

MEMO THREE

Guiding Pathways: Dual Credit Paves the Way

Expanding dual credit programs helps increase exposure and access to postsecondary education. By spurring early degree completion or introduction to college-level material, dual credit is a powerful tool for increasing the number of students applying, entering, and completing postsecondary education. Dual credit programs exist between two educational systems (K12 & higher education) that have different operational and administrative structures; therefore, attempts to expand, scale up, or improve dual credit requires supportive policy practices at every level: Local Education Agencies (LEA), Institutions of Higher Education (IHE), Regional Education Service Centers (ESC), and/or regional nonprofits, and state level entities.

As dual credit enrollment continues to grow, LEAs and IHEs must collaborate to develop and maintain high-quality programs that equitably address student needs. UP Partnership and Region 20 Education Service Center created the Guiding Pathways initiative to remove barriers to dual credit enrollment and completion. What follows are some recommendations LEAs, IHEs, regional

organizations, and the state can utilize to improve and maintain the quality of dual credit programs in Bexar County. These evidence-based practices were developed from an initial program evaluation of the Guiding Pathways project.

Local Educational Systems (K12 & Higher Education)

Access to dual credit courses has increased exponentially across the state of Texas. Due in part to the increasing importance of postsecondary credentials and state-level policies that incentivize ISDs to offer more dual credit courses, the number of students who have taken a dual credit course has increased by 753% from 2000 to 2017.¹ While the increase in quantity has positively affected college enrollment overall, LEAs with already strained resources struggled with the best way to advise dual credit students about which courses to take and how they might fit into future degree programs. LEAs were also not able to regularly connect with IHEs to align curriculum to ensure instructional continuity, and did not have adequate collaborative spaces to operational align. Simultaneously, IHEs struggled to find the best ways to

communicate course requirements to partnering high schools. This disconnect has resulted in inequitable distribution of dual credit programs that adequately fulfill the promise of early postsecondary access, leaving behind students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who typically do not have access to additional at-home supports to navigate multiple educational systems.

Participants in the Guiding Pathways project engaged in frequent and structured open communication to build trust, assure mutual objectives, and create common motivation. Communication focused on increasing transparency for the project and providing updates on progress towards goals and milestones.

Implementing policies that streamline inter-organization communication can help improve collaboration to facilitate student centered advising and build organizational orientations to understand the dynamics of the partner institutions.

- *Streamlined Communication* - As dual credit implementation joins two different organizations with multiple departments, campuses, and systems, streamlined communication is vital. To aid in consistent communication, each ISD and IHE should establish a lead point of communication for operations of dual credit courses. Identifying one individual or group to make decisions, implement changes, and follow up with participants ensures dual credit programs remain nimble and responsive.

- *Advising* - Since dual credit is only one part of improving college readiness attainment and completion, both ISDs and IHEs have a responsibility to ensure students know how their dual credit

courses fit into their long term academic path. IHEs and ISDs should have detailed student-facing information about how dual credit courses fit into their respective degree programs.

- *Organizational Orientation* - ISDs and IHEs are focused on different age groups and beholden to different rules, policies, and funding streams. ISDs have compulsory attendance, disparate funding sources, and most students are minors. IHEs have non-compulsory attendance, tuition-based and public funding, and are responsible for legal adults. ISDs and IHEs can proactively avoid missteps and misunderstandings by taking time to orient each other to policies through participant led workshops or webinars, especially policies that pertain to student safety.

Regional backbone and nonprofits

To help bridge the gap between ISDs and IHEs, regional organizations are critical to expanding and strengthening dual credit for students. The formation of Vertical Alignment Teams (VATs), which must be led by a regional organization, is an essential step in assisting with all of the aforementioned local institution policies.

VATs are a structured, collaborative method designed to support the alignment of education curricula between and within education institutions. As part of the Guiding Pathways project, VATs were convened by Region 20 and UP Partnership to streamline dual credit attainment to better prepare students and remove barriers to college enrollment and completion.

To fully benefit from VATs, resources will need to be dedicated towards their

creation and sustainability, and teachers should be compensated for their involvement. ISDs should dedicate the recently implemented College and Career Military Readiness outcomes bonuses to form and/or strengthen VAT structures.²

State

The Texas Legislature has spent the last several sessions working to increase access to dual credit courses, and that effort has been successful.³ To improve on the quality of the programs offered, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) should release state-level alignment and access guidance, and expedite transferability conversations.

- *State-level alignment and access* - TEA and THECB should create a central repository of best practices implemented and evaluated at the local and regional levels. They should also provide clear legislative updates to ensure all IHE and ISD advisers are aware of state policy changes. The University of Texas recently reported college advisers as recently as 2018 were still under the impression that if students' total number of attempted hours exceeded 150 they would be charged out-of-state tuition, which has not been the case since House Bill 101 was passed in 2009.⁴ By sharing operational recommendations, implementation guides, and student- and parent-facing informational guides, TEA and THECB can assist ISDs and IHEs with improving and expanding their own dual credit initiatives.

Additionally, as a part of the on-going implementation of Senate Bill 25, TEA and THECB should make public the annual reports required that share the number of dual credit courses taken and attempted

that were transferable to hold all IHEs accountable to students exploring transfer options.^{5,6}

- *Funding and Flexibility* - Funding for dual credit courses varies widely from region to region. Dallas County makes dual credit courses completely free for eligible students while costs in Bexar County can be anywhere from \$0 to \$333.⁷ By investing state dollars to cover the cost of dual credit courses for compensatory education students, policymakers can further support their commitment to expanding higher education access for students who face numerous barriers on the road to and through college in a sustainable and substantial way. While the cost may seem large, Texas demonstrably sees a significant return on investment for every dual credit dollar spent.⁸

As the state looks for ways to pivot in order to reach its 60x30 goal, educational institutions, agencies, and policy makers have a responsibility to ensure high-quality dual credit programs are accessible and beneficial to all students, especially those who face numerous barriers on the road to and through college.

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- ¹ [Dual Credit Education Programs in Texas](#)
- ² Texas Education Code § 48.110
- ³ [60x30 Dual Interim Report](#)
- ⁴ [UT Systems Dual Credit Study](#)
- ⁵ Texas Education Code § 51.4033
- ⁶ [Dallas County Community College, Dual Credit Offering](#)
- ⁷ [Dual Credit Education Programs in Texas reported Semester Credit Hours to be \\$111; average dual credit course earns three credits.](#)
- ⁸ [Dual Credit Education Programs in Texas](#)