Strategies for Expanding Dual-Enrollment Pathways for High School Students

Lessons from the Accelerate ED Initiative

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Getting a head start on college coursework in high school has become an even more important goal for high school students in recent years, due in part to the rising costs of obtaining traditional four-year college degrees coupled with the disruptions in learning for high school and college students due to the COVID-19 pandemic.[1] Now more than ever, students need more choices beyond the "college" or "no college" paths and faster ways to earn college credits. Accelerated postsecondary pathways models ("accelerated pathways") marry the academic experience of dual-enrollment programs with workforce exposure and, in some models, preparation for specific industries.[2] The accelerated pathways can enable students to earn credentials faster, increasing their chances of completing their degree(s) or industry-recognized credentials, or securing employment in reliable careers.[3] The Accelerate ED Initiative aims to expand access to these kinds of programs, with the intention of attracting students who are not typically selected for or encouraged to pursue traditional dual-enrollment programs.

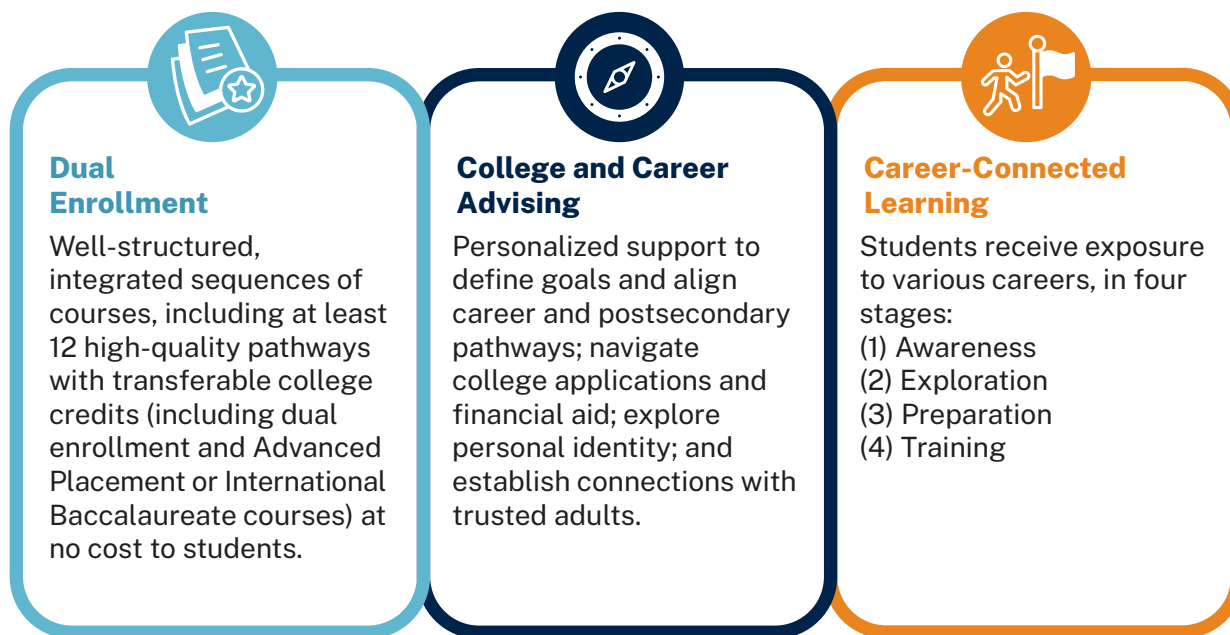## Accelerate ED Pathways Models at a Glance

Since its launch in 2022, the Accelerate ED Initiative has supported a variety of collaborative programmatic approaches aimed at expanding access to accelerated pathways for high school students, particularly those from

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underserved populations. The Initiative is guided by a north star: all students — especially Black, Latino, and Indigenous students, as well as those from low-income backgrounds — should have access to an educational experience that includes dual enrollment, college and career advising services, and career-connected learning as part of a coherent and integrated pathway experience. High school students should have a clearly mapped pathway to and through a post-secondary experience that leads to a degree and credentials that align with careers in high-wage and high-demand fields. As shown in Figure 1, these three pillars serve as foundational elements that ensure students receive structured academic opportunities, personalized guidance, and internships and other career-connected learning experiences. The goal is for these components not to be viewed as add-ons or individual strategies but rather for them to be woven into the fabric of educational institutions and aligned across systems.

