BUILDING A BRIDGE TO OPPORTUNITY:

THE RISE OF DUAL CREDIT PATHWAYS IN TEXAS

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ASSOCIATION OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRUSTEES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Dual enrollment—known in Texas as **dual credit**—has emerged as one of the nation's most effective college access and completion strategies. Enabling high school students to earn college credit early shortens the time to a credential or degree, reduces costs, and builds stronger connections between education and the workforce. Research consistently shows that dual enrollment participants are more likely to graduate from high school, enroll in college, and complete a credential, with low-income and first-generation students seeing the most significant gains.

Despite these benefits, access to dual enrollment has often been uneven, with underrepresented students—including students of color, rural students, and those from low-income backgrounds—participating at lower rates. The most effective programs move beyond offering isolated courses and instead provide structured pathways that align with postsecondary credentials of value and careers in high-demand fields.

Over the past decade, Texas has emerged as a national leader in expanding dual credit opportunities by aligning policy, funding, and local practices. In 2015, legislation lifted enrollment limits, which expanded access to more students, including younger ones. Later in the decade, the state required local school districts and colleges to embed advising and quality expectations in dual credit agreements. In 2021-2022, community college trustees and presidents, state legislators, and business voices came together to redesign the state's community college funding formula. The work of the Commission on Community College Finance culminated in House Bill 8, which established a performance-based funding model that rewarded colleges for multiple outcomes, including for students completing 15 semester credit hours of dual credit in a pathway. The legislation also created the Financial Aid for Swift Transfer (FAST) program to make dual credit free for low-income students and affordable for all.

The results are significant. In the first year of FAST, enrollment of economically disadvantaged students in dual credit coursework more than doubled, from 102,000 to 260,000. At some colleges, high school students are now the majority of the student body following dramatic growth in both academic and career-technical dual credit. Since implementing the performance-based funding formula that incentivizes student completion of 15 dual credit hours, colleges have been more intentional in developing meaningful college and career dual credit pathways.

Texas's experience shows that making dual credit accessible, affordable, and connected to clear pathways can open doors for underrepresented students while building a stronger workforce pipeline. Community college trustees and presidents play a pivotal role in expanding these opportunities and ensuring that every student's dual enrollment leads to a credential of value. Texas offers valuable lessons in its journey to expand access to dual credit pathways:

1. **Make dual credit coursework free:** Although the majority of Texas high school students are economically disadvantaged, they are underrepresented among dual credit participants. By providing free dual credit coursework, Texas eliminated the most significant barrier to dual credit access.

2. **Ensure dual credit coursework is embedded in a coherent pathway that leads to credentials of value and/or transfer to higher levels of postsecondary education:** Structured sequences tied to credentials and transfer yield stronger outcomes than random course-taking.

3. **Level up investments in career and technical education (CTE):** Before HB 8, CTE dual credit lagged far behind academic transfer options due to high costs, uneven funding, and limited incentives for colleges to expand offerings. By tying funding to CTE outcomes and providing financial aid for low-income students, HB 8 created a stronger environment for CTE pathways to grow.

4. **Investing in dual credit pathways strengthens a state's workforce and economic competitiveness:** Expanding access to dual credit for low-income students broadens the talent pipeline, which is vital in an era of skilled labor shortages. Communities with higher educational attainment are better positioned to attract investment, sustain innovation, and grow their economies.

5. **Integrate dual credit into the state's broader strategic vision:** Texas has embedded dual credit into its long-term higher education strategies, first through 60x30TX and now in Building a Talent Strong Texas, both of which set ambitious postsecondary attainment goals.

6. **Ensure students have the academic supports to succeed.** Texas strengthened dual credit outcomes by requiring that all students receive advising and access to support services through local agreements between school districts and colleges. These structured supports—including counseling, tutoring, and proactive advising—help students stay on track to complete meaningful credit milestones.

7. **Build a strong coalition motivated by student success:** Texas's expansion of dual credit was driven by a broad coalition—community college and university leaders, policymakers, employers, advocates, and students—united around improving student success. This collective effort shaped HB 8's dual credit provisions and secured major investments to expand access for underrepresented students while meeting workforce needs.

