



EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES **FOR STUDENTS:**

LESSONS FROM THE GROWTH OF DUAL
ENROLLMENT PATHWAYS IN CALIFORNIA





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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Dual enrollment has emerged as one of the nation's most effective strategies to expand college access and success. By enabling high school students to earn college credit, dual enrollment creates an early on-ramp to higher education and careers, accelerates progress toward certificates and degrees, and reduces college costs for families. Research consistently shows that students who participate in dual enrollment are more likely to enroll in and complete college, with especially strong impacts for low-income and first-generation students. When colleges and high schools collaborate to create structured pathways, dual enrollment not only strengthens college readiness but also connects coursework directly to future opportunities. For many students, this access can transform college from a distant aspiration into a tangible and attainable goal.

This brief highlights California's efforts over the past decade to expand dual enrollment pathways for underrepresented students. Historically, the students who stand to gain the most from early access to college-level coursework have been the least likely to participate. Recognizing dual enrollment as a powerful driver of opportunity, California policymakers and community college leaders have made sustained investments through legislation, education funding, and integration with workforce and economic development initiatives. By prioritizing College and Career Access Pathways (CCAP)—a model explicitly designed to reach students traditionally excluded from dual enrollment, including Black and Latino students, low-income students, and first-generation college-goers—California offers a compelling example for other states seeking to expand equitable pathways to college and careers. California offers valuable lessons in its journey to expand access to dual credit pathways:

1. **Embed dual enrollment in clear pathways:** Dual enrollment is most effective when it is embedded in coherent, well-designed pathways that lead to credentials of value or transfer, rather than just elective credit.
2. **Set and reinforce a strong vision:** State policy makers and community college presidents and trustees have expanded dual enrollment by consistently aligning legislation, funding, and strategic plans around a clear vision.
3. **Be intentional about providing access to dual enrollment for underrepresented students:** Expanding dual enrollment requires policies and practices that prioritize access for historically underrepresented students, moving beyond models that primarily serve already high-achieving students.
4. **Investing in dual enrollment pathways strengthens a state's workforce and economic competitiveness:** Dual enrollment coursework increases student college enrollment and completion while accelerating the pipeline from education to employment, producing a skilled workforce that drives innovation, competitiveness, and growth.
5. **Develop a coordinated strategy to expand dual enrollment access:** Sustainable growth of dual enrollment depends on persistent collaboration among legislators, advocates, researchers, K–12 administrators, and community college leaders over many years.
6. **Distinguish between local and statewide barriers:** Some obstacles require state-level policymaking, but many—such as student fees or other local policies—can be addressed directly by trustees and college leaders and, at times, their K-12 partners.
7. **Start early with ninth-grade access:** Beginning dual enrollment in ninth grade promotes more equitable participation, builds momentum toward completing college credits, and fosters early college identity.
8. **Expand the teaching pipeline:** Addressing shortages of qualified instructors by upskilling high school teachers or creating alternative solutions is critical to scaling dual enrollment.
9. **Confer meaningful credit:** Dual enrollment accelerates college completion when coursework counts toward both high school graduation and college degree or certificate requirements.
10. **Ensure students have the academic supports to succeed:** Counselors and tutors are essential to help students navigate dual enrollment and succeed academically, particularly those who are underrepresented in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Dual enrollment is one of the nation's most effective strategies to expand college access. By giving high school students the chance to earn college credit while still in high school, it provides an early on-ramp to higher education and careers, accelerates time to certificate and degree completion, and makes college more affordable. Research consistently shows that students who participate in dual enrollment are more likely to enroll in and complete college, with especially strong outcomes for low-income and first-generation students. When colleges and high schools work together to create structured dual enrollment pathways, they can open doors for more underrepresented students, strengthen college readiness, and connect coursework directly to future opportunities. For many students, access to dual enrollment is what makes the difference between seeing college as out of reach and believing it is within their grasp.

In this brief, we look at California's efforts over the past ten years to expand access to dual enrollment pathways for underrepresented students. Too often, the students who stand to benefit the most have been the least likely to participate in dual enrollment. The measures taken by California policymakers and community college leaders are grounded in the notion that dual enrollment can be a powerful driver of opportunity. California has repeatedly made significant investments to expand dual enrollment pathways for greater numbers of high school students, both directly through legislation and education funding and by incorporating dual enrollment into workforce and economic development initiatives. By investing in a model—College and Career Access Pathways—that explicitly targets those least likely to traditionally pursue dual enrollment, including Black and Latino students, low-income students, and first-generation college-goers, California offers an example for other states interested in expanding access to pathways to college and careers.

