few nationally.⁸
- ▶ After high school, early college graduates are more likely to persist in higher education and earn a degree within one or two years than their peers who did not attend early colleges.⁹
- ▶ All three of the ECEP districts have seen substantial increases in dual enrollment participation rates since the initiative began in 2012.¹⁰

Community Context for Early College Expansion

Pharr- San Juan- Alamo, Texas (PSJA) is a medium-sized district in the Rio Grande Valley—a region historically characterized by low educational attainment and limited economic mobility. Over more than a decade, the district has earned national recognition for raising graduation rates and enabling a large and growing number of students to earn associate’s degrees with their high school diploma. Superintendent Daniel P. King introduced early college when he took the helm in 2007 and has maintained an unwavering focus on early college designs as the district’s primary reform strategy. The district has worked closely with Educate Texas and JFF from the beginning to guide its early college efforts. With i3 support, the district expanded early college to its two remaining comprehensive high schools and supported four feeder middle schools in building a college-going culture and implementing college-preparatory instructional strategies. By spring 2015, all five of PSJA’s comprehensive high schools had been officially designated as early college high schools by the Texas Education Agency.

The district’s principal postsecondary partner, South Texas College, is one of the largest providers of dual enrollment in Texas and the nation.

Brownsville Independent School District, Texas is also located in the Rio Grande Valley, directly on the U.S.- Mexico border. The district has had one small early college high school since 2007 and in 2012 began the transformation of its six large, comprehensive high schools using the early college approach. Three of those high schools participated in the i3 grant, along with six feeder middle schools. Early in the grant

period, the district dealt with changes in its postsecondary partnerships as well as its own leadership. Nonetheless, by 2015, all six of its comprehensive high schools had received state designation as early colleges and had rapidly increased participation rates in dual enrollment and Advanced Placement classes.

The district’s primary postsecondary partner, Texas Southmost College, is a relatively new two-year college that formed when the former University of Texas at Brownsville-Texas Southmost College split into two separate institutions in 2013.

Denver Public Schools, Colorado is a large, highly diverse urban district with over 90,000 students and nearly 40 high schools. Many of its high schools had strong dual enrollment offerings prior to the i3 grant, and the district is home to one longtime standout in dual enrollment design, the Career Education Center Early College High School (CEC). This high school and eight others participated in the grant, along with six middle schools. CEC became a state-designated, early college high school in 2015. In spring 2017, five additional Denver public high schools applied for and received state designation as early colleges, including three of the i3 grant schools, and the district formed a new Early College Department to support them.

The district has a total of 23 postsecondary partners, with the largest numbers of dual enrollment courses provided by the Community College of Denver, Community College of Aurora, University of Colorado Denver, Red Rocks Community College, and Arapahoe Community College.

Defining Sustainability

On the surface, sustainability is a simple concept. Most would define it as an entity's capacity to maintain programming over time and survive common threats, such as the sunset of a funding source or a turnover of leadership. The goal, in this view, is to preserve an initiative's essence and, more importantly, maintain or grow its impact over time.

Education researchers like Michael Fullan take a somewhat broader view, defining sustainability as "the likelihood that the overall system can continuously regenerate itself in an ever-improving direction."¹¹ The assumption in this case isn't that a program will reach an ideal status or seek to maintain itself in perpetuity. In this frame of thinking, a sustainable initiative continues to advance in a particular direction, using the initial infusion of resources to set in motion a process of ongoing evolution and growth.

The ECEP partners have taken this broader view of sustainability. Their goal is much more than continuing to offer the exact same programmatic supports provided during the grant, and they recognize that achieving the broader mission of getting all students on an on-ramp to a postsecondary degree will take much longer than the five-year grant period. It will require deep integration into the core work of schools. Specifically, they are asking: How do we shift the focus of our staff from implementing a grant to a broader vision of long-term, continuous improvement?

KEY FACTORS

Promoting Early College Sustainability in the ECEP Districts

As the ECEP districts have learned, in order for an initiative to gain permanence, it must become institutionalized—embedded in the identity of the system and regarded as part of the everyday work of the schools and district. The districts have also realized that scaling promotes longevity and have attempted to continually increase the number of students graduating with college degrees and certificates. To support the districts in pursuing these goals, JFF and Educate Texas developed an array of planning tools. These documents helped school and district leaders think strategically about their ongoing needs in terms of human capital, partnership development, and community engagement, among other aspects of long-term planning.