8. **Develop a plan to upskill high school teachers so they have the qualifications to teach dual credit or build in alternatives to support expansion.** Many states expanding their dual enrollment offerings struggle with a lack of qualified teachers, as high school teachers who teach college courses have stricter credential requirements to teach college-level coursework in their subject area.

9. **Invest in research for casemaking.** Not every state invests heavily in research, but Texas demonstrates how a mix of locally and nationally funded studies helped push policymakers to continually build on efforts to expand access to high-quality dual credit pathways.

INTRODUCTION

Dual enrollment—known in Texas as dual credit— is one of the nation's most effective college access strategies.[1] Allowing high school students to earn college credit creates an early on-ramp to higher education and careers, accelerates time to degree, while making college more affordable and, thus, attractive to more students. Research shows that participants are significantly more likely to enroll in and complete college, with the impact especially strong for low-income and first-generation students. By building structured dual credit and dual enrollment pathways, colleges and high schools can create even greater opportunities for underrepresented students, expanding access to higher education and strengthening college readiness. Students who take dual credit or dual enrollment courses are more likely to graduate high school with marketable credentials that prepare them for high-demand careers, giving them a stronger start in both college and the workforce. For many, access to dual credit or dual enrollment is the critical difference between viewing college as attainable and feeling shut out of opportunity.

In this brief, we look at Texas's efforts over the past ten years to expand access to dual credit pathways for underrepresented students, including low-income students, first-generation college-goers, and students of color. The measures taken by Texas community college leaders and state policymakers are rooted in the recognition that dual credit can be a powerful driver of opportunity, but that too often, the students who stand to benefit the most have been the least likely to participate. By addressing barriers such as cost—while also strengthening alignment with college and career pathways—Texas is working to ensure that dual credit pathways have a broader reach and lead to credentials with value in both higher education and the workforce.

In 2023, Texas made substantive changes to its dual credit policies as it reformed its community college funding formula in the legislation popularly known as House Bill 8 (HB 8). But that was never the headline. HB 8 caught the attention of community college stakeholders and policymakers nationwide because it shifted Texas's community college funding formula from a static, enrollment-based system to a dynamic, performance-based model that incentivized the attainment of credentials of value. While community college leaders are right to celebrate the state's bipartisan approach and focus on how the dynamic funding formula has influenced debates on how other states approach funding, they also should pay close attention to the bill's lesser-known provisions that are driving more high school students to college-level coursework on pathways that lead to college and good jobs. By making dual credit courses free and rewarding colleges for embedding dual credit coursework in 15-semester-credit-hour college and career pathways, colleges and school districts in Texas are dramatically expanding access to dual credit coursework and all the opportunities this approach provides.

1 The majority of states refer to the concept of high school students enrolling in college coursework as "dual enrollment." Texas refers to dual enrollment as "dual credit," which is how we will refer to it when discussing the Texas context. This is also an important policy distinction, as Texas, unlike some states, automatically offers dual high school and college credit to those who pass dual enrollment coursework.

Dual Enrollment and Dual Credit Pathways Expand Opportunity

Research shows unequivocally that dual enrollment and dual credit yield positive outcomes for students.[2] Studies across multiple states demonstrate that students who participate in dual enrollment earn better grades, are more likely to graduate from high school, and enter college at higher rates (Taylor et al., 2022; Velasco et al., 2024). Dual enrollment is also associated with higher rates of college persistence and completion (CCRC, 2024). Dual enrollment can also provide students with a sense of belonging and identity as college students, leading to increased engagement and motivation (Giani et al., 2023). The more dual enrollment courses a student takes, the better their chances of reaping these rewards (Taylor et al., 2022). Even students with lower prior academic achievement perform better when they have access to dual credit coursework (Lee & Villarreal, 2022).