Dual Enrollment Pathways Expand Opportunity

Research shows unequivocally that dual enrollment—known as dual credit in some states—yields positive outcomes for students. Studies across multiple states demonstrate that students who participate in dual enrollment [earn better grades, are more likely to graduate from high school, and enter college at higher rates](#) (Taylor et al., 2022; Velasco et al., 2024). Dual enrollment is also associated with [higher rates of college persistence and completion](#) (CCRC, 2024). Dual enrollment can also provide students with a [sense of belonging and identity](#) as college students, leading to increased engagement and motivation (Giani et al., 2023). [The more dual enrollment courses a student takes](#), the better their chances of reaping these rewards (Taylor et al., 2022). Even [students with lower prior academic achievement perform better](#) when they have access to dual credit coursework (Lee & Villarreal, 2022).

While dual enrollment can transform students' lives, not all students have access to the opportunities it provides. Typically, dual enrollment has largely been limited to students who are already college-bound. Too many students, including [economically disadvantaged](#) and [first-generation](#) students, have insufficient access (Velasco et al., 2024; Fink et al., 2022). Black and Latino high school students [tend to be underrepresented in dual enrollment courses](#) in many states, including California (Fink, 2024). [Students in rural areas](#) are also less likely to have opportunities to take college classes in high school (Burton et al., 2023). English learners, youth in foster care, and students experiencing homelessness also access dual enrollment at lower rates than their peers.

While access to dual enrollment is critical, what students access is just as important. The promises of dual enrollment [pay off at greater rates](#) when such courses are embedded in a structured college or career pathway (College in High School Alliance et al., 2024). Underrepresented students can't afford to participate in "random acts" of dual enrollment, where they take a few college-level courses and end up with excess credits unrelated to their college or career goals. Quality dual enrollment programs connect coursework to a clear plan for college and career success. When courses are linked to a pathway, students avoid taking credits that won't transfer or apply toward a credential. Courses tied to career-focused pathways help students explore fields of interest early, gain relevant skills, and enter high-demand jobs more quickly. By making dual enrollment coursework purposeful and structured, pathways are especially powerful for first-generation and low-income students, who may not otherwise have a clear map to navigate higher education.

High-impact dual enrollment and dual credit pathways share many characteristics. They:

- Are structured in coherent sequences that lead to credentials and degrees, including transfer;
- Intentionally target underrepresented students;
- Remove tuition and fee barriers;
- Provide tailored early advising, counseling, career exploration, tutoring, and college readiness skills so students can succeed in college-level work while in high school; and
- Are aligned to labor market demand and with a career path of the student's interest.¹

Although much of the work to increase access to quality dual enrollment pathways resides with local school districts and community colleges, an increasing number of states are using policy to expand access for underrepresented students to quality dual enrollment pathways; many of which include the above criteria. According to the College in High School Alliance legislation tracker, 45 states introduced a collective total of over 200 bills related to dual enrollment in 2025. However, legislation is not the only avenue for policy change. Other policy levers include funding, regulation, guidance, and technical assistance.

A Comprehensive Approach to Expanding Dual Enrollment Access

California has steadily increased the number of students dually enrolled in high school and college over the past several years. Even though the number of high school students enrolled in community college courses more than doubled between [fall 2016](#) and [fall 2022](#), dual enrollment students only make up nearly 1 out of every 10 community college students in the state (Gallegos, 2023). Even so, California's story offers a valuable case study of a state's comprehensive, long-term efforts to expand dual enrollment access. State leaders and policymakers have been intentional about expanding access to dual enrollment pathways by embedding opportunities for their development within a broader statewide strategy to support college and career pathways, equitable college access, and regional economic development.

Multiple Dual Enrollment Options for California High School Students

- College and Career Access Pathways (CCAP) are formal partnerships between school districts and community colleges designed to expand structured dual enrollment opportunities for underrepresented high school students. CCAP partnerships move dual enrollment from “random acts” of college course-taking to intentional, equity-driven pathways that connect high school to higher education and the workforce.
- Early College High School (ECHS) programs are partnerships between high schools and a local community college or the California State University or University of California systems that allow students to earn a high school diploma and up to two years of college units in four years or less. ECHS can offer CCAP.
- Middle College High School (MCHS) programs are collaborations between K–12 districts and community colleges that aim to enroll “at-promise” students who have the potential for great academic success but face significant barriers and are “performing below their academic potential” to help improve the likelihood of high school graduation (California Legislature, 2019b). MCHS can also offer CCAP.
- Non-CCAP dual enrollment, which includes a range of different dual enrollment options:
 - Individual dual enrollment: advanced coursework on the college campus for those already college-bound;
 - Non-CCAP partnerships between school districts and community colleges that offer coursework at the high school and tend to have a career technical education focus (Career Ladders Project, 2025).

