



# The Lasting Benefits of Early College High Schools

## Considerations and Recommendations for Policymakers

The high school years are a pivotal stage for students to prepare to succeed in college and careers. Most jobs today require a postsecondary degree—and most students want to go to college. There are substantial challenges, however, in reaching the goal of college and career readiness for all students, particularly for students from low-income families and students of color:

- Many schools struggle to provide a positive school climate and a schoolwide, college-going culture, which can benefit students both academically and emotionally.
- Many students are not well prepared for college coursework, and, as a result, many high school graduates who enroll in postsecondary institutions leave without earning a certificate or degree.
- Even among students who are well prepared for college, many students fail to enroll in a postsecondary institution or complete a certificate or degree, due to financial barriers that contribute to disparities in access to postsecondary education.

### Early Colleges Show Strong Evidence of Effectiveness

Early College High Schools, also known as Early Colleges, could help policymakers and educators surmount these critical challenges.

Early Colleges are partnerships of school districts, charter management organizations, or high schools and 2- or 4-year colleges or universities, which are jointly accountable for student success. Originally created as part of the Early College High School Initiative spearheaded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Early Colleges are committed to serving students traditionally underrepresented in higher education.

As a type of dual enrollment program, Early Colleges offer all their students the opportunity to earn an associate's degree or up to 2 years of college credits toward a bachelor's degree in high school—at no or low cost to the students. Early Colleges also provide support to students as they plan for their college education, helping them select college courses, transfer to a 4-year college, and identify sources of financial aid.

The American Institutes for Research (AIR) has conducted two rigorous impact studies and a cost-benefit study of Early Colleges in recent years:

- The first study (Berger et al., 2013, 2014)—an impact evaluation built on a rigorous, “gold standard” randomized experimental design—included a sample of almost 2,500 students who applied to 10 Early Colleges across five states between 2005–06 and 2007–08. All study participants entered in Early College admissions lotteries; Early College students were randomly offered admission, and control students were not. Following these students for 2 to 4 years after expected

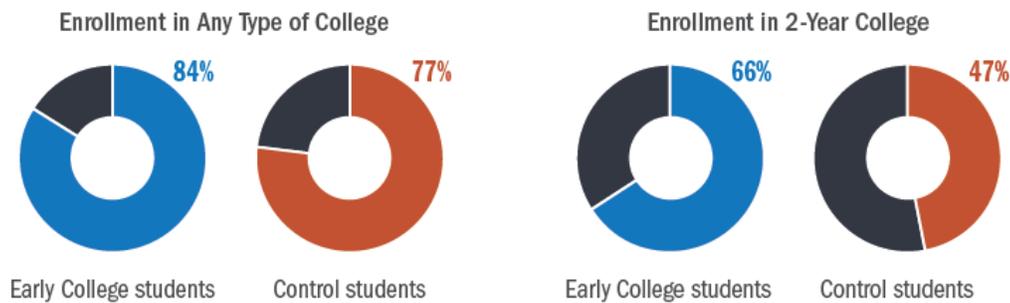
high school graduation, the study found **significantly higher rates of high school graduation, college enrollment, and college degree attainment** for Early College students than for the control students.

- A follow-up study (Song & Zeiser, 2019), which included these same groups of students, was the first study to assess the longer-term impacts of Early Colleges. This study found that **the positive impacts of Early Colleges on college enrollment and degree attainment continued for at least 6 years** after expected high school graduation.
- A second report from the follow-up study (Atchison, Mohammed, Zeiser, Knight, & Levin, 2019) compared the cost of Early Colleges to the estimated benefits resulting from increased postsecondary attainment. This study found that **per-student lifetime benefits of Early Colleges substantially exceeded the per-student cost**.

## Key Findings on the Longer-Term Impacts of Early Colleges

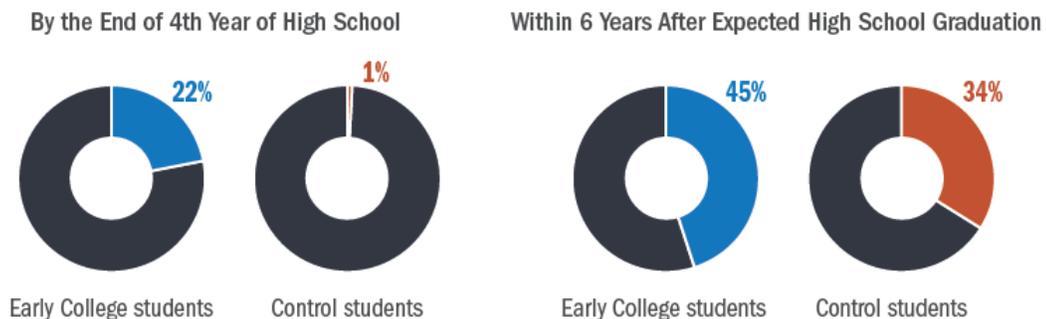
**Early College students were more likely than their peers to go to college and earn a degree.** Within 6 years after expected high school graduation, Early College students were significantly more likely than control students to enroll in college and to enroll in 2-year colleges. Early College students were just as likely as control students to enroll in 4-year colleges as well as selective 4-year colleges.

