



The Cost-Effectiveness of Providing Early College Opportunities in Rhode Island

FAQ AND DISCUSSION GUIDE

Rhode Island high school students can earn college credits at little or no cost to them or their families by taking dual enrollment, concurrent enrollment, or Advanced Placement (AP) courses and tests. REL Northeast & Islands partnered with the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) and the Rhode Island Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner (RIOPC) to study the effects and costs of these early college programs.



Read the full report:

<https://ies.ed.gov/use-work/resource-library/report/impact-study/cost-effectiveness-providing-early-college-opportunities-rhode-island>

This FAQ and Discussion Guide for district administrators and policymakers summarizes key findings, addresses frequently asked questions about the scope and approach, and suggests important considerations for applying the findings to policy decisions. This study provides new information about early college program outcomes and costs in Rhode Island. It is based on data about students who graduated high school in spring 2018 and the early college opportunities available at that time. Although these findings have some limitations explained below, they serve as a starting point for discussing investments in these programs, including their effects, the students they serve, and the resources they require.



Throughout this fact sheet, you will find discussion questions to consider when reflecting on your district's early college programming.



What are the effects of early college programs in Rhode Island?

The study found that participation in any one of the three programs—dual enrollment, concurrent enrollment, or AP—increased students’ likelihood of enrolling and persisting in college (see report page 8).



Does it cost the state more to provide each of these programs over and above the cost of a typical high school course?

Compared to the cost of delivering a typical high school course, each of the early college programs required additional investments, such as high school personnel time, materials, college fees, and transportation. The average additional cost per student was highest for dual enrollment, while it was lower for concurrent and AP programs based on information from the 2017/18 school year (see report page 11).

What **resources** do schools and LEAs use in your setting to deliver early college programs? For example, what do counselors do to support the programs and how much additional time do they require?



What should administrators consider when planning for early college program investments?

A smaller educational program typically has higher per-student costs because its overall investment must be spread over a smaller number of participating students. Dual enrollment participation at the local education agency (LEA) level in many cases is notably smaller than the other two programs, and this helps explain its larger average per-student estimated costs (see report page 12 and appendix page C-20). An increase in dual enrollment participation at the LEA level would likely reduce its per-student costs, though estimating by how much was not within the scope of this study. Decision-makers may want to consider how scale would affect early college program costs in their settings.

Consider the distinct populations served by different early college programs and the potential implications for program benefits. At the time of this study, dual enrollment reached a higher proportion of students from urban high schools and in groups that have completed college at lower rates, compared to the concurrent enrollment and AP programs. If more of these students participated in concurrent enrollment and AP, it is unknown whether these students would see the same positive results as they experienced in dual enrollment. Decision-makers may want to gather more information about program models that work especially well for different groups of students with particular needs.

Which **student populations are represented** in early college programs in your setting? How could program recruitment practices in middle school better reach all students, particularly those in groups currently participating at lower rates? If more of these students enroll, what resources do you anticipate these students might need that are different from current participants’ needs?



Who pays the costs of early college programs in Rhode Island?

In 2017/18, LEAs leveraged several sources of funding to pay for the program costs. High school personnel costs were generally paid for by LEAs, as were equipment and materials costs, including textbooks. In general, LEAs did not cover tuition and fees paid to partner colleges in 2017/18, although this practice may have changed since then. AP test fees, however, were covered through multiple sources, including by LEAs or participating students' families. Finally, families typically paid for transportation to and from the college campus for the dual enrollment program, although some LEAs may have supported this cost.

What are the **sources of funding** for the resources required to offer these programs in your setting?



What data are this report based on, and how confident can we be in these sources of data?

Data on student demographic characteristics, participation in early college, and college outcomes came from the state's longitudinal data system, which houses official administrative records like enrollment, demographics, and graduation data.

Some of the data related to cost, including student program participation and tuition and fees paid to partner colleges, came from official administrative records maintained by RIDE or RIOPC.