The integration and scale of these components within Accelerate ED pathways models vary significantly and are often shaped by the unique regional context in which the models operate. Some areas benefit from long-standing dual-enrollment programs and well-established partnerships with higher education institutions, providing a strong foundation for accelerated pathways models. In contrast, other regions are in the early stages of building these relationships, often leveraging recent policy shifts or targeted state or philanthropic funding to advance these efforts. Additionally, local labor market needs and state education priorities play a critical role in determining which components receive the greatest emphasis within each model.

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Figure 1. Core Components of Accelerate ED Pathways Models: Dual Enrollment, College and Career Advising, and Career-Connected Learning

Dual Enrollment

Well-structured, integrated sequences of courses, including at least 12 high-quality pathways with transferable college credits (including dual enrollment and Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses) at no cost to students.

College and Career Advising

Personalized support to define goals and align career and postsecondary pathways; navigate college applications and financial aid; explore personal identity; and establish connections with trusted adults.

Career-Connected Learning

Students receive exposure to various careers, in four stages:
(1) Awareness
(2) Exploration
(3) Preparation
(4) Training

To assist with the implementation of the pathways models, Education Strategy Group serves as the lead partner organization and together with Arizona State University, Delivery Associates, and Education Design Lab ("the Lab"), provides technical assistance and convenes the initiative's community of practice.[4] To learn from the effort, the foundation brought in MDRC as a research partner, focused on investigating how different models are being implemented to achieve the initiative's goals, including expanding access to pathways models. This brief draws on MDRC's analysis of data from surveys and conversations with leaders from K-12 and postsecondary institutions, as well as industry and community-based leaders who participated in the Accelerate ED Initiative and implemented pathways models in 2024 (see Table 1). This brief highlights strategies for leaders of similar pathways models to consider as they design, implement, and expand their pathways models to a larger scale.

Table 1. Four Regional Pathways Models

Pathways Model	Location	Partner Intermediary Organization
The Pathways for Accelerated College and Career Experience (PACCE)	**OH**	**Learn to Earn Dayton, Ohio**
At a Glance Ohio's PACCE model serves students in grades 8 through 12. It provides the opportunity for students in grades 11 and 12 to attain nine or more college credits by the time of their high school graduation. The program launched with a focus on health science courses and has expanded to other in-demand pathways. Depending on the school, courses can take place either at the high school, as a hybrid model with the student completing the curriculum virtually while sitting in a high school classroom, or on site at a community college. The model is intentionally designed to offer accelerated opportunities to students who are in the "academic middle" and may not be enrolled in more traditional college preparatory programs, such as Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate. Students have access to a dedicated school-based adviser — their Career Navigator — for high frequency, personalized academic and career guidance. All students complete YouScience[a] assessments in grades 8 and 10, which are used to reveal natural aptitudes and interests that can inform career plans.		
Early College Promise (ECP)	**MA**	**Massachusetts Alliance for Early College**
At a Glance The ECP model serves students in grades 10 through 12 and provides the opportunity for students to attain 30 credits by twelfth grade and up to 60 transferable credits toward a bachelor's degree by the end of a thirteenth year of high school. During the thirteenth year students take courses in person at the partner college and are taught by college faculty members. Students have access to a dedicated ECP Student Support Coordinator who offers academic and career advising. Access to career-connected learning opportunities varies by school and depends on existing industry partnerships.		

Table 1 (continued)

Pathways Model	Location	Partner Intermediary Organization
Accelerated Model Pathways for Information Technology (AMP-IT)	IL	Education Systems Center of Northern Illinois University, Illinois

At a Glance

Illinois' AMP-IT model serves students in grades 10 through 12 and provides an opportunity for students to attain 15 credits by the time they graduate. The pathway is focused on IT. Depending on the school and the resources it offers, courses can take place either at the high school, a regional occupational center, or at a community college. The model offers students career advising through school counselors. Access to career-connected learning opportunities varies by school and depends on existing industry partnerships.

| Education Design Lab Designers in Residence Program (the Lab) | CA, LA, NC, TX, & VA | Chaffey College and East Los Angeles College (CA) Delgado Community College (LA) Forsyth Technical Community College (NC) Lone Star College-Tomball (TX) Northern Virginia Community College (VA) |

At a Glance

The Lab includes six community colleges across the country with a range of pathway offerings including healthcare, IT, business, childhood education, and more. These community colleges form meaningful partnerships with districts, students, parents, employers, and community organizations to create program-specific dual-enrollment pathways with a focus on preparing students for high-wage, high-demand local jobs through college coursework, certifications, and internships.