¹ Criteria are derived from the author's research and the interviews cited in the Acknowledgements.

Building Dual Enrollment Pathways Through College and Career Access Partnerships

California began seeding dual enrollment pathways with the California College and Career Pathways Trust, which was established in 2013–14, with \$500 million allocated in the 2013–14 and 2014–15 budgets (Career Ladders Project, n.d.). These funds were provided as one-time, competitive grants to regional consortia, including school districts, county offices of education, charter schools, regional occupational centers, and community college districts, to align education systems and improve transitions to college and careers. While the Trust’s scope was broader—focusing on career and technical education (CTE) pathways spanning grades 9 through 14—it explicitly supported dual enrollment strategies. The Trust funded regional collaborations that, among other things, worked on high school to college transitions, dual enrollment strategies, and career pathway development. It funded approaches like [Linked Learning](#) that blended college and career preparation opportunities and served as a foundational structural investment that reinforced later dual enrollment efforts by helping districts and colleges design structured pathways for students.

In 2016, the state enacted [Assembly Bill 288](#), which created College and Career Access Pathways (CCAP) partnerships between community colleges and school districts. These partnerships focused on developing or increasing access to dual enrollment pathways for a population largely excluded from dual enrollment—those from underserved backgrounds, including those who do not appear to be what some would call “college-ready” (California Legislature, 2015). The bill targeted “students who may not already be college-bound or who are underrepresented in higher education” with the goal of developing seamless pathways from high school to community college for career technical education or preparation for transfer, improving high school graduation rates, or helping high school pupils achieve college and career readiness.

CCAP transformed the way California approached dual enrollment. Instead of “random acts” of dual enrollment, students were part of a cohort, and courses were expected to be part of a pathway (California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office [CCCCO], 2016). Just as importantly, the legislation targeted a different set of students and reflected a broader access and equity strategy. State Assembly member Chris Holden, the legislation’s primary author, was explicit about his aims: “We need to expand opportunities for a broad range of students or lose our competitive edge with other states and other nations. Concurrent enrollment can motivate students who aren’t on the college track and provide opportunities for students who want to get started in their careers earlier by working towards a degree or certificate in career technical education. Even those who’ve struggled in high school classes can rise to the challenge, motivated by the chance to try on the role of a college student” (Pasadena Now, 2015).

Assembly Bill 288 made several substantial changes to dual enrollment policy that laid the groundwork for its expansion. It made dual enrollment free by waiving tuition and fees for high school students participating in CCAP partnerships. It permitted college courses to be taught on high school campuses exclusively for high school students. It authorized students in CCAP partnerships to enroll in up to 15 units per term. It required the partnerships to align coursework with transfer pathways and high-demand career fields, so credits apply directly toward degrees, certificates, or industry-recognized credentials. And it required a focus on underserved students.

In 2019, Assembly member Holden took early lessons from CCAP’s implementation to craft [Assembly Bill 30](#), which expanded the program’s sunset date to 2027 and made CCAP partnerships easier to implement and expand, ensuring more schools and colleges could participate with fewer administrative barriers (California Legislature, 2019a). It simplified the administrative process by allowing the use of a single application for CCAP dual enrollment students, reduced bureaucratic hurdles for parents and students during registration, and clarified that students in CCAP partnerships had the same rights as other community college students (e.g., access to counseling and libraries). It reaffirmed that CCAP partnerships must be designed to increase participation among underrepresented students. It also encouraged better alignment of career and technical education pathways with regional and statewide labor market demand by requiring CCAP partnerships to consult with local workforce investment boards.



CCAP legislation includes clear minimum criteria for memoranda of understanding between a community college district and a K–12 school district, specifying data-sharing agreements, college course offerings, instructional logistics, and data reporting responsibilities. Community colleges are required to submit annual reports to the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office documenting demographics, academic performance, outcomes, and course information for students taking CCAP courses (CCCCO, 2021). However, at this time there is limited available data on course access, participation in dual enrollment, and later outcomes (EdTrust-West, 2025).

Assembly Bills 288 and 30 were an enabling policy framework, with colleges and districts expected to bring in other funds to cover costs, including apportionment, local funding, and other statewide grants, such as the College and Career Pathways Trust and subsequent one-time state funding streams. For example, colleges can use their existing apportionment funding (the per-student full-time equivalent enrollment dollars they receive from the state) to support CCAP students. There is no separate CCAP funding stream.