While dual enrollment can transform lives, not all students have access to the opportunities it provides. Typically, dual enrollment has largely been limited to students who are already college-bound. Too many students, including economically disadvantaged and first-generation students, have insufficient access (Velasco et al., 2024; Fink et al., 2022). Black and Latino high school students tend to be underrepresented in dual enrollment courses in many states, including Texas (Fink, 2024). Students in rural areas are also less likely to have opportunities to take college classes in high school (Burton et al., 2023). English learners, youth in foster care, and students experiencing homelessness also access dual enrollment at lower rates than their peers.

While access to dual enrollment is critical, what students access is just as important. The promises of dual enrollment pay off at greater rates when such courses are embedded in a structured college or career pathway (College in High School Alliance et al., 2024). Underrepresented students can't afford to participate in "random acts" of dual enrollment, where they take a few college-level courses and end up with excess credits unrelated to their college or career goals. Quality dual enrollment programs connect coursework to a clear plan for college and career success. When courses are linked to a pathway, students avoid taking credits that won't transfer or apply toward a credential. Courses tied to career-focused pathways help students explore fields of interest early, gain relevant skills, and enter high-demand jobs more quickly. By making dual enrollment coursework purposeful and structured, pathways are especially powerful for first-generation and low-income students, who may not otherwise have a clear map to navigate higher education.

High-impact dual enrollment and dual credit pathways share many characteristics. They:

- Are structured in coherent sequences that lead to credentials and degrees, including transfer;
- Intentionally target underrepresented students;
- Remove tuition and fee barriers;
- Provide tailored early advising, counseling, career exploration, tutoring, and college readiness skills so students can succeed in college-level work while in high school; and
- Are aligned to labor market demand and with a career path of the student's interest.[3]

Although much of the work to increase access to quality dual enrollment pathways resides with local school districts and community colleges, an increasing number of states are using policy to expand access for underrepresented students to quality dual enrollment pathways, many of which include the above criteria. According to the College in High School Alliance legislation tracker, 45 states introduced a collective total of over 200 bills related to dual enrollment in 2025. However, legislation is not the only avenue for policy change. Other policy levers include funding, regulation, guidance, and technical assistance.

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2 Since the research cited here is broader than Texas, we refer to dual credit and dual enrollment interchangeably when discussing outcomes.

3 Criteria are derived from the author's research and the interviews cited in the Acknowledgements.

A Closer Look at the Texas Community College Finance Formula: A Vehicle for Major Dual Credit Policy Change

More than a decade ago, Texas funded its community colleges much like other states—primarily through enrollment-based formulas that allocated state dollars according to the number and type of credit hours students took. Over time, however, this model became unstable as enrollments declined, especially at small and rural colleges with limited local tax bases compared to their urban peers. In 2013, the Legislature introduced a modest performance-based component, tying 10% of community college funding to student success metrics such as completions and transfers. This "test run" allowed colleges to adjust without overhauling the entire system. By 2020, as enrollment pressures persisted and funding gaps widened, the Texas Association of Community Colleges and other advocates began pushing for broader reforms. Dr. Brenda Kays, President of Kilgore College, notes that "under the old model, all community colleges across Texas were slowly going out of business." They argued that a more robust outcomes-based financing system was needed to sustain all colleges—particularly those facing shrinking enrollments and weaker local revenues.

These reforms weren't undertaken in a vacuum, though. The Texas Commission on Public School Finance transformed Texas's K-12 finance system in 2019. Their recommendations led to the passage of the bipartisan House Bill 3 legislation (Texas Education Agency [TEA], n.d.; Texas Legislature, 2019a). Schools are rewarded for outcomes related to college, career, and military readiness (CCMR), with funding bonuses for economically disadvantaged students. The formula incentivizes dual credit. A student counts as CCMR-ready if they complete at least three hours of dual credit in English or math, or nine hours in any subject area.

The Texas Commission on Community College Finance (the Commission) was legislatively established in 2021 to make recommendations on the state's community college funding formula and funding levels for community colleges to the Texas Legislature by 2022 (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board [THECB], n.d.; Texas Legislature, 2021a). Although mainly focused on the community college funding formula and financing, the Commission had a broad purview. It could examine and make recommendations on other policy and finance matters, including workforce demand and skills gaps, variations between taxing districts and service areas, student graduation, transfer, and success metrics, the relationship between economic cycles and student enrollment, and dual credit programs and their associated costs. The latter area of focus came as no surprise, as Texas had engaged in dual credit reform for several years.