As the ECEP districts have taken stock of their progress and considered how to embed the early college mission into their work for the long haul, they

have each developed long-term plans that reflect local priorities, resources, and realities. JFF has observed three main factors across the three districts that are likely to prove critical to sustainability and that can be instructive for leaders of other reform initiatives. These factors are:

- ▶ **Maintaining a clear and coherent instructional focus.** Whole-school transformation requires a clear vision for rigorous and engaging instruction. During the grant period, the ECEP schools were introduced to a set of early college instructional strategies to help students master complex material in any subject. To prepare for sustainability, the districts and intermediary partners have been focused on institutionalizing these strategies, creating cohesion with other instructional priorities, and establishing the internal capacity and momentum needed to keep professional learning going in the years ahead.

- ▶ **Creating structures to manage postsecondary partnerships and support college transitions.** The ECEP districts developed governance structures and communication channels to maintain a constant flow of information with their college partners. They also recognized the critical roles of managers who oversee the administrative aspects of these partnerships, as well as liaisons who can help students navigate the college course enrollment process.
- ▶ **Generating and leveraging public support for early college.** The ECEP districts have committed to building parent buy-in for early college, and dual enrollment more broadly, and they are seeing dividends from their investments in community support. Parental demand bolsters sustainability, especially when coupled with supportive funding and state policies that encourage the spread of high-quality early college designs.

Factor 1: Maintaining a Coherent Instructional Focus

Early college is a bold concept. It places historically underserved students on an accelerated pathway to a degree, one that is carefully sequenced, rich with support, and must make the most of every instructional minute. Early college high schools cannot succeed, therefore, without rigorous, engaging instruction. We also know, from research, that schools with a clear and coherent approach to instruction—including a common definition of what constitutes high-quality teaching and commitment to related pedagogical strategies—are more likely to measurably improve student learning.¹²

A core component of the ECEP logic model was for schools to adopt six instructional practices that research associates with student engagement, deeper learning, and the development of college- and career-readiness skills. The six instructional practices, called the Common Instructional Framework (CIF), include strategies such as collaborative learning groups and meaningful, open-ended classroom conversations that have students analyze their thinking (see box “The Common Instructional Framework (CIF)” on next page).

To help teachers and school leaders learn these strategies, instructional coaches provided professional development. National coaches from JFF or Educate Texas were assigned to work with the participating schools in each district, and the districts used i3 grant funds to hire district-based coaches to provide ongoing support for instructional improvement.

While externally provided coaching will end with the grant, continuing to improve instruction is essential and, therefore, a major factor in each district’s plans for sustainability. The following discussion provides brief examples of how the ECEP districts have worked to adopt the CIF strategies, focus their vision for instruction, and assume responsibility for instructional coaching.

Embedding the Common Instructional Framework in Everyday Classroom Habits

Some teachers and administrators in the two Texas districts initially viewed the strategies in the (CIF) as just one more bureaucratic demand. Overcoming their reluctance to adopt the new approaches took time and extensive professional development. Shortly after the grant was awarded, Educate Texas held an institute for all of the Brownsville coaches, principals, deans, and teachers to practice using the strategies. Following the institute, the district-based coaches shadowed Educate Texas coaches for a full semester to hone their expertise in training and supporting teachers in using the strategies.

Brownsville coaches won over many teachers by explaining how the CIF strategies supported standards on the new Texas Teacher Evaluation Support System. For instance, the new evaluation system directed administrators to look for evidence of student participation and complex, higher-order thinking. Every CIF strategy is designed to address both. The “Classroom Talk” strategy has students articulate their thinking on a topic, often to a partner or small group, while the teacher coaches and encourages the use of academic vocabulary.

Many teachers initially feared that the collaborative learning strategies encouraged in the CIF, such as small-group work, would create chaos and reduce their control of the classroom. Instead, they discovered that students became more engaged and discipline problems decreased. Over time, more teachers began to try the strategies and seek out coaches for ideas and feedback.

