

ADVANCED OPPORTUNITIES:

How Idaho is Reshaping High Schools by Empowering Students

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About the Author



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Executive Summary

More than half of Idaho's high school seniors are already enrolled in college. Dual enrollment programs, in which high school students enroll in college courses, have gained traction nationally in the past two decades, but Idaho's "Advanced Opportunities" initiative has been particularly successful. When students reach seventh grade, Idaho provides them with \$4,125 that can be used to pay for dual enrollment courses, Advanced Placement exams, professional certification examinations, "overload" high school courses (above a full schedule), and, as of this school year, workforce development and apprenticeship courses. This student-centered investment has encouraged high school teachers to partner with community colleges and four-year universities to provide college-level instruction—an arrangement that also provides teachers with a financial stipend and postsecondary institutions with an enrollment boost. State policymakers seeking ways to improve the quality of high school instruction and expand postsecondary access and attainment can benefit from Idaho's example.

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Introduction: The Promise of Dual Credit Expansion

Over the past half-century of increased spending and successive waves of education reform, American elementary schools appear to have improved, but the quality of America's high schools may actually have deteriorated. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, there have been modest increases in achievement for fourth- and eighth-grade students, while 17-year-old students have made little progress.¹ The recent increase in high school graduation rates has been much celebrated, but given stagnant performance, this likely represents little more than the systemic lowering of academic standards.

In the last quarter-century, reform efforts have focused primarily on closing achievement gaps, to the neglect of higher-achieving students. As the Fordham Institute's Chester E. Finn, Jr. put it, "many of the country's most talented young people—rich and poor alike—are left unable to surge ahead, languishing in classes geared toward universal but modest proficiency."² And despite the fact that less than 20% of students smoothly transition from high school to college to a career,³ policymakers have made "college readiness" the north star of a high school education, even as college costs have risen and college enrollment has declined substantially in the last decade.⁴

One policy that holds promise to address some of these systemic weaknesses is dual enrollment: enabling high school students to take college-level academic and/or career and technical education (CTE) courses. Although dual enrollment has received limited attention in national policy discussions, it has steadily gained traction in many states in the last two decades. Forty-seven states and the District of Columbia have laws enabling dual enrollment, and approximately 80% of American high schools make provision for dual credit instruction.⁵ The most recent national data released by the Department of Education showed that about one-third of students who entered ninth grade in 2009 took at least one dual credit course.⁶

Approximately 80% of participating students take dual credit courses within their high schools from teachers who partner with colleges or universities; the rest take courses online or at a college campus. Although the research is limited, studies have suggested that dual enrollment increases college attendance for low-income students,⁷ as well as graduation from community colleges⁸ and four-year universities.⁹ The ability to accrue college credit while in high school offers students and their families a significant economic benefit.

Dual enrollment has not been without its critics. In an article in *Thought and Action*—a publication of the National Education Association, America's largest teachers' union—Alec Thomson, president of the Michigan Association for Higher Education, lamented that dual enrollment "seeks to address K–12 institutional shortcomings by co-opting college and university participation." Its expansion, he argues, means that the "line between being enrolled in high school and college becomes so blurred that the one thing becomes indistinguishable from the other."¹⁰

But policymakers should welcome these developments. Importing curricula from colleges into high schools can raise the rigor of instruction. And colleges, especially community colleges, tend to be more attuned to local workforce demand than traditional public high schools. Given that 30% of dual enrollment courses are CTE courses, a robust dual enrollment system helps prepare students who aren't college-bound for a successful career.¹¹ For example, in Arkansas, where the average high school student takes about five CTE courses, an additional CTE course increased high school graduation by 3.2 percentage points, improved the probability of employment after high school by 0.6 percentage points, and led to a 3% increase in wages. Students who concentrated in CTE (taking, on average, about nine CTE courses) were 21 percentage points more likely to graduate and 1 percentage point more likely to be employed after high school.¹²

Last year, according to the Education Commission of the States, 108 bills were introduced in 38 states, and 36 bills were enacted in 23 states, related to dual enrollment.¹³ As state legislators and policy advocates consider expanding and refining their dual enrollment policies, they would be wise to look to the example of a state that rarely gets attention in national policy conversations: Idaho.