CCAP partnerships have been especially effective at boosting the participation of students who are underserved in higher education, which is one of the reasons they are worthy of study. Recent research indicates that CCAP had the smallest access gaps of any dual enrollment model by both race and socioeconomic status (Rodriguez and Gao, 2021; Kurlaender et al., 2021; Friedmann et al., 2024). Latino students enroll in CCAP programs at rates consistent with their share of the overall high school population. Eighty-two percent of CCAP students enroll in college within one year of graduating from high school—the state average for all high school graduates is 66 percent. Fifty-one percent of CCAP students enroll in a California Community College (CCC), and 31 percent enroll directly in a four-year college (Rodriguez et al., 2023). The majority of dual enrollment students are not enrolled in dual enrollment through CCAP, though. Although CCAP has driven most of the growth of dual enrollment, it only represents 20% of all dual enrollment taken at community colleges.

California's work to expand access to dual enrollment was also integrated with its efforts to implement whole-college reform through guided pathways, a framework for redesigning community colleges around coherent program maps, proactive advising, and structured student supports that steer students from enrollment to completion. California adopted guided pathways statewide in 2017, accompanied by a \$150 million one-time investment for multi-year grants to community colleges (CCCCO, 2019). Dual enrollment was seen as a natural on-ramp to these pathways, helping high school students begin college already connected to a program of study with momentum toward a credential or transfer.

California's Strategic Commitment to Dual Enrollment

Increasing equitable access to dual enrollment is a goal for California Community Colleges Chancellor Sonya Christian and Governor Gavin Newsom. It is woven throughout the state's policy priorities and strategies. Both see dual enrollment as a crucial strategy for reaching the governor's goal of 70% of residents with postsecondary degrees and certificate attainment by 2030. Chancellor Christian is a longtime advocate for dual enrollment, as illustrated by the partnerships she fostered when she was chancellor of the Kern Community College District and president of Bakersfield College.

In 2022, Gov. Newsom released his [Multi-Year Roadmap for California Community Colleges](#) aimed at improving student success and making that success equitable for all students served by the California Community Colleges. The Roadmap set a goal of increasing the percentage of high school students who graduate with 12 or more college units earned through dual enrollment by 15%, while also closing equity gaps in access to these courses (California Department of Finance, 2022). To achieve this, the Roadmap directed the Chancellor's Office to collaborate with local education agencies and the California Department of Education to implement strategies that expand access for underrepresented students. It also required colleges to collect baseline data on existing equity gaps in dual enrollment participation and to establish annual metrics to track progress in reducing those gaps.



Chancellor Christian had the opportunity to leave her mark on the California Community Colleges' strategic plan in 2023. [Vision 2030](#) lays out a benchmark of “increasing with equity the number of California community college students who complete a certificate, associate degree, or baccalaureate degree by 30% by 2030” (CCCCO, 2023a). The achievement of this goal is linked to the chancellor's ninth-grade strategy, which aims to expand equitable dual enrollment pathways to all high school students starting in ninth grade, complementing the goal the governor laid out in the Roadmap.

As articulated in the [2025 update](#) to Vision 2030, “The ninth-grade strategy envisions a future where every California high school student is on a clear path—whether transfer, career, or apprenticeship—and graduates with at least 12 units of college credit” (CCCCO, 2025b). When combined with the continued commitment to CCAP, the ninth-grade strategy represents another fundamental shift in how high schools and colleges approach structuring dual enrollment coursework. Moving dual enrollment courses earlier in students' journeys is now recognized as a necessity for student success. “Helping students see themselves as college scholars and preparing them to choose a workforce pathway must begin earlier in students' academic journeys,” Vision 2030 states. “This early exposure to college and career is particularly important for historically underrepresented students and will equip colleges to utilize dual enrollment as a tool to close equity gaps” (CCCCO, 2023). Instead of simply focusing dual enrollment opportunities on the most academically prepared and well-resourced students who are already considered college-bound, Vision 2030 echoes the original CCAP legislation by aiming for more equitable access to dual enrollment.

The [California Master Plan for Career Education](#), released in 2025, emphasizes aligning K–12, postsecondary, and workforce training systems to expand equitable access to living wage careers. A central priority is the universal availability and adoption of pathways programs, including dual enrollment. The plan highlights the importance of designing dual enrollment pathways that both accelerate progress toward associate and bachelor's degrees and lead to industry-recognized credentials (Governor's Office of California, 2025). By creating career pathways that begin in high school and continue through college, the Master Plan envisions smoother transitions to higher education and the workforce—ensuring students can earn credentials of value while still in school.