Today, when both Brownsville and PSJA administrators conduct classroom walkthroughs, they look to see whether lessons include CIF strategies. In some schools, those strategies are included in peer learning sessions, lesson planning templates, and walkthrough checklists. At PSJA Early College High School, for instance, an instructional coach works with teacher leaders to focus their afterschool collaborative learning meetings on one CIF strategy per month. The teacher leaders model the strategy for their colleagues, who then include it in their lesson plans. Administrators then make it a priority that month to observe teachers' use of that strategy and provide them with feedback.

The CIF has become such a part of the day-to-day work of educators in the two Texas districts that coaches and school administrators feel confident its use will long outlast i3 funding. Because strategies such as “Writing to Learn” and “Classroom Talk” are included in classroom observation tools used by administrators, they will remain a focal point of conversations about improving instruction at least for the near future. To sustain a long-term focus on the strategies, however, the districts will need to ensure that new school leaders and teachers understand their importance and are well-trained to use or observe them.

Aligning Competing Initiatives

In Denver, the early college instructional coaches also encountered teacher resistance at the start of the ECEP initiative. The expectation to adopt CIF strategies came on the heels of the district's new teacher evaluation system, Leading Effective Academic Practice (LEAP), and updated strategic plan, Denver Plan 2020—both of which laid out higher expectations for schools and educators. They expressed further frustration with a

The Early College Common Instructional Framework (CIF)

The Common Instructional Framework is a set of six powerful, research-based instructional strategies that prepare high school students to succeed in college coursework. They are a core component of JFF's early college model.

Collaborative Group Work: Students engage in meaningful group tasks that include multiple entry points and support and challenge students of diverse skill levels.

Writing to Learn: Low-stakes writing activities provide students with the practice they need to develop their ideas, think critically, build writing fluency, and master written conventions.

Scaffolding: Teachers use information from assessments to plan a careful sequence of activities that link prior knowledge to new knowledge and skills, challenging students with increasingly difficult tasks.

Questioning: Teachers and students use meaningful questions to open conversations, deepen classroom discourse, and investigate and analyze their thinking.

Classroom Talk: Working in pairs, collaborative groups, and as a whole class, students practice articulating their thinking, while the teacher serves as a facilitator to promote higher levels of academic discourse.

Literacy Groups: Students use a collaborative structure with defined roles and/or discussion protocols to actively probe the meaning of a text.



preponderance of seemingly competing instructional initiatives, including International Baccalaureate, Advanced Placement, AVID, and the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) protocols for English language learners. Denver schools operate with a great deal of site-based autonomy, so any given school might have commitments to a combination of these and other initiatives designed to promote college and career readiness and close achievement gaps.

To address these concerns, the coaches realized they first would need to help school leaders create coherence across multiple instructional initiatives and mandates so that teachers would not feel that they were being asked to juggle so many different priorities.

As the coaches explored the district's existing initiatives, they noticed a recurring theme: the need to develop students' skills in communication and collaboration, critical thinking, ownership of learning, and an academic growth mindset, which is the belief that one's academic abilities can increase through hard work. Using these four student competencies as the frame, the coaches created a Keys to Success chart to help educators see that the CIF, rather than being an add-on, supported existing district initiatives, including the new teacher evaluation system.

The Keys to Success tool allowed coaches and school administrators to easily monitor the progress of multiple initiatives during classroom observations. Using the data gathered in walkthroughs, coaches helped identify areas where teachers needed more training to help students develop the four competencies. While the specific tools and instructional support materials used in DPS high schools may continue to evolve, the alignment process the coaches modeled helped schools develop shared understanding of what constitutes rigorous and engaging instruction.

Going forward, Denver school leaders will need to keep an eye on maintaining coherency across initiatives, which is especially important given the district's size and the relative autonomy of its schools.

Training the Trainer

The Denver schools have also made important moves toward long-term sustainability of early college expansion goals by building internal coaching capacity, with a gradual handoff of responsibility from JFF coaches to district-based coaches hired through the grant and placed in the Office of College and Career Readiness (OCCR). The JFF coach trained the OCCR coaches in all of the CIF strategies, worked with them to design debrief sessions and workshops they could use with school staff, and co-delivered professional development for teachers and administrators.