Years and layers of incremental reforms had made Idaho third in the nation in terms of dual credit enrollment by the 2015–16 school year.¹⁴ That year, the legislature passed the Advanced Opportunities (AO) program, which was, and still is, the only one of its kind in America. Whereas some states directly reimburse colleges, or provide additional funding to high schools, or provide partial or full reimbursement to students, Idaho is the only state that puts money for dual enrollment directly into students' hands. With student demand in the driver's seat, AO has fundamentally reshaped the high school experience in Idaho. This report describes the mechanics, origin, and institutional effects of Idaho's initiative, which is a useful model for legislators and policy advocates in other states who are searching for ways to improve the quality of high school instruction, decrease the cost of college, and help students who are not college-bound graduate high school with a professional skill.

Advanced Opportunities 101

The policy design of AO is simple: give students money and tell them how they can use it. When students reach

seventh grade, the state provides them with \$4,125 that they can use to further their education in several ways. They can use that money to accelerate their path through the K–12 system by taking “overload” courses over the summer or online during the school year (on top of a full middle or high school schedule); they can use it to pay for Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), College-Level Examination Program (CLEP), and professional certification examinations; to pay for dual enrollment courses; and, as of this academic year, to fund state-approved CTE workforce development courses and apprenticeships.

The Philosophical and Administrative Origins of Advanced Opportunities

The key architect of AO is State Senator Steven Thayn, a former high school Spanish teacher and dairy farmer who splits his time between serving in the Idaho legislature and baling hay. Idaho Senate Education Committee chair Dean Mortimer described Thayn as an “ideas man.”¹⁵ Thayn's central idea: “Public education was founded on a fundamental flaw: that the state could educate students without the help of parents. That's what Horace Mann said, and I've been trying for thirty years to figure out how to correct that mistake.”¹⁶

That's a concern far easier to articulate than to address. From 2010 to 2014, Thayn sponsored and helped pass a series of bills intended to provide academically ambitious students with more agency over their high school careers. In 2010, he sponsored the Mastery Advancement Pilot Program (MAPP), which allowed high school students to “challenge” courses by passing competency examinations in lieu of fulfilling seat-time requirements for courses; if students accumulated enough credits to graduate a year early, they would earn a scholarship worth 35% of their annual per-pupil funding (about \$2,250 at the time).¹⁷ In 2012, he sponsored a bill creating the “8 in 6 Program,” which provided \$225 per credit for students to take “overload” courses online or during the summer, in order to accelerate their education. If students took full advantage of the program, they could accumulate enough credits to graduate high school after their sophomore year, and spend the next two years earning an associate degree via dual enrollment courses. (Hence the name “8 in 6,” as a student taking full advantage of the policy could complete eight years of education in six years.)¹⁸

Around that time, Idaho fixed the price of dual enrollment at \$65 a credit (it has since risen to \$75). Idaho used federal funding from the 2009 federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to cover dual credit tuition for low-income students. When that proved popular, Idaho continued to cover dual enrollment tuition for low-income students, but middle- and higher-income students bore full financial responsibility for dual credit classes.

In 2013, Thayne crafted the “Dual Credit for Early Completers” program, which made students who had accumulated enough high school credits to graduate early eligible for funding to cover up to 36 dual enrollment credits.¹⁹ In 2014, Thayne and Democratic state senator Grant Burgoyne sponsored a bill providing juniors with up to \$200 and seniors up to \$400 toward dual enrollment, although the state contribution was not to exceed 75% of a student’s total dual enrollment cost.²⁰

These programs substantially increased dual enrollment, which nearly tripled from slightly more than 6,000 students enrolled in 2009–10 to nearly 18,000 by 2015–16.²¹ In spring 2015, David Peterson, then superintendent of the Nampa School District, told the *Idaho Press* that dual enrollment was up “a ton,

and much more than in previous years.” He also explained that managing the program was “extremely challenging” for guidance counselors.²² Reflecting on the 2014–15 and 2015–16 school years, Connie Benke, a high school counselor in the Vallivue School District, described triaging student participation across those programs and managing the student reimbursement process with the state, as “two years of torment.”²³ Counselors had to essentially act as accountants, building their own spreadsheets to manage funding requests to the state and disbursement to students for four separate but, at times, overlapping programs.