These are ambitious goals, and the state has made significant strides towards achieving them. After stagnating during the COVID-19 pandemic, dual enrollment participation began to rebound, with the number of students enrolling in college via dual enrollment [increasing by almost 22%](#) between 2022 and 2023 and reaching nearly [150,000 students, or about 30% of the high school class of 2024](#) (CCCCO, 2024b; Rodriguez et al., 2024). Scaling dual enrollment is challenging in an environment where there is no ongoing funding stream for colleges to develop and expand pathways. Under [California Assembly Bill 1122](#), which was introduced in 2025 but did not advance, a local educational agency (LEA) that does not have an existing dual enrollment program would be required to establish a CCAP partnership or an early or middle college high school through a formal partnership or agreement with the governing board of a community college district starting with the 2029–30 academic year. Currently, 22 states require all high schools to participate in the state's dual enrollment programs (Mann, 2023).

Chancellor Christian wants dual enrollment partnerships between colleges and high schools to include a career exploration course in ninth grade where students develop a preliminary college and career plan that leads to family-supporting jobs. All ninth graders at the rural [McFarland High School](#) in the Kern Community College District, for example, begin their education with a student development course that focuses on college navigation skills, helping them choose a postsecondary credential goal. It is delivered in person on high school campuses by regular college faculty or high school instructors who meet the minimum qualifications to teach college courses, or online by college faculty with a high school teacher as a facilitator. Through this partnership with Bakersfield College, students are on a path to take between 12 and 60 college credits in high school, graduating with an associate degree or a career pathway certificate, or earning significant credits toward a degree or certificate. Offerings include general education requirements, as well as agriculture business management, public health, education, and welding (CCCCO, 2024a). “Dual enrollment is a game changer for college attainment,” Chancellor Christian notes (personal communication, January 17, 2025).

Investing in Pathways

Recent budget commitments to dual enrollment reflect the goals set by the governor and chancellor. The 2022–23 California budget included \$200 million in one-time general funds for dual enrollment to be spent over five years. The funds were used to create a competitive grant program for local educational agencies to either establish new dual enrollment programs or expand existing ones. Half was allocated to Local Education Agencies (LEAs) for College and Career Access Pathways (CCAP) partnerships and the other half to Early College/Middle College High Schools (California Legislature, 2023).

Most recently, the state invested \$500 million in the [Golden State Pathways Program](#) (GSPP), which provides LEAs funding to develop high-quality career pathways in high-wage, high-skill, and high-growth areas, including technology, healthcare, education, and climate-related fields. The program serves students enrolled in career pathways by providing increased access to postsecondary education opportunities, workforce training, and gainful employment in industries that align with market needs. One of the goals of the authorizing legislation was to provide students the opportunity to earn 12 or more credits applicable to the completion of a degree, certificate, or credential through CCAP, Advanced Placement, or International Baccalaureate programs (California Education Code, 2022).

As noted earlier, neither Assembly Bill 288 nor Assembly Bill 30 offered a permanent funding stream for CCAP. One-time funding has been provided to LEAs to build or expand CCAP partnerships over the years, including the \$100 million from the 2022–23 budget and Golden State Pathways funding. However, there is no ongoing money for colleges to improve capacity or to ensure, for example, that all ninth graders have access to a college and career success dual enrollment course, which can be a crucial first step toward a college or career pathway.

CCAP partnerships have instead been supported through other education and economic development funding streams. The Strong Workforce Program (SWP), launched in 2016, provides ongoing state funding—now nearly \$300 million annually—to expand, improve, and modernize career technical education (CTE) across California’s community colleges. Its goal is to increase the number of students who earn credentials in high-demand fields (such as healthcare, technology, and manufacturing), transfer to four-year technical programs, and secure family-sustaining jobs. The program complements initiatives such as guided pathways and dual enrollment by ensuring that educational pathways connect students to high-wage, high-growth careers. Funding is split between local colleges and seven regional consortia which foster collaboration among community colleges, employers, workforce boards, K–12 districts, and other partners. Programs are required to align with regional labor market needs and expand opportunities for historically underrepresented students. While originally focused on strengthening community college CTE programs, SWP has increasingly supported the development of high school to college pipelines aligned with labor market demand, sometimes delivered through CCAP partnerships, to ensure students—and especially those from underserved groups—can start earning career-relevant college credits early. SWP is key in meeting the goal of Vision 2030 and Gov. Newsom’s Roadmap for California Community Colleges to prepare students to obtain living wage jobs (CCCCO, 2025a).