NOTE: [a]YouScience is an online, technology advising tool that provides students with the opportunity to inventory their aptitudes and assessments and learn about aligned careers and educational paths.

Addressing Structural Challenges

Interviews with representatives from four of the pathways models revealed that there are three key structural challenges in the models: There are not enough staff members to deliver the core components; the resources to develop strong programmatic partnerships are limited; and the design and implementation of the pathways models do not reflect the needs of students, parents, and the community. To effectively navigate these challenges, program and school leaders have adopted targeted strategies. The following sections explore these strategies, providing insights on their implementation.

Address Shortages in "People Power"

Leaders from school districts, postsecondary institutions, and their intermediary partners noted that insufficient human capital — or "people power" — is one of the biggest challenges to supporting accelerated pathways students. The challenge persists despite the widely documented benefits of having enough dedicated staff members to support students' success in these types of programs and is typically because of the cost of having dedicated advisers. Previous MDRC research on mentoring and advising in similar models like PTECH and Career Academies shows that access to trusted adults helps students navigate and succeed in rigorous academic environments.[5] Dedicated advising and mentoring can help students develop a stronger sense of belonging in dual-enrollment programs.[6]

Accelerate ED leaders developed innovative ways to address staff member shortages. For example, in Ohio, the **Pathways for Accelerated College and Career Experience** (PACCE) model created a dedicated college and career advising position, known as a "Career Navigator" who serves as a connector for students, school staff members, and industry stakeholders across multiple schools and districts. This position was created by Learn to Earn Dayton, an intermediary that oversees the PACCE model in several urban and rural districts in Ohio. Rather than having individual site-specific staff members working to develop career-connected learning opportunities, PACCE's Career Navigator works with one or more schools in a district or supports multiple neighboring districts. The Career Navigator coordinates career-connected learning — all students experience large scale events (career fairs and lunch-and-learn sessions), while students in the accelerated pathways model benefit from field trips, job shadowing days, and more personalized experiences.

Before creating this position, school staff members (often guidance counselors) were responsible for developing and maintaining partnerships with local industries and businesses, and their capacity to do so was limited. Learn to Earn Dayton and the Montgomery County Educational Service Center support the Career Navigator in developing a network of industry partners and provide the Navigator with crucial guidance and resources (such as passing along industry contacts and information about industry-related events, among others). According to a member of a local business organization, the Career Navigator is essential to increasing connections between regional industries and school districts, linking students' interests with industry needs,

> [W]hat we hear from employers is … "I don't want to be contacted by all 16 public school districts in [the county]." … They like to have a more unified approach … so having someone like the Career Navigator is really useful because I want someone to actually be able to speak to what's happening across the whole county.

Since the position was created, Career Navigators have streamlined and improved relationships between educational institutions and their local business communities, making it possible to offer more frequent and targeted career exposure events for PACCE students. For example, one Career Navigator took PACCE students pursuing the Health Sciences pathway to a local hospital for a job shadowing day. A Learn to Earn staff member shared the result of that activity, "Now we have dozens of kids who, three months ago, had no idea that healthcare could be a career for them [and are] now actively heading toward a healthcare pathway." PACCE found that this role is essential to implementing the Accelerate ED Initiative's design elements and expanding its pathways model across the state in both rural and urban contexts. As a result of the early success with the Career Navigator position in Dayton, Learn to Earn is advocating for state funding so that each district can hire its own Career Navigator.

Similarly, in Massachusetts, the **Early College Promise** (ECP) model gives students access to a dedicated school-based ECP Student Support Coordinator. The ECP Coordinator provides academic advising, college planning guidance, and coaching about the transition to the college environment during students' "thirteenth year," which can be a difficult transition. The ECP model allows students to attend college courses while remaining enrolled in their high school for an additional year. Students can choose this option and receive tuition assistance from the high school for these college credits. The ECP Coordinator aids students during this transitional year by helping students develop a sense of belonging on a college campus and to access college student supports (such as tutoring and advising services) that have been shown to help students in a postsecondary setting socially and academically.[7] One ECP coordinator shared,

> I've had students … ask me "What do I wear to the first day? What do I do in terms of taking notes?" And then, as the year goes on, those questions get … fewer and fewer. And to me, it's like … they understand the culture of the climate … [and] what's expected of them in college.