The Commission was comprised of 12 members. Prominent Texas businessman Woody Hunt, chairman and chief executive officer of the Hunt Companies and a passionate supporter of higher education and community colleges, who had credibility across party lines, was the Commission's presiding officer. Four members were community college presidents or chancellors. Del Mar College Trustee Carol Scott represented trustees on the Commission. Four legislators were also on the Commission, as well as leadership from another community college and the executive director of an education-reform nonprofit organization from Dallas. Philanthropic resources partially funded the Commission, with the governor and Legislature providing the rest. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) played a staffing and support role. The Commission held hearings with expert testimony and allocated funding for focus groups, public polling, and message testing. According to participants, part of the Commission's success resulted from its inclusive, data-informed, and non-partisan nature.

In its final report to the Texas Legislature in October 2022, the Commission proposed a dynamic, performance-based model tied to specific outcomes, including student completion of a postsecondary credential with value in the labor market. It also included a base tier that ensures colleges with limited local resources can cover core operations. Dual credit was incentivized by rewarding colleges when students achieved a sequence of at least 15 semester credit hours of dual credit.

The Texas Association of Community Colleges and its 48 members unanimously supported the commission's recommendations. "Dual credit is a powerful tool to accelerate student progress and reduce the cost to degree. Making dual credit a fundable outcome was important," explains Ray Martinez, president and chief executive officer of the Texas Association of Community Colleges (TACC). Based on TACC's recommendations, policymakers developed HB 8. With the legislation's unanimous bipartisan passage, Texas reformed its community college finance system to align policy and funding incentives with changing workforce needs. The legislation addressed affordability by creating a dual credit financial aid program for low-income students (Financial Aid for Swift Transfer, FAST) and adding $125 million to the need-based Texas Education Opportunity Grant, expanding coverage from 28% to at least 70% of eligible community college students. The legislation went into effect on September 1, 2023. The state invested $683 million in implementation.

Texas's new performance-tier funding system ties dollars to clear, student-centered outcomes that advance the state's higher education goals and regional workforce needs. The urgency is clear: At the time the policy was adopted, only one in four Texas students earned a postsecondary credential within six years of high school graduation, and completion rates were even lower for economically disadvantaged students—just one in eight (McCabe, 2022). Meanwhile, the fastest-growing, family-sustaining jobs in Texas increasingly required education and training beyond high school, making improved credential attainment a priority.

The formula also includes a base tier that ensures colleges with limited local resources can cover core operations. The base tier is especially important for smaller and rural colleges with weaker tax bases. However, the vast majority of funding—roughly 95%—is distributed through the performance tier.

The fundable outcomes include:

- Credentials of value, including credentials from credit and non-credit programs;
- Credentials of value awarded in high-demand fields;
- Students who complete a sequence of at least 15 semester credit hours through academic and workforce dual credit programs; and
- Students who transfer with at least 15 semester credit hours to four-year universities (THECB, n.d.).

Funding levels vary by credential, with extra support for high-demand fields.

Weights are provided for students who are:

- Economically disadvantaged (Pell recipients): 25%
- Academically disadvantaged: 25%
- Adult learners (25 years of age or older): 50%

How Many Dual Credit Courses Propel Students to College and Career Success?

Research doesn't definitively answer how "much" dual credit is necessary for a student to gain momentum for college. There is mixed research on the appropriate "dosage" of dual credit and dual enrollment coursework for students to start seeing the payoff in terms of increased transitions and success in college (Taylor et al., 2022). In 2025, HB 1868 directed the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board to study whether lowering the performance funding threshold for dual credit from 15 to nine semester credit hours would impact access and outcomes (Texas Legislature, 2025b). Doing so would align postsecondary policy with the K–12 accountability system, which starts rewarding secondary schools for students who achieve nine dual credits. A nine-hour threshold could enable colleges to receive performance funding sooner and support shorter course sequences, albeit at an increased cost to the state.

