Multiple Pathways to College
An Evaluation of the Early College High School Initiative from 2003–05

Early College High Schools convey their purpose in their name, offering students a chance to experience college courses while still in high school. Supported with grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, these schools provide far more than just a preview of college expectations. Students can earn up to two years of college credits through a public high school, saving on tuition and accelerating the acquisition of a college degree. Whether the college course is conducted on a high school or college campus, students are expected to encounter the foundation’s three Rs: rigorous instruction, relevant curriculum and supportive relationships.

Instructors on high school and college campuses have been successful in conveying high expectations and demonstrating support and caring for students. Improvement is still needed to ensure all schools offer rigorous and relevant instruction.

49 schools by 2004; 175 more by 2008

Jobs for the Future (JFF) coordinates the overall initiative by working with 13 intermediaries — foundations, colleges and school development organizations who select sites, distribute grants, assist with relationship building, provide technical assistance and policy support, and track progress. JFF and the intermediaries helped to define the vision and “Core Principles” of ECHSs.

The intermediaries worked quickly to open 49 schools with higher education partnerships by fall 2004, and more than half of them opened as brand-new schools. About one-third were high schools that adapted the characteristics of ECHSs, and 14 percent were programs within larger high schools. While there is no specific requirement for locating the schools, 55 percent of ECHSs were on college campuses in 2004–05, with 22 percent in shared facilities with other schools and 22 percent in their own buildings.

In the short life span of the grants, intermediaries have developed an understanding of the “conditions required for the ECHSs to be successfully implemented and sustained.” By 2004–05, there was a noticeable emphasis on greater accountability for results, with more intermediaries developing benchmarks to measure progress and some linking their technical assistance to those benchmarks.

Plans call for 175 more schools by 2008.

An evaluation synthesis report on the initiative by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) and SRI International (SRI) reveals that the schools have successfully targeted low-income and minority students for enrollment, and the majority of schools have at least some of their students enrolled in college courses. Having established a closer connection to their instructors, students are attending school at higher rates and with greater purpose. Although many students struggle with academically challenging courses, almost all of those interviewed have their sights set on attending college after completing high school.

Intermediaries: Distributing grants, nurturing relationships, providing technical assistance

- Center for Native Education at Antioch University Seattle
- City University of New York’s Early College Initiative
- Foundation for California Community Colleges
- Georgia Department of Education/University System of Georgia
- Jobs for the Future
- KnowledgeWorks Foundation
- Middle College National Consortium
- National Council of La Raza
- North Carolina New Schools Project
- Portland Community College’s Gateway to College
- SECME
- Texas High School Project
- Utah Partnership
- Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation

The Education Program of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation aims to significantly increase the number of students — particularly low-income African Americans and Hispanics — who graduate with the high-level skills they need for success in college and work.

One funding strategy has been to support the creation of Early College High Schools where students can advance on their path to college by earning credits while still in high school. These schools have the potential to:

- Improve graduation rates;
- Compress the number of years necessary to attain a college degree;
- Prepare students for careers that sustain families; and
- Remove financial and other barriers to college.

This publication summarizes an evaluation of this effort to create powerful new models of schools that implement the three Rs — rigor, relevance, and personalized relationships — in high school and college classrooms.
Multiple paths to 60 credits

Recruiting strategies, such as media advertising, mailings, school fairs and counselor referrals, worked to reach the target population of low-income and minority students, and about three-quarters of schools had more qualified applicants than available space. ECHSs offered college courses in one of four ways:

• A college course on their high school campus;
• A college course with only ECHS students on the college campus;
• A cohort of ECHS students on a college campus with both high school and college students; and
• An individual student attending a college course with college students on the campus, which proved to be the most popular choice.

By 2004–05, nearly three-quarters of ECHSs planned to use more than one of these options for credit-bearing classes.

Determining exactly how students might be able to acquire a full 60 college credits was more problematic. Schools that successfully addressed this challenge worked with their higher education partners to identify courses that would count toward the high school diploma and qualify for college credit. According to the evaluators, “Collaboration resulted in course sequence changes. Some discovered if they moved courses around, students would be better prepared for standardized tests and transitions into college coursework would be easier.”