To sustain and expand instructional coaching beyond the life of the i3 grant, OCCR coaches have made their own shift to a “train the trainer” model, seeking to build on-site coaching capacity in the schools. In the grant’s final year, they developed a series of professional development workshops for teacher leaders on college- and career-readiness skills, student-centered instruction, and progress-monitoring techniques for teachers and students. They are providing these workshops to all of the i3 schools and two additional state-designated early colleges. Schools may select additional professional development offerings for teachers, teacher leaders, and adjunct professors.

The OCCR and its new Early College Department have laid important groundwork for helping Denver schools implement early college instructional strategies. To help prepare even more students to qualify for and succeed in college courses, the district and individual schools will need to continue building the expertise of schools’ instructional leadership teams so that they, in turn, can provide actionable feedback to teachers that raises the level of rigor in all classrooms.

As Tara Schneider, Denver’s Early College Expansion Partnership manager, notes, “It takes a deep level of collaboration with schools, including classroom walkthroughs and observations, school and teacher feedback, and professional development, to ensure students are college and career ready.”

Factor 2: Creating Strong Postsecondary Partnerships

The success and sustainability of early college also hinges on strong working relationships between administrators from high schools, the school district, and the partnering colleges or universities. Having multiple partners invested in an initiative can buffer it against potentially disruptive changes, such as leadership turnover, at any one institution.

Communicating regularly with partner institutions became even more crucial for the ECEP districts as they expanded dual enrollment to serve more schools

and students. To coordinate, districts needed to create a governance structure and have managers dedicated to making decisions and resolving ongoing policy issues. They also needed staff positions responsible for overseeing day-to-day operation of courses and student support services.

Structuring Governance

The ECEP logic model included an “i3 Cabinet” at each site, a governance body that brings together key leaders of the district’s early college initiative, including the superintendent or senior district leaders, school principals, and college or university administrators. The cabinet plays a critical role in keeping partners focused on improving alignment between high school and college curricula and ensures that all have a regular (typically monthly) time to connect, analyze data on student outcomes, monitor progress toward goals, and work through challenges.

JFF and Educate Texas worked with each site to create an effective governance structure. Leaders from all three districts noted the importance of such a structure for collaborating with multiple institutions on a complex initiative. As Sofia Peña, director for Early College High School at South Texas College, said: “Higher education and K-12 don’t always speak the same language. At some point, partnerships are going to have problems, so each partner needs to communicate, they need to feel vested in the students’ success, and they need to be able to compromise.”

Educate Texas guided the two Texas districts to establish i3 Cabinets and even led the early meetings to model effective facilitation and project management practices.

In PSJA, the i3 Cabinet has been expanded to include the principals of all district high schools and the middle schools participating in i3. Meetings are scheduled a year in advance and attendance is considered essential. The meetings provide a way to keep key central office departments engaged in supporting early college expansion. Both Texas districts have also established

“Each partner needs to communicate, they need to feel vested in the students’ success, and they need to be able to compromise.”

district-level subcommittees that function as working groups on specific topics, such as student support and data analysis.

Denver Public Schools did not structure its i3 Cabinet as a standalone committee, due in part to the large number of college partnerships and layers of administration in the large district. Instead, progress on the i3 grant was included as an agenda item for the Concurrent Enrollment Advisory Board and other regular district meetings. Antonio Esquibel, DPS’s executive director of Early College, also holds weekly meetings with the district’s largest dual enrollment provider, Community College of Denver, and this practice will outlast the grant.

Additionally, large teams of DPS administrators and Community College of Denver leaders traveled to Texas to visit PSJA and South Texas College in spring and fall 2017. Esquibel credits this site visit with providing new ideas for both the district and college partners about how they can develop a shared set of supports for early college high schools.

Managing Dual Enrollment

The ECEP districts have discovered firsthand that maintaining a strong secondary-postsecondary partnership and providing adequate support for students at scale requires considerable logistical and managerial support. All three districts have created frontline and managerial positions to act as go-betweens for schools and college partners and help students enroll and succeed in college courses.

Denver has three frontline college liaisons to assist students with college placement testing and course

enrollment. These tasks extend beyond the work of a regular school guidance counselor. The liaisons also serve as in-district experts on the complexities of the district’s college partners, helping students and staff navigate course catalogs and understand course prerequisites, admission policies, deadlines, and degree requirements.