What Were the Conditions that Led to the Dual Credit Policies in HB 8?

A decade of debate and legislation preceded HB 8, showing how dual credit policy in Texas developed through an iterative process. Texas saw a 650% increase in dual credit participation between 2000 and 2015 (University of Texas System, 2018). In Texas, students have a few different paths by which to pursue dual enrollment, including Early College High Schools, Middle College High Schools, Pathways in Technology Early College High Schools, career and technical education (CTE) pathways, and academic transfer pathways. In 2015, lawmakers lifted limits on the number of dual credit courses a student could take per semester, year, or high school career, and removed grade restrictions on when students could begin (Texas Legislature, 2015). As a result, 9th and 10th graders gained access, and students overall could take far more courses than before. Implemented in the 2015-16 school year, these changes—paired with intentional efforts by schools and colleges—drove a 20% increase in dual credit enrollment within two years (Texas Legislative Budget Board, 2017).

As dual credit enrollment exploded, policymakers and stakeholders raised concerns about course rigor, students accumulating college credits that did not advance their college or career goals, and unequal access for underrepresented students, including low-income students and students of color. In response, 2017 legislation directed the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) to establish statewide goals for dual credit (Texas Legislature, 2017). Released in September 2018, these goals aimed to ensure that all students who could benefit had access to quality dual credit pathways (TEA, 2018):

- School districts and colleges will implement purposeful and collaborative outreach efforts to inform all students and parents of the benefits and costs of dual credit, including enrollment and fee policies.
- Dual credit programs will assist high school students in the successful transition to and acceleration through postsecondary education.
- All dual credit students will receive academic and college readiness advising with access to student support services to bridge them successfully into college course completion.
- The quality and rigor of dual credit courses will be sufficient to ensure student success in subsequent courses.

The legislation also required every school district and partnering college to formalize their dual credit program through a memorandum of understanding (MOU). Each MOU outlined the terms of the partnership—defining roles in maintaining quality and rigor, establishing course equivalency crosswalks, describing advising and academic supports, and clarifying funding sources (Texas Education Agency, 2018). These agreements required close collaboration between colleges and school districts to build academic and workforce pathways, with additional requirements for MOUs added by the Legislature in future years.

Concurrently, in 2017, the University of Texas System and the Texas Association of Community Colleges (TACC) co-convened a Dual Credit Task Force to examine how dual credit could support the state's new higher education strategic plan. The task force brought together leaders from K–12, community colleges, universities, education-focused nonprofits, and state agencies, including the TEA, the TEHCB, and the Texas Workforce Commission.

The task force released its findings—focused on access, funding, and alignment—in June 2018, with the desire to inform dual credit discussions in the following legislative session. The report highlighted key challenges: persistent gaps in access and eligibility for underserved students, geographic inequities for rural communities, wide variation in funding practices and cost-sharing, the difficulty of sustaining career and technical education dual credit despite its importance to Texas's workforce, and the challenge of affordability for low-income students (University of Texas System & Texas Association of Community Colleges, 2018). It also underscored the importance of ensuring dual credit courses were built along postsecondary pathways that aligned to college and career success.

Building on these findings, the Texas Legislature held a hearing in September 2018 to examine the effectiveness and growth of dual credit programs in the state (Texas Senate Committee on Education, 2018). The focus was on determining if dual credit was fulfilling its potential to shorten the time to degree completion and increase college affordability for students and the state. Lawmakers raised concerns about uneven access to quality programs, particularly for rural and underrepresented students, and examined issues of rigor, the adequacy of student advising, and funding models and costs associated with dual credit.