Other data related to cost were estimated from interviews with staff from several schools and districts. Staff were asked to describe the additional resources they used to implement the early college program over and above resources used for typical high school courses, including additional program staff time, equipment and materials, and any other non-personnel resources such as transportation. For some of these additional resources, such as college-level textbooks and teacher and counselor salaries, researchers then used public national and state price data to estimate costs (see report page 6 and appendix page B-12).

What **sources of information** could you draw on to think about the resources and opportunity costs of providing early college programs in your district?



Does this study use expenditure data according to the state's Unified Chart of Accounts (UCOA)?

The study used a cost analysis approach regarded as best practice in research on educational costs.¹ This method considered all resources required to deliver the programs, including the opportunity cost of staff time dedicated to program-specific responsibilities. Because this approach captures greater detail and a broader scope of costs, the resulting figures may differ from official budget or financial documents.

1. Institute of Education Sciences. (2020). *Cost analysis: A starter kit. Version 1.0.* (IES 2020-001). U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED604237>; Cost Analysis Standards Project. (2021). *Standards for the economic evaluation of educational and social programs.* American Institutes for Research. <https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/Standards-for-the-Economic-Evaluation-of-Educational-and-Social-Programs-CASP-May-2021.pdf>

This approach was chosen partly because many education program costs are not easy to document through available sources like district budgets or UCOA. Interviews with LEA staff uncovered costs that were less readily visible. For example, UCOA data do not capture how much time high school counselors spend supporting early college opportunities and other specific programs, or additional time a staff member might spend that goes beyond the time required for their regular responsibilities absent these programs.



What additional information about these programs is missing?

The state's early college programs have grown and changed in many ways since the period studied here (2014/15-2017/18), especially dual enrollment programs. For example, some LEAs are now serving larger numbers of students than before, so that some costs are spread out across more students, yielding a lower average cost per student. It would be valuable to continue to gather information about how resources and outcomes evolve as the programs reach larger numbers of students.

LEAs also offer these early college programs in a variety of ways—particularly in the case of dual enrollment. For example, at the time of the study, some LEAs offered a comprehensive program with substantial advising support to help students earn a credential during high school, while others gave students the opportunity to pursue dual enrollment credit largely independently (see report page 17 and appendix page C-19). As the state implements and scales different models, information about how they are implemented would be helpful for understanding student outcomes and program costs.

Finally, given that this study was able to gather implementation cost information from only a sample of LEAs in 2017/18, more statewide comprehensive and current information would offer a more complete and reliable picture of the present-day costs of these programs.



How did the study estimate the effect of each program on students?

Using information about students when they were in grade 8, the study matched program participants from each type of early college program with other students in the same high school graduation cohort who were similar to them before starting high school but never participated in any early college program. Then researchers used statistical techniques to compare these two similar groups and estimate how likely each group was to enroll in college on time and to be enrolled two years later (see report page 5 and appendix page B-6).

What patterns have you noticed in early college **student outcomes** in your setting? How do you determine which students need more support to succeed in these programs?



How did the study estimate the average per student cost of each program, over and above the cost of a typical high school course?

Researchers used statewide postsecondary records and interviews with personnel from a sample of LEAs to estimate what it cost per student on average to provide each program in the senior year of the graduation cohort (2017/18), over and above the costs of a regular high school course. To estimate costs, this study considers all resources used to implement the programs that were paid for by the state K-12 education agency, districts, and high schools at the time of the study—or costs that could in theory become the responsibility of those institutions in the future. These costs include additional high school personnel time and materials beyond the costs of a typical high school course, funds paid to colleges for their role in implementing concurrent and dual enrollment to capture postsecondary costs, and transportation costs to and from college campuses for dual enrollment (see report page 6 and appendix page B-15).



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January 2026

REL Northeast & Islands works in partnership with state departments of education, local schools and districts, and other education stakeholders to develop and use research that improves outcomes for students.

Learn more at <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/region/northeast>.

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