Denver also created a managerial position to supervise the college liaisons. The concurrent enrollment manager, Eliza Harding, established consistent practices for advising and placing students in college courses. She created a comprehensive dual enrollment guide for the liaisons and school guidance counselors that covers essential information, including course eligibility rules, fees, timelines, and testing procedures. The guide helped fill an important knowledge gap in the district.

In Texas, PSJA has long employed “transitional counselors” to advise students on dual credit coursetaking. Brownsville used i3 funding to create similar positions in each of its high schools. PSJA counselors sometimes also work onsite at the two-year college campus to support both dual enrollees and the district’s recent graduates who have matriculated as full-time college students. Similar to Denver, the Texas districts also rely on mid-level managers to keep the dual enrollment program running smoothly. In Brownsville, for instance, Merrill Hammons, administrator for Advanced Academics, speaks daily with Joe Arambul, Texas Southmost College’s Early College High School liaison. Together, they troubleshoot the inevitable issues that arise between institutions, ensuring the partnership stays on track.

The two Texas college partners, Texas Southmost College and South Texas College, have expanded their own campus-based support for high school students as well. Both institutions had some dual enrollment counseling positions prior to the grant; the ECEP partnership provided the incentive to develop and expand campus-based support for dual enrollees. Looking ahead, Denver Public Schools and the Community College of Denver are exploring the possibility of jointly funding additional counseling positions for the district's early college high school students.

All three ECEP districts have come to view these liaison roles as critical to sustaining the early college initiative and have committed to funding them beyond the life of the grant.

Factor 3: Building and Leveraging Public Support

For an early college model to expand across a district, external support and community demand are crucial. All three ECEP districts have successfully garnered such support at both the grassroots and state level, positioning their early college initiatives for continued expansion.

Raising Community Aspirations

PSJA had a head start, having long invested in winning community support for the early college model. As documented in the 2014 JFF publication *Sharing Responsibility for College Success*, PSJA Superintendent Daniel P. King launched a community campaign nearly a decade ago to generate support for the district's College³ motto: every graduate ready for college, connected to college, and able to complete college. Understanding that they would need to raise aspirations in the impoverished Rio Grande community in order to raise early college enrollment, King and his team displayed the College³ logo prominently in schools, on the district's website, in print materials, and even on school buses and the entrance to the sports complex.

PSJA began reaching back to engage younger students in the College³ mission by administering college placement tests to all 8th graders and offering counseling to help them develop postsecondary goals and action plans. King and his staff made it easier for parents and community members to further their education too, opening three education centers where adults can take courses in English as a Second Language, literacy, citizenship, and vocational skills. Many of the classes are offered in partnership with South Texas College. The initiative has served to both boost adult learning and foster a "college for all" spirit in the PSJA community.

PSJA has also built demand for early college throughout the Rio Grande region. As the first district to transform a comprehensive high school into a wall-to-wall early college, PSJA was a national leader. Its success at graduating its predominantly low-income, minority students with significant college credit attracted much attention. Today, early college has become a popular model throughout the region, with great community demand and support.

Early college is a newer concept in Brownsville, but thanks to the success of nearby PSJA, there was already a high level of community interest prior to the i3 grant. The district leveraged this interest to attract more students to its high schools. Competition from charter schools has caused the district to lose about 1,000 students a year and significant funding. Since launching the early college expansion, high school enrollment ceased its decline and even began to grow by about 1 percent a year. Parents are choosing district high schools over charter schools because they see early college as a way to secure better opportunities for their children and help them get through college more affordably without leaving the Rio Grande Valley.

Brownsville district leaders built this demand by considering how they might create a pipeline for early college enrollment beginning in younger grades. They have had to think about ways to begin preparing students for college-level courses much earlier—pushing college placement testing down to the 8th

grade level, for example, and exposing elementary students to STEM opportunities. Their assumption is that by increasing the number of students who are ready for college courses by the end of middle school, they will increase demand for dual enrollment courses starting in 9th grade.