Another significant investment supporting CCAP dual enrollment strategies is the [K-12 Strong Workforce Program](#) (K12SWP). It promotes collaboration between the K–12 sector and community colleges, involving industry and organizations to strengthen career technical education programs and pathways aligned with regional workforce needs. The state allocates \$150 million annually to community colleges for K12SWP. The California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office (CCCCO) partnered with the California Department of Education (CDE) to introduce the program for LEAs and community colleges—effectively connecting Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs at the K–12 level to community colleges to create seamless pathways for students to complete certificates and degrees in high-demand, high-wage industries. In Los Angeles County, K12SWP-funded programs enhanced dual enrollment implementation. For example, Centinela Valley Union High School District partnered with El Camino College to offer a Dual Enrollment Faculty Success initiative, through which high school instructors co-developed curriculum with college faculty. It also provided funding for a college counselor to meet with students weekly (Los Angeles Regional Consortium, 2023).



The California Regional K-16 Education Collaboratives Grant Program provided \$250 million in one-time funding to K-16 educational collaboratives of school districts, colleges and universities, and employers to create equitable occupational pathways from high school to postsecondary education and into the workforce, including accelerated degree and/or credential programs that incorporate work-based learning in high-growth sectors. The funding was intended to help California's economy recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. Targeted sectors include healthcare, education, business management, and engineering or computing. Collaboratives are required to have at least one K-12 school district, at least one University of California campus, at least one California State University campus, and at least one California Community College district. This funding helped scale regional pathways, and many regions used CCAP for their pathways model.

Using Regional K-16 Collaboratives Funding to Expand Dual Enrollment Access

The Central Valley Higher Education Consortium (CVHEC) brings together public and private community colleges and universities serving more than 250,000 students across a primarily rural nine-county region. In 2019, regional leaders asked CVHEC to develop a sustainable strategy for expanding intentional dual enrollment programs aligned with guided pathways, a recognition of dual enrollment as a tool for upward mobility. In response, CVHEC created a task force of colleges, universities, and K-12 partners to design a plan for scaling effective programs. By 2020, over 150 secondary and postsecondary leaders had joined the effort. One of the main challenges identified was the shortage of qualified teachers in the Central Valley to teach dual enrollment courses, particularly in rural districts, which limited student opportunities and widened equity gaps.

With funding from the Fresno-Madera K-16 Collaborative, CVHEC partnered with several community colleges and universities to address this gap by enabling 115 high school teachers to pursue master's degrees in English or mathematics. This credentialing allowed them to meet the minimum qualifications to teach dual enrollment courses at their schools. As a result, high school students across the region gained access to transferable college-level English and math courses, helping them earn credits earlier, accelerate degree completion, and improve their long-term college success (Central Valley Higher Education Consortium, 2021).

College and Career Access Pathways Outcomes

The outcomes for College and Career Access Pathways (CCAP) partnerships are robust. Eighty-two percent of CCAP students enroll in college within one year of graduating from high school, well above the state average of 66% for all high school graduates (Rodriguez et al., 2023). Transfer- or degree-intending CCAP students at California Community Colleges complete gateway courses at higher rates than non-dual enrollees with the same goals. Students who participate in a CCAP also complete gateway transfer-level mathematics and English courses at a higher rate than pupils who did not participate in dual enrollment programs. Within one year of enrollment, 38% of CCAP students completed transfer-level math and 59% completed transfer-level English, compared with 23% and 42%, respectively, of non-dual enrollment students (Rodriguez et al., 2023).

Lessons Learned

The story of California's sustained investments in dual enrollment through legislation, education funding, and integration with workforce and economic development initiatives offers significant lessons for community college leaders and trustees in other states looking to expand access and opportunity for all students.

1. **Embed dual enrollment in clear pathways:** Dual enrollment is most effective when embedded in coherent pathways that offer a clear sequence of courses that lead to credentials of value and/or transfer to higher levels of postsecondary education. Well-designed pathways begin with structured exploration of college and career options in the early high school years, giving students—especially those historically underrepresented in higher education—opportunities to identify fields that match their interests and connect them to high-wage, high-growth careers. The chancellor's proposed ninth-grade strategy would ensure all students have access to this type of early guidance. CCAP partnerships were created with this intent: to connect students to college and career pathways through dual enrollment. However, because California does not automatically award dual credit



or establish crosswalks to college coursework, many students risk earning only elective credit with limited long-term value. Without intentional design, this disproportionately affects the low-income students, first-generation students, and students of color who stand to benefit most from clear, supported pathways. The governor's Master Plan for Career Education could help close this gap by providing a framework to expand CTE pathways and ensure more high school students can connect dual enrollment to meaningful postsecondary and career outcomes.