In January 2015, Tina Polishchuk, a former middle school math teacher, was tasked as the sole full-time bureaucrat in the Idaho Department of Education responsible for overseeing these programs. When Polishchuk conducted a training session with high school counselors in northern Idaho that August, one approached her and angrily demanded, “Tina! Why does this have to be so complicated?” Polishchuk saw how administrative hurdles and red tape were substantially limiting access to the program and thought that it would be much simpler and more effective to allocate funding directly into student-controlled accounts.²⁴



Polishchuk’s supervisor liked the idea but told her that it would probably take three years of grooming the legislature to get it passed. She decided to drop the idea. But a few weeks later, Polishchuk met with Tim Corder, who was then the Idaho Department of Education’s legislative liaison, to interview him for a paper she was writing for her Ed.D. program at Boise State University (BSU). After the interview, Corder asked how her work was going, and she mentioned her idea. He asked her to have a proposal on his desk by the end of the day. Polishchuk took the laws that Thayn had passed in the last six years, “and combined them all together, taking snippets of what would work,” and did a back-envelope calculation to determine that \$4,125 would be a reasonable per-pupil allocation for the program. Corder took the idea to Thayn, who—despite initial skepticism that this proposal would gain the approval of the traditionally frugal Idaho state legislature—persuaded his colleagues to pass a bill establishing it within a few months.²⁵

Dramatic Growth

Advanced Opportunities grew faster than anyone anticipated. In the 2015–16 school year, reimbursements to students on the constituent programs that became AO totaled approximately \$4 million. The state expected expenditures for 2016–17, AO’s first year, to be slightly higher—\$5.5 million—but, in fact, they rose to \$11.7 million. In 2017–18, expenditures rose to \$17.5 million; in 2018–19, expenditures rose to \$19.25 million.

Thayn credits the dramatic rise of AO to a mind-set shift in students and parents. “When you talk to students and parents about money,” he said, “it becomes more concrete. The kids feel like it’s their money. It’s not a state program that they have to access. It’s theirs. That’s a huge psychological difference.”

Now that high school guidance counselors were no longer overwhelmed by reimbursement paperwork, they devoted more time to raising awareness about AO, holding assemblies and meeting with classes to explain that students now had more than \$4,000 at their fingertips. Thayn recalled speaking to one principal at a school in Idaho Falls who expressed skepticism that his students would be interested in taking dual credit courses. Thayn insisted that the principal hold a public meeting to gauge interest. “They gave two days’ warning,” Thayn said, “and hundreds of parents showed up.”

Figure 1 shows the dramatic increase in dual credit courses, “overload” courses, and Advanced Placement

FIGURE 1.
Statewide Enrollment in Advanced Opportunities-Funded Courses and Exams

Year	2015–16	2016–17	2017–18	2018–19
Dual Credit Courses	16,264	50,224	60,807	70,395
Overload Courses	1,228	7,432	10,642	13,908
AP Exams	6,240	12,697	13,303	13,429

Chart: Manhattan Institute

exams funded by AO. Idaho now has the largest share of high school students earning college credit in America. In the 2018–19 school year, 54% of Idaho’s juniors and 56% of its seniors took at least one dual credit course.

Fabiola Juarez-Coca, director of concurrent enrollment at BSU, says that now that there is broad public knowledge of the program, “it has almost become a way [for superintendents and principals] to recruit students into their school district. They’re hiring teachers who meet our academic requirements [a master’s degree in the subject area] and e-mailing me to get them on board. It’s a complete flip from 10 years ago, when I had to go pound on superintendents’ doors and say ‘please think about doing this.’”²⁶

Reshaping High School

The explosion of dual credit has reshaped high school for students, teachers, and administrators. Staff interviewed in four school districts described various ways that AO has changed their schools.

More Opportunities, More Advising

School districts have substantially improved their college and career counseling services. Whereas counselors in many high schools wait for juniors and seniors to approach them with questions about college applications, high school counselors in Idaho are now engaging seventh- and eighth-grade students in discussions about their postsecondary and/or career ambitions.