The strategy is working. As of spring 2017, then-Rivera High School Principal Aimee Garza Limón reported, “The incoming 9th graders are now asking for college classes and are more motivated.” Obed Leal, former early college director at Pace High School, noticed the shift too, saying, “We used to be looking for [college] classes that we could persuade the kids to take; now the kids and parents are demanding the classes.” Assistant Superintendent Berta Peña in Brownsville has even higher ambitions for the district: “There’s no stopping this now. In five years, I hope that it would be the norm, not the exception, for students to graduate with 60 college credits.”

With such widespread demand for early college, the district will be able to justify continued expansion even in a tough budget climate. Community backing may prove crucial for the long-term sustainability of early college in an otherwise resource-stretched district.

Raising Local Funds

Denver generated enough community support for dual enrollment and other district initiatives to pass a comprehensive school funding package in the November 2016 local election. This property tax initiative includes \$8 million for the district to sustain and grow college- and career-readiness activities. Prior to the vote, the district created a committee to determine the best use of potential funds. About 20 programs within the district submitted proposals, and the committee prioritized those that were in line with the superintendent’s Denver Plan 2020. Dual enrollment, which has shown strong results and cemented the superintendent’s support, made the cut. Among other items, the funds cover tuition for dual credit courses and funding for the college liaison positions that are so critical to making the early college model function.

Leveraging State Policy

The ECEP districts have also benefited from state policies that provide external validation for their early college expansion, further increasing demand and providing more assurance of long-term commitment to the initiative. Texas has long been a leader in adopting state policies that recognize and promote the expansion



“There’s no stopping this now. In five years, I hope that it would be the norm, not the exception, for students to graduate with 60 college credits.”

of early college high schools. As directed by the state legislature, the Texas Education Agency created a state designation for early colleges in 2007, a move that has helped create a common understanding in Texas about what early college is and its advantages for students. Early college high schools must submit annual applications for approval by the agency and demonstrate that their design elements follow the Texas Education Agency’s Early College High School Blueprint, a detailed set of criteria on topics ranging from college partnership agreements to leadership team structures and required student supports.¹³ Early college leaders have noted that the Blueprint has proven useful in articulating expectations and elevating the status of these schools within their districts. Clear requirements for the early college model may also help protect its core components even as funding streams change and grants sunset.

At the same time, revisions to the Blueprint taking effect in 2018-19 will likely pose a challenge for some Rio Grande Valley schools.¹⁴ For the first time, maintaining early college designation will require high schools to meet certain outcomes, including the total numbers of college credits earned by graduates. While increased accountability will strengthen quality control and provide ambitious goals, these targets may be easier to meet at smaller high schools of choice and more difficult for large high schools serving more diverse and high-need populations, such as those in Brownsville and PSJA. With tightened standards for state designation, preparing students for college coursework and maintaining robust college partnerships will become all the more important.

Colorado also has a state designation process for early college high schools; however, until 2017, only one Denver school had pursued it. A recent state policy

change sparked new interest in early college: Colorado adopted new graduation requirements that will compel students, beginning with the class of 2021, to meet college-readiness benchmarks, which can be satisfied in a variety of ways, including by passing dual enrollment courses in math and English.

In Denver, a districtwide committee was formed in 2016 to examine the potential impact of the new graduation requirements. The results were alarming, projecting a significant drop in graduation rates, particularly for African-American, Latino, and low-income students. Meanwhile, Denver’s Career Education Center Early College High School, at that time the district’s only state-designated early college high school, had a relatively high number of students from low-income, mostly Latino households who were already on track for meeting the new graduation requirements. The school’s early college design and significant student supports meant that it was better prepared to meet the new requirements. Superintendent Tom Boasberg and other district leaders took note, and in spring 2017, five additional schools applied for and received the state’s early college high school designation. The new designation increased clarity in the district about the type of school design, support structures, and college partnerships that will be needed to graduate more students with an associate’s degree, rather than simply a set of miscellaneous college credits.

In response to the increased interest, Boasberg established a new Early College Department with its own executive director and manager to support the state-designated schools in 2017-18. According to Executive Director Antonio Esquibel, “The state designation is forcing the district to think differently about the supervision and support of the early colleges,” given the unique expertise and resources needed to

develop and improve these schools. Esquibel and his team are working to develop an implementation guide for early colleges (based on the Texas Education Agency Early College High School Blueprint), as well as a longer-term strategic plan to support sustainability. Beginning in 2018-19, these schools will be part of a newly created “Early College Network,” with their principals reporting to the same instructional superintendent.