Options for Earning College Credit and Percentage of ECHSs Offering Each Option

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of ECHSs with Support Courses, by Content, 2004–05</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Literacy Skills Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other Skills Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>Academic Skills Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Skills Development or Support</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Recognizing that many students were struggling with academically challenging courses, schools developed a variety of classes to shore up the skill level of students. Eighty-eight percent of ECHSs offered support courses to ease the transition to college, and one-fourth helped ease their students into college with developmental education classes, which are noncredit college courses.

Another way schools chose to address the skills deficit was to prepare students before they got to high school. For many sites, improving middle school preparation is still in the discussion stages. Of those who have moved beyond discussion, one site is planning for middle school students to improve basic skills in a Saturday and summer program. One intermediary has all of its schools designed as 6–12 schools.

High expectations, more personalization

Students at ECHSs reported a noticeable difference in how they were expected to perform in the classroom and the level of support for their efforts to achieve. In more established schools where a positive climate and strong relationships had formed, students reported teachers had respect for them as individuals and for their futures.

“They teachers care about me. It makes you think, if they care about you, why don’t you care about your education? It makes you want to care, too.”

“Teachers at other high schools judge you — not here.”

A teacher reported that the most rewarding aspect of ECHS was knowing students well.

“I know their academic levels, know their struggle. I know where they need help.”

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Growing interest in ECHS on the policy front

There is growing interest among policymakers in programs such as Early College High Schools that accelerate learning for historically underserved students. This interest is related in part to the growth in the number of students taking Advanced Placement courses or enjoying dual enrollment in high school and college. With the increasing cost of higher education, the promise of earning college credit in high school is attractive to parents and policymakers.

• In 2005, Governor Mark Warner of Virginia made dual enrollment the centerpiece of his National Governors Association initiative.
• Governor Michael Easley of North Carolina is supporting the opening of 75 ECHSs as part of the Learn and Earn initiative.

“The North Carolina program is aimed at students who are typically among the first in their family to graduate from high school and don’t see college in their future. ‘It’s a good accelerated path to an associate’s degree and can be a fast track to a good job or a state university,’ says Tom Vander Ark, education director of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.”

—Newsweek, June 12, 2006
Evaluators found that although college professors were not as “intimately involved as high school teachers and counselors, [they] were adequately supportive and caring.”

High school teachers assumed a greater sense of responsibility for reaching all students, whereas most college instructors put the responsibility for learning squarely on the student. Evaluators did find instances where college instructors placed “a high value on relating the substance of their discipline to students’ lives and the real world.”

Students and their teachers on high school campuses credited small school size and class size with promoting strong relationships and feelings of student respect, equality and closeness. Relationships between ECHS students and college students, where they existed, were usually positive.

Being on a college campus helped students think of themselves as college students. Those on campus were treated more like college students — they were taught the same way and followed the college schedule. In response, students indicated that the respect shown them by faculty motivated them to meet their instructors’ expectations. By contrast, for high schools or programs within a high school, the orientation of the instructors was preparing students for college, rather than treating them like college students.

College instructors were more likely to maintain high standards when students enrolled along with other college students. In classes with just ECHS students enrolled, instructors were more likely to modify the course content of their delivery of instruction. Those instructors who kept the content the same for all students were more likely to modify their delivery of instruction, making such modifications as giving additional explanations and offering more time for discussion.

Some ECHS staff wrestled with maintaining high expectations for all students, given great differences in skill sets, which was observed by a student who said, “We are not as far as we could be. They’re helping the kids who need extra help.”

Some schools found they needed to create more rules with consequences to address behavior problems related to the maturity level of the students. There were more problems on college campuses with behavior and expectations in classes that were solely or predominately ECHS students. But in the case where an instructor established clear boundaries, students distinguished themselves by taking responsibility for themselves and demonstrated the motivation needed to succeed.