Currently schools can choose how to invest the state funding they qualify for based on the ECP pilot program's funding model. The ECP Coordinator role represents a priority investment area for many schools.[8]

Much like the importance of dedicated advisers, maintaining a pipeline of credentialed teachers is key to sustaining accelerated pathways models. Since dual-enrollment teachers are required to meet additional credentialing standards to teach college-level courses, it can be difficult and costly for high school teachers to achieve those credentials while managing their current workloads. All interviewees identified teacher credentialing as a priority area when implementing and expanding pathways models. Making teacher credentialing programs more affordable and accessible is key to sustaining the dual-enrollment workforce and fully integrating accelerated pathways models into

high schools. To tackle this, K-12 and postsecondary education leaders have developed local strategies to more efficiently deploy existing credentialed teachers.

In Illinois, the **City Colleges of Chicago** (CCC) system—a partner of the Accelerated Model Pathways for Information Technology (AMP-IT) model—created a position for a rotating credentialed faculty member who travels across high schools to teach dual-enrollment courses. This "traveling teacher" model originated from a need to standardize student access to in-person credentialed faculty members, without requiring students to commute during the school day to access dual-enrollment courses. According to the CCC system, in-person faculty member access is imperative for a stronger implementation of dual enrollment in pathways models. To address long-term needs, CCC offers a discounted credentialing program for Illinois high school teachers. Similarly, **EdSystems**—a policy development and program implementation center within Northern Illinois University—partnered with the University of Illinois to support 80 percent of the associated costs for high school teachers to obtain the computer science credentials that were needed to teach relevant pathways courses in 2023 and 2024.

Engage Intermediary Organizations and Existing Networks

Most accelerated pathways models were designed by regional and state-level cross-sector partnership teams. The models are generally led by a community-based organization or institution (such as a nonprofit organization or a community college). These organizations bridge the gap between K-12 schools, postsecondary institutions, and the business sector, contributing their local policy expertise, resources, and networks to build strong, sustainable partnerships that can help students access opportunities and can help to expand pathways models to a larger scale. They can also address the infrastructure and capacity needs of practitioners implementing pathways models.

In Illinois, **EdSystems** helps its partner schools use data more strategically, by creating systems to collect data that track students' progress, identify equity gaps, and inform programmatic decisions. EdSystems does this by establishing data-sharing agreements across districts, community colleges, and state agencies. To ensure that the data collected through these agreements are useful, EdSystems hosts regular meetings with all partners to review state and local-level dashboards, which aggregate and visualize progress on key metrics such as dual-credit participation and attainment by key demographics (including race, gender, and income level), college enrollment, and regional industry trends. These meetings serve to prompt critical discussions about equitable access, alignment of resources, and successful strategies to improve student outcomes and meet regional workforce demands.

The **Massachusetts Alliance for Early College** (MA4EC) assists its high school partners in navigating complex state guidelines and contractual agreements. For example, MA4EC helps schools create and negotiate the required memorandums of understanding to define cost per credit between K-12 schools and postsecondary institutions. MA4EC stepped in to fill a knowledge gap, making the ECP pathways model more straightforward to adopt for interested schools. Additionally, MA4EC created a community of practice connecting ECP practitioners during monthly learning forums,

which allow ECP pathways leaders to learn from others' experiences with administrative processes and funding mechanisms.

Include Students and Families in the Design and Implementation of Pathways Models

As noted above, the design of pathways models is often led by K-12 and postsecondary education administrators, intermediary organizations, and industry partners. Accelerated pathways require parents, students, and school administrators and teachers to have the opportunity to inform the design and creation of their pathways model. During the design phase, partner intermediary organizations held structured conversations early and often with students and their families to gather insights about their desires, goals, and understanding of current options. Accelerate ED pathways models continue to leverage these insights to circumvent barriers to enrollment, engagement, and completion of the pathways models. The examples below are from pathways models that are led by community colleges, supported by Education Design Lab's Designer in Residence program. Creating solutions for stronger family engagement was an intentional focus of the Lab's work with pathways models.

Chaffey College, in California, worked to refine a preexisting pathways model offered with its partner high school by first conducting interviews with current and former dual-enrollment students and their families, a practice that they had not engaged in before participating in the Accelerate ED Initiative. After conducting these interviews, a college administrator shared that, "We didn't realize how much [academic] anxiety our students were feeling." As a result of these interviews, Chaffey worked with students to develop a peer mentoring system at a partner high school whereby older students who are farther along in their dual-enrollment experiences can mentor younger students. According to college administrators at Chaffey, this helped ease student anxiety and create a more supportive college environment for dual-enrollment students.