### Percentage of students enrolled in college within 6 years after expected high school graduation



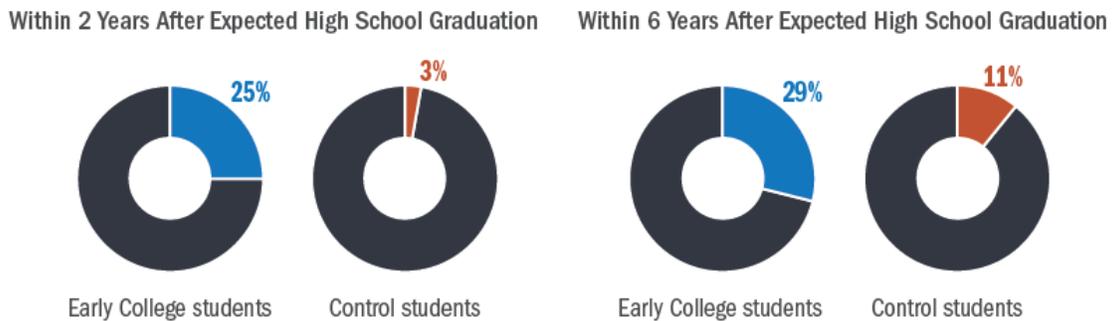
Early College students also were more likely than control students to complete a postsecondary degree by the end of each year between their 4th year of high school and 6 years after expected high school graduation.

### Percentage of students who attained any postsecondary degree by the end of the 4th year of high school and within 6 years after expected high school graduation



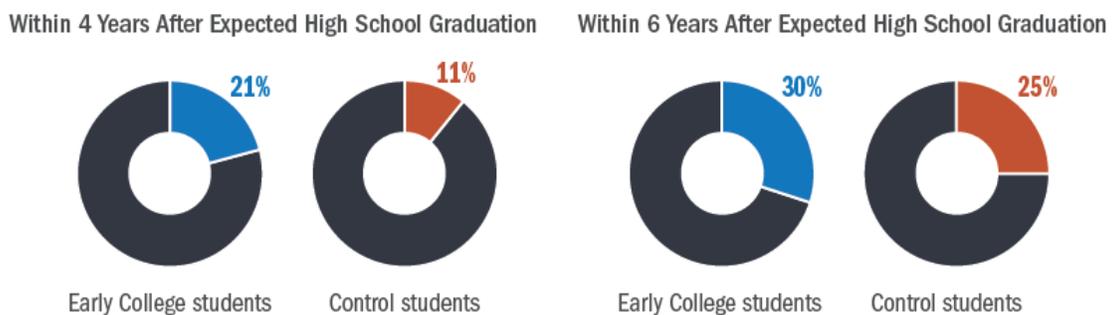
Within 2 years after expected high school graduation—the time by which students had 4 years to complete high school and 2 years to complete an associate’s degree or certificate—the gap in the completion rates of these two credentials between Early College students and control students exceeded 20 percentage points. Within 6 years after expected high school graduation, Early College students were nearly three times as likely as control students to complete an associate’s degree or certificate.

**Percentage of students who attained an associate’s degree or certificate by the end of the 4th year of high school and within 6 years after expected high school graduation**



Within 4 years after expected high school graduation, about one in five Early College students had earned a bachelor’s degree, compared to about one in 10 students in the control group. Within 6 years after expected high school graduation, this gap in bachelor’s degree attainment had narrowed, but Early College students were still significantly more likely than control students to have completed a bachelor’s degree.

**Percentage of students who attained a bachelor’s degree**



**Early Colleges equally benefited students from different backgrounds, including students who are traditionally underrepresented in higher education.** The Early College impacts on postsecondary enrollment and attainment outcomes did not differ significantly by students’ gender, race/ethnicity, or eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch.

Taken together, these findings indicate that Early College students not only were more likely to complete postsecondary degrees, but they also completed these degrees more quickly than control students. Although the difference in degree completion rates between the two groups of students narrowed

over time, the fact remains that a larger percentage of Early College students completed postsecondary degrees earlier in their lives. Earlier degree completion allowed students to get a head start on furthering their education or entering the labor force at a younger age, or both, which has implications for potential lifetime earnings.

## Key Findings on the Benefits and Costs of Early Colleges

**Investing in Early College programs pays off with lasting benefits for students and the broader population.** Boosting postsecondary educational attainment improves individuals' earnings over a career, increases the amount of taxes governments collect, and reduces government spending on federal assistance programs. AIR's cost-benefit study estimated the benefits of Early Colleges by multiplying the impact of Early Colleges on postsecondary educational attainment by the estimated public and private monetary returns to postsecondary attainment reported in prior studies. The results indicated lifetime benefits of almost \$58,000 per Early College student.<sup>1</sup>

Using data from the six Early Colleges that were able to provide detailed cost data on their programs, the cost-benefit study indicated that providing students with an Early College education cost more than a traditional high school education by approximately \$3,800 per student during the course of 4 years of high school. Comparing the estimated benefits to the cost, the study calculated a return on investment of \$15 for every dollar spent on Early Colleges.