Brooke Claredge stepped into her role as a college and career counselor at Minico High School (which serves about 1,000 students, two-thirds of whom qualify for free- and reduced-price lunch, located two and a half hours east of Boise) in the 2016–17 school year. In her first

months as a counselor, she went to Minidoka County's middle schools to meet with seventh- and eighth-graders to explain the new opportunities available to them. She also met individually with the top 25% of every high school grade, encouraging them to maximize their dual enrollment credits, and even earn an associate degree by graduation. In 2018, six students earned associate degrees; in 2019, 18; and this year, Claredge projects that 29 students—more than 10% of the senior class—will graduate high school with associate degrees.

To help students navigate AO, the Idaho legislature created a \$5 million program to support college and career advising, and increased funding for that program to \$9 million in 2019. While school districts have broad flexibility in how to use these funds, a review conducted by *Idaho Ed News* indicated that most school districts have used the money to add counseling personnel.²⁷

Since Claredge stepped into her role, Minico has added two college and career counselors in addition to its three high school counselors. For years, advisors from the federally funded TRIO and Gear Up programs (intended to help steer disadvantaged students toward higher education) and a transition coordinator from the College of Southern Idaho (CSI) had tried to help serve Minico's students. But Claredge says that their involvement had not been productive until Minico added staff and all counselors started to work as a coherent team to help their students maximize the opportunities at their disposal.

This team puts Minico's student-to-counselor ratio at 144-to-1, well above the American School Counselor Association's recommended 250-to-1 ratio, and substantially above the national average of 482-to-1.²⁸ Personalized advising has also proved integral to ensuring a higher caliber of instruction in Minico's dual credit courses. "The teachers and I work really well together," Claredge said. "I vet all the kids who go into their classrooms. That's what's different."

Kerilee Jewks, the AO coordinator in Emmett High School (which serves 680 students, about half of whom qualify for free- and reduced-price lunch, located 45 minutes north of Boise), starts engaging students in career conversations in seventh grade. When students reach high school, they meet with counselors to develop a four-year plan; by 10th and 11th grades, Jewks and her colleagues "are talking to them all the time. ... We start with a career goal and work backward. If that means going to lineman school or going to college, we do our best to get them there." Thus far, Jewks says, four parents have approached her after their children graduated, saying, "Hey, now can you help *me*? I want to go to school now that my kids are raised."

Raising Rigor Through Advanced Placement and/or Dual Enrollment

Emmett High School offers only two Advanced Placement courses. Nationwide, the number of schools offering AP courses has more than doubled, from 9,292 in 1990 to 18,920 in 2013, and the number of tests taken has increased eightfold.²⁹ But rural schools have struggled to sustain their programs. From 2008 to 2012, the share of rural schools offering AP dropped by 5 percentage points.³⁰

Jewks reflected that at Emmett, "we don't have a lot of opportunities like bigger schools. Our course handbook is very small." But to increase the rigor of their offerings and afford students a possibility of gaining college credit, Emmett High School offers students the option to take core courses for dual credit. "They're in the exact same class," Jewks explained. "If they're taking algebra, they can take college algebra. They just choose whether they're taking it dual credit or not." Last year, 122 out of 157 seniors graduated, having taken at least one dual enrollment course for credit.

The Vallivue School District, by contrast, prides itself on its AP offerings. Located 20 minutes west of Boise, Vallivue's two high schools (Ridgevue and Vallivue High School) serve a total of about 2,300 students, half of whom qualify for free- and reduced-price lunch. Vallivue High School's principal, Shane Carson, noted that since AO was implemented, his school added five AP courses. The school has found a synergy between dual enrollment and AP; students who take advanced courses can choose whether to take them for dual enrollment credit (a surer option for accumulating credit at an in-state college) or to take the AP exam (an option that could provide credit for out-of-state colleges if students score a 3 or higher). Teachers' partnerships with postsecondary institutions have helped increase the caliber of instruction, and the fact that AO covers the cost of AP exams has encouraged more students to take them. Between the 2015–16 and 2018–19 school years, the number of students taking AP exams increased from 305 to 522, and the number of exams taken increased from 492 to 828, even as the pass rate remained stable, at about 40%.

Teacher-College Partnerships

Schools like Minico, Emmett, and Vallivue have been able to increase their dual credit offerings so rapidly partly because teachers in those districts have a financial incentive to teach these courses. Postsecondary institutions receive \$75 per student

credit hour for dual enrollment. Several participating colleges kick back \$20–\$25 per student credit hour to teachers.