Through similar interviews, the team at *Forsyth Technical College*, in North Carolina, found that the local community did not know enough about their dual-enrollment opportunities. Additionally, Forsyth administrators remarked that not all high school guidance counselors "[had] … everything they needed … to fully communicate this opportunity to all their students." Forsyth administrators acted on this finding by developing a multifaceted communications campaign to provide information in a more equitable way to students and families who may be interested in dual-enrollment opportunities. In a two-part approach, Forsyth administrators first conducted training sessions with guidance counselors across high schools to inform them about dual-enrollment offerings. They then tasked student ambassadors and an adult advisory council with sharing information about dual enrollment (for example, the application process, program offerings, and student outcomes) in their community. Forsyth administrators also circulated a series of promotional videos through the college's social media channels, featuring current dual-enrollment students sharing their experiences with the pathways model with their peers. This campaign was not only designed to disseminate information about the accelerated pathways model but to also increase participation and expand the model to a larger scale.

Conclusion

The Accelerate ED Initiative demonstrates that expanding equitable post-secondary pathways requires systemic change, not just programmatic interventions. By embedding dual-enrollment programs, career advising, and career-connected learning into K-12 institutions, these models transform when and how students access and navigate postsecondary opportunities, ensuring a more seamless transition from high school through college to a career.

Achieving this shift requires sustained investment, enabling statewide policies, and a commitment to break down institutional silos and rethink how education and workforce systems collaborate. Key strategies — investing in dedicated advising roles, strengthening partnerships with intermediary organizations, and focusing on student and family voices — help create the infrastructure needed to sustain and expand accelerated pathways programs. When these strategies are implemented at scale, they reshape the education system to provide all students — regardless of background — with clear, supported, and equitable pathways to postsecondary success.

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Notes and References

1. Melanie Hanson, "College Tuition Inflation Rate," *Education Data Initiative* (https://educationdata.org/college-tuition-inflation-rate, 2024).

2. Dual enrollment occurs when high school students take college-level courses at their high school or at a local higher educational institution. Dual enrollment is meant to encourage high schoolers to pursue college by offering free or low-cost credits that can be transferred to local colleges, reducing the time needed to earn a degree or credential. National Center for Education Statistics, "A Majority of Grade 9-12 Public Schools Rate Themselves Favorably on Preparing Students for College," press release (March 9, 2024), https://nces.ed.gov/whatsnew/press_releases/3_19_2024.asp.

3. Davis Jenkins, Hana Lahr, John Fink, and Elizabeth Ganga, "What We Are Learning About Guided Pathways" (website: https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/guided-pathways-part-1-theory-practice.pdf, 2018); Navi Dhaliwal, Sayeeda Jamilah, McKenna Griffin, Dillon Lu, David Mahan, Trey Miller, and Holly Kosiewicz, "Do Dual Enrollment Students Realize Better Long-Run Earnings? Variations in Financial Outcomes Among Key Student Groups" EdWorkingPaper: 25-1137 (Annenberg Institute, Brown University, 2025).

4. Through the initiative, practitioners from the different regions formed a community of practice, a space for them to share lessons learned and bring back innovative ideas to try in the context of their own accelerated pathways models.

5. MDRC, "P-TECH 9-14 Evaluation," (website: https://www.mdrc.org/work/projects/p-tech-9-14-evaluation, n.d., accessed April 2025); MDRC, "Career Academies: Exploring College and Career Options," (website: https://www.mdrc.org/work/projects/career-academies-exploring-college-and-career-options-ecco#overview, n.d., accessed April 2025).

6. Aurely Garcia Tulloch, "What Do Dual Enrollment Students Want? Elevating the Voices of Historically Underserved Students to Guide Reforms" (Community College Research Center, Columbia University, 2024).

7. Alexander Mayer and Kate Tromble, "Comprehensive Approaches to Student Success: An Evidence-Based Approach to Increasing College Completion" (MDRC, 2022).

8. In the 2023-2024 school year, ECP concluded its pilot phase and began a state evaluation. If the pilot program is deemed successful then it will receive continued state funding to sustain and expand its pathways model. The Massachusetts Alliance for Early College, a Massachusetts-based intermediary, has been a crucial partner and advocate for the pilot program.

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