With community demand, local funding streams, and state policies aligning to support early college mission, the ECEP districts are well positioned to sustain their expansion efforts, harnessing this external support to maintain local focus and push for increasing quality at scale.

Considerations for State Policy

As demonstrated in this brief, policy can play a role in spurring demand for early college high schools—which, in turn, makes it more likely that districts will invest in them. In Denver, for instance, district leaders have turned to early college high schools as a strategy to meet the demands of new state graduation requirements

At the federal level, the Every Student Succeeds Act has ushered in new provisions that, in many states and districts, may fuel the expansion of early college high schools or dual enrollment more broadly. For instance, ESSA requires all schools to report on the number of students taking accelerated coursework to earn postsecondary credit. States may also choose to include dual enrollment as an indicator of college readiness in their accountability system or focus on early college designs as a strategy for improving low-performing schools.¹⁵ ESSA also clarifies the ways in which states and districts can use a variety of federal grants for the development and implementation of early college high schools. While supporting wider adoption of early college designs, state and local leaders stand to learn from the experience of the ECEP districts. Considerations include:

- ▶ **Offering a framework for quality:** States can promote high-quality early college high school designs by developing a state designation process and a clear guide, or “blueprint,” to

uphold the critical elements of these schools. Policies and guidance documents that clarify the expected features and outcomes of early colleges can drive continuous improvement in existing early college high schools while also helping to inform the implementation of new programs.

- ▶ **Supporting implementation through technical assistance:** Transforming comprehensive schools into early colleges is a complex and long-term process that requires strategic planning, partnership development, curriculum alignment, instructional improvement, and more. Ongoing technical assistance from state-level entities, intermediary organizations, or district-level offices will be critical to establish and sustain high-quality early college high schools.
- ▶ **Creating a supportive funding mechanism:** Early college high schools have many costs that must be covered to ensure that dual enrollment is affordable for high schools and colleges, and access is equitable for students. In addition to accounting for the cost of enrollment and tuition, funding mechanisms should ensure that dual enrollment partnerships have the resources to sustain the important administrative and advising roles needed for high school students to select, register for, and persist in college courses.

REMAINING QUESTIONS

The ECEP districts have made significant progress in expanding access to early college in a few short years and have taken important steps toward institutionalizing the early college mission and strategies that will support long-term expansion and improvement. School systems are complex, however, and the ECEP districts must continue to attend to issues that could impede their progress. Several questions in particular will warrant close attention going forward. For instance:

▶ **How will districts allocate resources to support the instructional transformation required to ensure the success of the early college vision?**

Some pieces of the early college model require ongoing, dedicated funding. While the ECEP districts have committed to keeping the college liaison/transitional counselor positions, they have expressed less certainty about funding the equally important instructional coach positions at the district level.

▶ **How will districts and colleges build and maintain an adequate supply of qualified and well-trained instructors for dual credit courses?**

As discussed in detail in *Solving the Dual Credit Staffing Puzzle*,¹⁶ all three districts currently lack a sufficient number of high school teachers qualified to serve as adjunct professors. They also lack funding beyond the grant to pay for teachers to earn the graduate credits required for adjunct status. All of these issues must be addressed through a long-term human resource strategy if ECEP districts are to reach their goal of offering early college to all of their high school students.

▶ **How can districts strike the right balance between local autonomy and fidelity to essential design principles?**

Denver early college leaders must negotiate a delicate balance between district-level support and direction and local-level empowerment in decision-making. The Denver Public Schools' Early College Department has attempted to clarify the expectations of early college high schools in 2017-18, working to build consensus around non-negotiable design elements as more schools seek state designation. It's an issue all of the ECEP districts would be wise to carefully consider. Each ECEP district will need to strike a balance between allowing schools to adapt early college to their particular context and helping them understand and faithfully implement its most important features.

CONCLUSION

All three ECEP districts made great progress in increasing college course enrollment for their diverse, low-income student populations. As the districts reach the end of their i3 grant, they are well-positioned to further improve and expand their early college initiatives. Doing so will require sustained work and attention.