2. **Set and reinforce a strong vision:** State legislative leaders, the governor, the California Community Colleges chancellor, the president of the California State Board of Education, and community college presidents and trustees have emphasized the importance of dual enrollment to expanding access to college and career pathways through legislation, strategic plans, targeted funding for dual enrollment, and workforce and economic development funding streams. For instance, Gov. Newsom sees dual enrollment as a strategy to meet the state's 70% college completion goal. Ellen Cesaretti-Monroy, a consultant for the California Assembly Higher Education Committee who has crafted language, provided analysis, and shaped policy direction related to dual enrollment, notes the importance of collective buy in at the highest levels that dual enrollment is a successful model to CCAP's continued expansion (personal communication, January 17, 2025).
3. **Be intentional about providing access to dual enrollment for underrepresented students:** The state offers a range of dual enrollment options, but most remain designed for students who are already high achieving, leaving out many others who could also benefit. CCAP partnerships specifically target students who are underrepresented in higher education, moving beyond the "scholastically advanced" model. It also eliminates a cost barrier by making CCAP dual enrollment free. But participation in dual enrollment overall in California remains unequally distributed across racial and socioeconomic subgroups, as well as geography (personal communication, Chris Nellum, January 5, 2025; Friedmann et al., 2024).

Linda Collins, the founder and CEO of the Career Ladders Project, a key provider of technical assistance to CCAP partnerships, said, "It's time to consider making dual enrollment the default high school experience in California, rather than just a choice open to those aware of it or only those able to access that opportunity" (personal communication, December 19, 2024). The governor's Master Plan for Career Education echoes this sentiment to be more intentional about increasing underrepresented students' access to dual enrollment, stating that "if administrators, students, and families do not understand dual enrollment or cannot equitably access it, dual enrollment will remain an underused pathway to college mobility" (2025). California's policy choices, including offering free dual enrollment through CCAP partnerships, discarding student entrance requirements for CCAP partnerships (such as meeting a certain grade point average), measuring equity gaps in access, and emphasizing ninth graders' access to dual enrollment, all contribute to expanding access for those not generally considered for dual enrollment.

4. **Investing in dual enrollment pathways strengthens a state's workforce and economic competitiveness:** Dual enrollment is a proven strategy to link high school, college, and careers in ways that strengthen the workforce, reduce skills gaps, and give states a competitive edge in attracting jobs and investment. Dual enrollment accelerates the pipeline from education to employment, producing a skilled workforce that drives innovation, competitiveness, and growth. Communities with higher levels of educational attainment are more likely to attract investment and sustain long-term prosperity. And when pathways are aligned with regional industries and high-quality jobs, colleges supply employers with the talent they need to expand. Every additional degree or credential earned contributes to higher lifetime earnings for students and greater tax revenues for states. Nan Gomez-Heitzeberg, Kern Community College District Trustee and member of the California Community Colleges Board of Governors, says that "dual enrollment is good business sense. It enables us to build a more educated workforce, more quickly, and shortens the time to degree, which saves families money" (personal communication, September 10, 2025).

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5. **Develop a coordinated strategy to expand dual enrollment access:** California's decade-long commitment to expanding access to dual enrollment required stakeholders to persist and work together with a long-term commitment to change. Stakeholders invested time and energy in educating policymakers about the importance of dual enrollment as a means of addressing equity gaps. Assembly member Holden's commitment to the development and expansion of CCAP partnerships spanned over six years. He saw dual enrollment as an opportunity to expand access to higher education for underperforming students. The [Career Ladders Project](#), a nonprofit that partners with community colleges, K–12 schools, and state agencies to expand access to higher education and career pathways, particularly for historically underserved students, has spent over a decade providing research, technical assistance, professional development, and policy guidance to policymakers, practitioners, and community college leaders to advance dual enrollment. Advocates like [EdTrust-West](#) have developed [policy recommendations](#) to dramatically expand access to dual enrollment, helping push policymakers to continually build on their efforts to expand access to high-quality pathways. Researchers from the [Public Policy Institute of California](#) and the [University of California-Davis's Wheelhouse Center for Community College Leadership and Research](#) have spent a decade studying the impacts of dual enrollment and measuring the status of closing equity gaps for underrepresented students, which has enabled policymakers and practitioners to continue to encourage school districts and college partners to develop an equitable expansion strategy.
 6. **Distinguish between local and statewide barriers:** California's progress in expanding dual enrollment has been incremental, reflected in the evolution of CCAP legislation and targeted funding for local education agencies. Some barriers have been addressed at the state level—for example, legislation removed the requirement that high school principals approve college course enrollment each semester. Other obstacles, such as the charging of student fees, remain within local control and can be eliminated by trustees. Trustees also play a critical role in advancing early access by encouraging colleges to align with the chancellor's ninth-grade strategy, ensuring that more students benefit from dual enrollment at the start of high school. Trustees also can review local policies and practices to identify where barriers are self-imposed and can be changed without waiting for state action.
 7. **Start early with ninth-grade access:** Participation in dual enrollment during ninth grade—most often facilitated through formal CCAP partnerships between high schools and community colleges—is more equitable by both race and socioeconomic status than participation that begins in 11th or 12th grade (Friedmann et al., 2024). Yet only 6% of California students take a college course in their first year of high school (Gallegos, 2023). The chancellor's ninth-grade strategy seeks to change this by ensuring that every California high school student, regardless of background, has the opportunity to complete at least one college-level course in ninth grade. Aligned with Vision 2030's broader goals to expand access, improve success, and strengthen supports, this approach is designed to reduce barriers for historically underserved populations. Ninth-grade dual enrollment levels the playing field, helps students build momentum toward completing at least 12 college credits, and fosters early college identity. These experiences not only introduce students to college expectations but also support career exploration and early development of a college and career plan. For this strategy to reach its full potential, however, the state will need to address gaps in funding, advising, and course articulation to ensure early dual enrollment leads to meaningful progress toward college and career outcomes.
 8. **Expand the teaching pipeline:** As is the case across the country, finding qualified instructors who meet the minimum professional requirements to teach a college course is challenging. This is especially the case in rural areas and in academic courses such as English or math for which instructors need master's degrees (Rodriguez et al., 2021). Providing upskilling opportunities to the existing high school teaching workforce, which allows qualified high school instructors to teach college courses, expands the number of classes available to students and makes it easier to scale dual enrollment opportunities.