Some high schools, like Minico, partner exclusively with one postsecondary institution (in its case, CSI). Other high schools, like Emmett and Vallivue, allow their teachers flexibility in terms of which postsecondary institutions to partner with (e.g., English through the University of Idaho, calculus through BSU).

Dual credit teachers must meet the same qualifications that they would need to teach the same subject at the postsecondary institution they are partnered with. For BSU, a four-year public university, that means a master’s degree in the subject area. This has limited the number of teachers who can partner with BSU, but the university offers teachers the opportunity to pursue a tuition-free master’s degree, funded by money that BSU brings in from its dual enrollment students.

For the College of Western Idaho (CWI), a community college, teachers must have either a master’s degree or a bachelor’s in the discipline plus five years of teaching the subject. High school faculty are put in touch with an instructional mentor from a postsecondary institution and, according to Stephen Crumrine, director of dual enrollment at CWI, “that’s where the hard work begins, of lining up their curriculum with our syllabus. ... The [memorandum of understanding] is not for teaching; it’s for aligning curriculum.”³¹ At CWI, department chairs recruit faculty members within their respective departments, with an eye toward their bandwidth and workload. Faculty are provided training in curriculum alignment, and then receive a small stipend for working with high school teachers to help align their curriculum to collegiate standards.

“There is some heartburn that we’re not M.A. only,” says Crumrine. But one reason that the program is successful is “because we’ve done that. It’s allowed us to do significant outreach into rural settings, which historically have a hard time retaining highly qualified teachers.” Several stakeholders expressed hope that AO may make it easier for rural districts to retain talented teachers. Typically, Crumrine says, rural schools “get faculty, train them, and then they go to bigger districts to get more money.” But if a teacher were to teach three sections of a three-credit-hour college course to 25 students per section, she could make an additional \$5,625 per year—about a 10% raise for the median Idaho teacher. This stipend could, in theory, offset the salary benefits of moving to a larger district, especially if the larger district has no need for dual credit teachers in a teacher’s subject area.

Remote Rural Schools

Whether or not AO helps ameliorate rural schools’ teacher-retention issue, it has, in partnership with the Idaho Digital Learning Alliance (IDLA), Idaho’s state-funded virtual school, leveled the playing field for rural students in terms of courses they can take. This partnership has made Idaho one of 15 states to have a “course access” program, which leverages digital learning to provide students the opportunity to take advanced course-work that their school does not offer.³²

Figure 2 shows the number of courses taught in person at Salmon River High School in Riggins, three and a half hours to the north, which serves 80 students, and at Timberline High School in Boise, which has 1,285 students in grades 10–12.

According to Adam Lowe, former executive director of the National Alliance of Concurrent Education

FIGURE 2. Course Offerings at Salmon River High School and Timberline High School

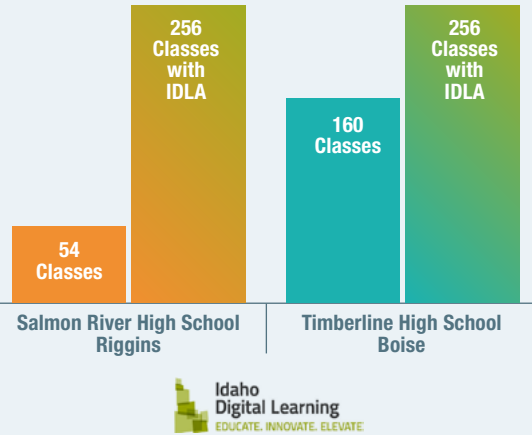


FIGURE 3. Dual Credit Courses by Geographic Region

	2015–16	2016–17	2017–18	2018–19
City	2,421	7,693	8,888	10,670
Suburb	4,302	18,360	22,179	26,031
Town	4,529	11,150	13,512	15,842
Rural	4,734	12,407	15,324	16,855

Chart: Manhattan Institute



Partnerships (NACEP) and an advisor at the Education Strategy Group, the most analogous program is Louisiana's Supplemental Course Academy. The key difference is that Louisiana's program funds schools based on their enrollments, whereas Idaho funds students directly. "From a policy innovation perspective," Lowe says, Idaho's "flexibility is something that's very attractive. The classic policy argument is 'Who should be making these decisions?' Other course choice programs bring the decision down to the school level. What AO represents is bringing that decision down into the hands of students and parents." Whereas course access programs that run funds through school districts have, in some cases, stymied growth (in Missouri, for example, parents have been forced to sue to allow their students access),³³ AO's student-directed funding encourages schools to work to provide courses that students want while imposing no financial or administrative cost when students take courses online.