Looking ahead, the districts will need to maintain a consistent approach to rigorous instruction and uphold strategies that lead to deeper student learning. The groundwork has been laid by embedding the CIF into lesson plans and aligning it with other district initiatives.

While higher education partnerships are likely to grow ever more complex as dual enrollment climbs, districts have prepared for that challenge by establishing practices that promote clear communication between institutions.

Building community support and demand for early college is a strategy that can pay off with increased funding for the model. All districts have earned considerable community support, further bolstered by state policies in Colorado and Texas that support early college.

All of these factors will play a key role in sustaining this important work, ensuring that early college remains a core district strategy for improving student success—instead of fading to the sidelines as an isolated program. In the words of PSJA Superintendent Daniel P. King, implementing early college districtwide “takes a combination of persistence and patience. This is not an overnight thing. If you’re really going to talk about scaling early college, it’s a very long-term initiative, and it takes a lot of commitment.”

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ENDNOTES

1. These data come from the Early College High School Initiative Student Information System, or SIS, which includes data on over 100 early college high schools nationwide. See Michael Webb and Carol Gerwin, *Early College Expansion: Propelling Students to Postsecondary Success, at a School Near You* (Boston: Jobs for the Future, 2014).
2. See: Sarah Hooker, *Leadership Lessons from the Early College Expansion Partnership* (Boston: Jobs for the Future, 2017); Sarah Hooker, *Solving the Dual Enrollment Staffing Puzzle: Strategies from the Early College Expansion Partnership* (Boston: Jobs for the Future, 2017); Joel Vargas, *Sharing Responsibility for College Success: A Model Partnership Moves Students to Diplomas and Degrees* (Boston: Jobs for the Future, 2014).
3. The districts and states highlighted in this brief alternately use the terms *dual enrollment*, *dual credit*, or *concurrent enrollment*. While there are nuances that differentiate these terms in some states, this brief interchangeably uses the terms dual enrollment and dual credit to refer to courses taken by high school students for both secondary and postsecondary credit.
4. Data from 2015-16 Texas Academic Performance Report, accessed March 6, 2017, <https://rptsvr1.tea.texas.gov/perfreport/tapr/2016/srch.html?srch=D>.
5. Ibid.
6. 2015-16 data from Colorado Department of Education District Dashboard, accessed March 6, 2017, <http://www2.cde.state.co.us/schoolview/dish/dashboard.asp>.
7. Webb and Gerwin, *Early College Expansion*.
8. Webb and Gerwin, *Early College Expansion*.
9. Andrea Berger et al., *Early College, Early Success: Early College High School Initiative Impact Study* (Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research, 2013).
10. A third-party evaluation of the ECEP's implementation and impact is forthcoming. For a snapshot of each district's progress, see Hooker, *Leadership Lessons*.
11. Michael Fullan, "Principals as Leaders in a Culture of Change," *Educational Leadership*, 2002, <http://michaelfullan.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/13396053050.pdf>.
12. Fred Newman, BetsAnn Smith, Elaine Allensworth, and Anthony Bryk, "School Instructional Coherence: Benefits and Challenges" (Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2001).
13. Texas Education Agency, *The Early College High School Blueprint* (Austin: Texas Education Agency, 2017), Available at: <https://tea.texas.gov/ECHS/>.
14. JFF provided strategic advising for the Texas Education Agency redesign of the Early College High School designation process in 2017. For a description of this process, see Michelle Sedaca, "From Great to Greater: Expanding Strong Early College Schools in Texas," Jobs for the Future, September 29, 2017, Available at: <http://www.jff.org/blog/2017/09/29/great-greater-expanding-strong-early-college-schools-texas>.
15. For a more-detailed state policy guide on implementing dual enrollment and early college high schools in the context of ESSA, see *How to Scale College in High School: A State Policy Guide for Implementing Dual College Enrollment and Early College Designs Under the Every Student Succeeds Act* (College in High School Alliance, 2017), https://static1.squarespace.com/static/589d0f90ff7c507ac483988e/t/58bcd0349de4bb44fb5e7f4/1488769081403/How+to+Scale+College+in+High+School_CHSA+%283%29.pdf.
16. Hooker, *Solving the Dual Enrollment Staffing Puzzle*.

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