### Rigorous and relevant instruction

Rigorous instruction in high schools was more likely to occur in English language arts classes, where students might be required, for example, to offer their own interpretations of the morals and themes expressed in Shakespeare, not just restate themes or memorize a passage from a play. In math classes, students were more likely to concentrate on basic computation or memorization, and in science and history or social studies classes, they experienced lectures and reviews for tests. There were instances of rigor, however, such as the class in which students worked in groups to develop political posters that reflected reform ideas in China. They had to know the historical context well enough to create persuasive messages, and they had to communicate their ideas clearly.

Instructors at both the high school and college level need help in offering more rigorous and relevant instruction. Although instructors describe the importance of active inquiry and in-depth learning, classroom observations did not surface significant evidence of instruction with those characteristics.

Some ECHSs provide opportunities for students to make choices of what they might study; to connect classroom learning to the world outside the school through projects, such as using math measurements in home construction; and to serve in internships.

ECHS instructors have demonstrated strong interest in learning how to adjust their lessons to meet students’ needs. The most requested professional development topics include inquiry-based and discovery learning and working with students who have low basic skill levels.

Some institutions set expectations for instructors to employ active inquiry and in-depth learning. At one such institution, professors are evaluated for tenure on the basis of how well they “integrate group work experiential learning and service learning into their repertoire of instructional strategies.”

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Rigor in an English language arts class

In one classroom, students read a challenging book selection and then worked in groups to write six test questions using Bloom’s Taxonomy, which orders thinking skills from simple to more complex, with synthesis as a higher-order skill. One student read a piece of text and then suggested to her group, “For [the thinking skill of] analysis, why did the prisoners keep working when there weren’t guards near them?” This assignment required students to demonstrate conceptual understanding of the book and the ability to organize, interpret, evaluate and synthesize information.

“We have college advisory that meets twice a month. That’s a small group of kids with an adult talking about what they need to do to get ready for college, what the application process is like, what kinds of jobs that kids should be looking for.”

—ECHS leader
Early — and limited — outcomes

Some of the measures that can be used to gauge the effects of Early College High Schools at this early stage of development are attendance rates and measures of academic engagement.

The schools have created an atmosphere that draws students to school, with attendance rates for 22 schools in 2003–04 at 91 percent average daily attendance. “Our attendance is outstanding,” said one teacher. “We do have some kids that are problems, but even those kids have attendance that is good.”

Based on interviews with teachers, counselors and ECHS leaders, the level of student engagement was improving, particularly among older students. As one staff member said, “It seems like [the students’] self-esteem has jumped up. … You will see how they are very positive. They are not afraid to communicate with anyone. It’s really amazing.”

It is still early to measure student retention, which should be based on students remaining at the school four or five years, graduation data and data on college course completion.

Enrollment in College Courses by Grade Level, 2004–05

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Total number of ECHSs</th>
<th>Number of ECHSs with at least half of the students in the grade taking college courses for credits</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9th Grade</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th Grade</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11th Grade</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12th Grade</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Perhaps the most significant progress to date is the high number of schools that developed the partnerships, curricula and schedules necessary to offer college credits to students. By 2004–05, 90 percent of ECHSs had at least some students enrolled in college courses.

Recommendations for success

Early College High Schools may improve the odds of students earning college credit by taking these steps:

• Making greater investments in middle grade outreach activities so that students are better prepared by the time they reach ninth grade;
• Offering more support for students with significant academic delays or with low motivation to seek help;
• Providing support for high school instructors in the development of rigorous and relevant courses; and
• Ensuring that all faculty members develop a better understanding of the college course expectations and the high school expectations, and the degree to which they should influence each other.

Individuals from various partner groups across the initiative cited examples of students meeting, and even exceeding, expectations in college classes.

Learning More

An executive summary of the Year 3 Evaluation of the High School Initiative is also on the Web site, along with reports on Creating Cultures for Learning: Rigor, Relevance, and Results; and Getting to Results. The full report can be found on the Bill & Melinda Gates Web site at www.gatesfoundation.org/education/researchandevaluation.

www.gatesfoundation.org/education

For More Information