According to IDLA's student services manager Kristen Binder, about 75% of IDLA's enrollment in AP or dual credit courses comes from students in rural schools. About 20% of rural students have taken at least one virtual course, compared with 10% in suburban and

urban districts. Rural schools frequently provide dedicated class periods for students to take IDLA courses; some have built in an IDLA lab every single period of the day. Although the most explosive dual enrollment growth has come in the suburbs, IDLA has helped facilitate threefold growth in rural schools (see **Figure 3**).

Reorienting Higher Education

The rapid rise in dual enrollment has brought changes to Idaho's higher-education system as well. Nationwide, according to David Jenkins, an associate at the Community College Research Center at Teachers College Columbia, community colleges "are making up for the declines in adult enrollment with dual-enrollment high school students."³⁴

According to CWI's Crumrine, about 10,000 its 30,000 students are high schoolers taking dual enrollment courses. In the 2015–16 school year, CWI partnered with 247 teachers at 62 schools to deliver 399 courses.

This year, CWI is partnering with 417 teachers at 93 schools to deliver 813 courses.

As dual enrollment has expanded across the country, some community colleges have raised the concern that it could prove to be a double-edged sword. Even as community colleges expand their overall enrollment, they risk losing revenue in the long term if lower-tuition dual enrollment credits act as pure substitutes for higher-tuition credits from adult students. This concern, articulated by administrators at CWI, where the price for adult students is \$139 per credit hour, led the Idaho State Board of Education to increase the price of dual enrollment tuition from \$65 to \$75.³⁵

Crumrine admitted that there had been trepidation from the operations side of his college. “But,” he says, “I think I’ve been able to change the party line. There’s no evidence suggesting that an increase in dual enrollment negatively affects matriculation. If I’m just looking at the numbers from this last year, we saw an increase in both.”

In the 2015–16 school year, CWI received \$1.36 million in dual enrollment tuition fees, representing 7% of total tuition payments. This year, CWI received about \$5 million in dual enrollment tuition fees, representing 20% of overall tuition payments.

At the four-year BSU, on the other hand, dual enrollment has not become a key source of revenue, according to Fabiola Juarez-Coca. “It’s more of a community service,” she explained. “Idaho isn’t rich. We’re not a wealthy state. So with this, we’re trying to develop partnerships. Students do two years at community colleges to get their general education requirements, and then come here to finish a degree in construction management or computer science. This can accelerate that.”

Although it can’t necessarily be attributed to AO, BSU’s enrollment has climbed almost 20% in the past five years,³⁶ and Juarez-Coca says that BSU has also seen an increase in its four- and six-year graduation rates, which, she speculates, may be a product of students entering with more credits.

In many states, transferring credits between postsecondary institutions has proved a vexing and persistent problem. A 2017 Government Accountability Office report found that “students who transferred from 2004 to 2009 lost, on average, an estimated 43% of their credits.”³⁷ Under AO, a high school student could acquire college credits from several postsecondary institutions before graduating. There were some kinks to work out. “A superintendent here,” Polishchuk related, “whose daughter finished 60 credits found out that

only 30 would transfer. So he called his legislator to complain. One phone call to the right legislator really changes laws in our state.” There is now universal credit transferability among Idaho’s public colleges. What’s more, the Idaho State Board of Education worked with postsecondary institutions to standardize course numbers and titles across institutions.

There is little guarantee, however, that credits acquired through AO would transfer to out-of-state schools. From a policymaker’s perspective, this could provide an additional benefit to the state if it incentivizes high-achieving students to remain in state for college, which could plausibly add to the pool of college-educated young professionals and help attract more investment in the state. Although there is no way to know whether AO has played a role, the share of high school seniors who enroll in state versus out of state has steadily inched up, from 71% in 2014 to 75% in 2018.³⁸

Career and Technical Education: The Next Frontier

Last year, the Idaho legislature made a further change to AO, allowing for money to flow to fund career and technical education (CTE) courses and apprenticeships.³⁹ “This piece was a little harder to understand,” said Polishchuk, “because workforce development is a little more squishy. With dual credit, you can say, ‘Here’s a class, 75 dollars a credit.’ It’s very cut-and-dried. There was a lot of trepidation about this in the legislature because you’re trying to do right by taxpayers, but how do you determine what a construction certification should cost?”