## Implications for Policymakers

- **Early Colleges work for students from different backgrounds.** The 10 Early Colleges in the AIR studies served diverse student populations. The programs had similar positive impacts for students who are economically disadvantaged and traditionally underserved and for students from more advantaged backgrounds.
- **Early Colleges have the potential to improve the high school experience of all students.** The common denominator of Early College programs is a schoolwide focus on instructional rigor, a college-going culture, and strong support for all students. This schoolwide focus helps to ensure that all students—not just higher achieving students or students from higher socioeconomic classes—benefit from the program.

<sup>1</sup> The time frame over which returns to postsecondary attainment are estimated varies across studies. The AIR cost-benefit study used other studies that most commonly calculated estimates of the private returns based on an assumed 40-year work life, with estimates of public benefits most commonly covering a 60-year period after high school completion.

### FAST FACTS

Among the Early Colleges included in the AIR cost-benefit study, the per-student cost for Early Colleges was about **\$955** more per year than for traditional high schools, or **\$3,800** for 4 years. This amount paid for Early College students to earn up to 2 years of postsecondary credits during high school.

In comparison, the average annual cost of tuition and fees for the 2017–18 school year was **\$3,600** at community colleges and about **\$8,300** at 4-year, in-state colleges, according to the [National Center for Education Statistics](#) (Ginder, Kelly-Reid, & Mann, 2018). Average tuition and fees were much higher for out-of-state public colleges and for private colleges.

- **Early Colleges can help policymakers and educators address many key priorities in education.** The schoolwide focus, college credit accrual at little or no cost to students, and positive impacts of Early Colleges relate directly to secondary and postsecondary education priorities, including the following:
  - Improving instructional rigor and college-going culture in schools
  - Improving students' college and career readiness and postsecondary outcomes
  - Reducing economic barriers to postsecondary education and addressing the student debt crisis

“ *Early Colleges are dual enrollment on steroids. Providing opportunities for high-achieving students to take Advanced Placement or college courses and earn college credits during high school is great, but it may lead to disparities in opportunities and outcomes within schools. Early Colleges integrate the high school and college academic program for all students in a school.* ”

—Kristina Zeiser,  
senior researcher at AIR and director of the Early College follow-up study

## Recommendations for Policymakers

AIR's Early College research can help policymakers and education leaders make informed, evidence-based decisions about Early College investments.

### Recommendations for Federal Policymakers

- **Increase support for Early Colleges.** The U.S. Department of Education should consider expanding support for Early Colleges in federally funded programs such as the Education Innovation and Research Program Expansion Grants, Charter Schools Programs Grants for Replication and Expansion of High-Quality Charter Schools (also known as charter management organization grants), and Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs.
- **Support further research on Early Colleges.** Research on the impacts of different Early College models, as well as research including more recently established Early Colleges, would help states, postsecondary education institutions, districts, charter management organizations, and schools invest in the most effective model.

### Recommendations for State Policymakers

- **Learn from trailblazers in the Early College movement.** Hundreds of Early Colleges have opened during the past 2 decades. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has invested hundreds of millions of dollars to spearhead the creation of Early Colleges nationwide. Jobs For the Future, a Gates Foundation grantee, helped design and develop the first 280 Early Colleges nationally and

continues to lead the expansion of Early Colleges. With the help of a statewide designation process, more than 150 Early Colleges have opened in Texas alone. Insights into how these trailblazers formed partnerships and overcame financial or political obstacles as they established Early Colleges could serve as a how-to guide for creating and sustaining Early Colleges.

- **Learn more about Early Colleges in your state.** State policymakers should reach out to superintendents in districts or leaders of charter management organizations that offer Early College programs and to leaders in postsecondary institutions that partner with Early Colleges to find out how these programs are implemented in your state, how programs are working, how students fare, and what these stakeholders need to sustain and expand these programs. If your state has no Early College programs, reach out to trailblazers in other states to learn from their Early College experience.
- **Encourage districts and postsecondary institutions to create or expand Early Colleges.** State policymakers should bring together secondary and postsecondary education leaders to explore ways of building Early College programs in local communities. These leaders could help showcase Early Colleges in their state and engage the wider community of stakeholders, including educators, parents, students, business leaders, and service providers, in making Early College programs available to more students.
- **Increase funding for Early Colleges.** Early College programs cost modestly more per student than traditional high school education programs, but the benefits far outweigh the cost. Early College programs need both initial and ongoing funding to succeed. Without continued support, Early College programs may falter after initial funding from grants or other sources comes to an end.
- **Assess the policy landscape, and pass new legislation or modify existing legislation to spur the creation and operation of Early Colleges.** State policymakers should also consider whether current state legislation and policies support or impede Early College programs, and they should amend policies that stand in the way of secondary and postsecondary education partnerships that put students on the path to stronger educational outcomes.

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