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9. **Confer meaningful credit:** Unlike some states, California does not require CCAP partnerships or other dual enrollment partnerships to award high school credit for dual enrollment coursework. Dual enrollment is especially effective in accelerating college completion when courses count simultaneously toward high school graduation requirements and college degree or certificate pathways. The governing boards of the school district and the community college district decide whether the dual enrollment course counts for credit.
 10. **Ensure students have the academic supports to succeed:** Drawing from CCAP annual reports, the Chancellor's Office found in 2021 that local programs would be strengthened by adding dedicated counselors and tutors. Counselors can promote dual enrollment, guide students through the enrollment process, coordinate with partnering schools, and support students who are struggling. Tutors can provide targeted help with challenging coursework. However, because neither AB 288 nor AB 30 included funding for these roles, colleges were left without sustained resources to support them. One-time dual enrollment funding has helped some CCAP partnerships by allowing school districts to provide these supports, but high student-to-counselor ratios mean there is no guarantee that students receive them. Moreover, dual enrollment students who are most underrepresented in higher education [may not be fully aware](#) or take full advantage of available college services and supports (Rodriguez et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

Dual credit and dual enrollment students now make up the majority of students at some community colleges. Expanding the promise dual enrollment means reaching more students—especially those historically underrepresented in higher education—while also ensuring they take high-quality courses, receive strong advising and academic supports, and follow pathways that clearly connect to their college and career goals. California's story illustrates that with buy-in from political leadership, state agencies, school districts, community college presidents and trustees, and education advocates, comprehensive dual credit policy and practice reforms are within reach.

Community college trustees can play a critical role in shaping policies and partnerships that make these opportunities possible. They can set clear institutional priorities by championing the adoption of dual enrollment as a strategic goal in board policy and the college's strategic plan. Trustees can address affordability barriers by approving tuition and fee policies that reduce or eliminate costs for high school students, especially those with low incomes. They also can advocate for state and local funding to cover textbooks, technology, and transportation. Trustees can help strengthen dual enrollment pathways and quality by requiring that dual enrollment courses are embedded in structured college and career pathways leading to degrees or credentials of value, not just standalone classes. And they can monitor student success data (credit accumulation, transfer rates, credential completion) to ensure quality and alignment.

Trustees can also play an influential role in the policy process. They can ensure broad access by prioritizing underserved students. "When we think about dual enrollment, think about who we haven't served and what can we do differently in order for all of our students to cross that finish line so that they and their families can have a better shot at a living wage," Trustee Gomez-Heitzeberg noted (2023). Trustees can provide testimony or guidance to policymakers showing how dual enrollment expands opportunity and strengthens local economies. They can support legislation that incentivizes broad access and high-quality dual enrollment pathways. And finally, by fostering strong partnerships with K–12 schools, employers, and policymakers, trustees can remove barriers and make dual enrollment a driver of both student opportunity and workforce readiness. By supporting dual enrollment pathways, trustees can expand access to higher education, accelerate student success, and help secure their state's economic future.



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