For now, the Idaho Departments of Education and Labor are working together to approve a limited number of community college–provided CTE courses and apprenticeships, based on an analysis of local labor demand. Students can now put \$500 of their AO fund into online, in-person, or hybrid courses in fields such as electrical, plumbing, and HVAC maintenance. While the prices of these workforce training courses vary by community college, AO funding typically covers most, if not all, of the cost.

Sean Kelly, a CTE development advisor at the Dennis Technical Education Center, the Boise School District’s dedicated CTE campus, noted that the availability of AO funds for professional certification exams substantially increased the number of students who took them. In the

2015–16 school year, before funding was available, 13 students took certification exams; last year, 161 students took them.

Now that AO funding can be put toward apprenticeship courses, in addition to certification exams, Kelly hopes to see a similar uptick in interest. This year, 14 students are taking HVAC, plumbing, or electrical courses, and Kelly expects that number to grow substantially after more students realize that they “could come out of high school with something concrete.”

Kelly said that “more and more students are questioning college,” which he views as a positive development, given that “only 24% of students graduate college and get jobs requiring college degrees.” (This is a slightly high estimate; as Oren Cass noted, fewer than “one in five students travel smoothly from high school diploma to college degree to career.”)⁴⁰ Kelly noted that when kids are young, adults ask them what they want to be when they grow up, but once they reach high school, adults ask them what college they want to go to. He hopes that engaging middle and high school students in career conversations and offering them a path toward a professional certification or an apprenticeship course will substantially increase student demand and start to reorient high school toward genuine career readiness. It is, however, far too soon to tell whether AO will prove to be a game changer for CTE in the way that it has been for dual enrollment.

Conclusion

State Senator Dean Mortimer projects that with Advanced Opportunities, 10 years from now, students in the eighth grade “will fill out a career counseling plan, and get all the counseling they need to map out their next four years to graduate with a skill or a head start on college. Our community colleges will take an even more active presence in our high schools, making the transition between high school and postsecondary seamless,” and the entire system will be driven by and responsive to the preferences of students and the demands of the local economy.⁴¹

AO has enjoyed broad, bipartisan support in Idaho. “It’s not a partisan issue,” says Democratic state senator Burgoyne.⁴² “Politically, no one is opposed to this,” says Thayn. “The biggest opposition has come from some arch-conservatives who believe that no government program can do good. This kind of blows apart their paradigm. But because I’m trying to solve problems, some of them think I’m a liberal. But if only liberals solve problems, that’s quite an indictment of conservatism.”⁴³

It’s likely that there would be more opposition to similar programs from the Left if other states adopted Idaho’s model. Dual enrollment courses are open to two objections from “equity”-minded education advocates.

First, given that they serve academically advanced students and given that rates of high achievement are not equal across racial groups, dual enrollment programs tend to serve higher shares of white and Asian students and lower shares of black and Hispanic students. For left-leaning education analysts, these results paint “a distressing picture of how opportunities continue to be denied to non-white, non-wealthy high schoolers.”⁴⁴ But policymakers should not conflate unequal participation with unequal access; no matter their race or wealth, AO provides students with money and provides their academic institutions with an incentive to meet their needs.

Second, the idea of providing additional funding and more opportunities to students who are academically advanced can be viewed as morally dubious in a field where policy advocates are primarily intent on closing achievement gaps and boosting outcomes for disadvantaged students.

“Some people object that we’re spending money on kids who go to college anyway,” says Thayn. “Well, we’re already spending hundreds of millions of dollars on kids who go to college. It’s called funding higher education. And we’re finding that the kids who start taking classes and navigating the system while they’re still in high school have greater success in college.” And if AO can fulfill its proponents’ hopes and do for CTE and apprenticeships what it has done for dual enrollment, it will help provide students who are not on the path to college with a marketable professional skill.

“We’re letting the agents of change be the students and parents themselves,” says Thayn. “We’re giving them some money. They’re accessing it on their terms. This is really a powerful concept.”

Endnotes

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