The topics addressed in the hearing and the task force recommendations laid out a dual credit legislative agenda that stakeholders and policymakers would chip away at over the next several years in their desire to improve Texas dual credit programs. In the first legislative session following the task force's report and the education committee hearing, the Legislature passed a law that added the required MOU elements. The law also established common advising strategies related to dual credit and college readiness, as well as aligning high school and dual credit courses with postsecondary pathways and credentials at the college and industry certifications (Texas Legislature, 2019b). Another law required the school district and college to consider the use of free or low-cost open educational resources in dual credit courses (Texas Legislature, 2019c). In the following session, legislators added language to the MOU requirements stipulating that at least one employee of the ISD or college had to be designated as responsible for providing academic advising before students enroll in a dual credit course, helping ensure they don't take unnecessary courses due to a lack of information (Texas Legislature, 2021b). Another piece of legislation required dually enrolled students with 15 semester credit hours to declare a meta-major or field of study (Texas Legislature, 2019d).

These laws ensured that dual credit isn't just advanced coursework that may or may not add up to a postsecondary credential—it must serve a clear educational pathway, whether that's preparing students for college majors, industry certifications, or workforce entry. This structure reinforces coherence across high school, college, and career planning, helping families and students make informed decisions about the future.

One of the most difficult challenges—cost—took several years to address. The Dual Credit Task Force and witnesses at the 2018 hearing on dual credit, including then-CEO of the TACC Jacob Fraire, urged the Legislature to create a grant program for low-income dual credit students, noting that costs varied widely across Texas. Funding mechanisms and cost-sharing arrangements differed from district to district, creating significant barriers to access. Many community colleges, especially those without property tax revenue or with limited local tax bases, relied on student tuition to cover costs. Some school districts used local funds or high school allotments to cover students' costs, while others required families to pay out of pocket, often creating barriers for low-income students. A few colleges, including those in Dallas, El Paso, and Austin, absorbed the full cost, but at many colleges, students were left to shoulder it themselves, sometimes at rates over $100 per credit.

Dual credit enrollments in Texas grew both in total numbers and as a share of overall college enrollment, reaching 25% in 2019 (THECB, 2022b). However, access was not equitable across various demographics, geographic regions, program availability, or funding. Historically, disadvantaged groups participated at lower rates than their share of the student population. Community college leaders and policymakers viewed dual credit as a powerful tool to bridge opportunity gaps and deliver a higher-skilled workforce. However, despite legislation and rulemaking efforts since 2015, it had not yet fulfilled that promise. As the 2022 Texas Commission on Community College Finance report to the Legislature stated: "Across the state, enrollments in dual credit courses accelerated rapidly over the past two decades as state policymakers aligned incentives to encourage school districts and colleges to offer more dual credit courses. However, enrollments in these courses, which can set high school students on early pathways to success, continue to lag for students who are economically disadvantaged."

Commission members asked many of the same questions policymakers and stakeholders had been wrestling with for years: Who is accessing dual credit? Are students pursuing intentional course sequences within pathways? How can funding support broader access? What additional supports are needed to expand participation among disadvantaged students (THECB, 2022b)?

In response, the Commission addressed two of the most significant remaining challenges preventing dual credit from delivering on its promise by pulling policy levers to address access and quality: financial aid for dual credit courses and incentivizing enrollment and completion of dual credit college and career pathways.

Free Dual Credit: Financial Aid for Swift Transfer

The HB 8 legislation established the Financial Aid for Swift Transfer (FAST) program, which put dual credit pathways within reach for tens of thousands of additional students by making dual credit courses free for low-income students and capping the cost for all other students (THECB, 2025). Previously, Texas students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL) were less likely to earn dual credit—only 25% of these students took even one dual credit course. FAST ensures that low-income students who receive FRPL have access to free academic and workforce dual-credit classes, including books, materials, fees, and access to a laptop and internet hotspot.

Participation in FAST is optional, because a college has to agree to cap its dual credit costs to participate, but only a small number of colleges have opted out of the program. The state reimburses colleges at $58 per semester credit hour for dual credit students who receive FRPL in the current year or any of the previous four years (THECB, 2025). Dual credit costs for other students are capped at the same rate, significantly reducing the price for them. Institutions may choose to charge a lower rate for any or all dual credit courses, allowing those colleges that were already offering free dual credit instruction to all students to continue doing so. Institutions that opt in to participate in the FAST program receive an allotment of funding equal to the FAST tuition rate for each semester credit hour (or equivalent) of dual credit coursework taken by an eligible student. Colleges work with their independent school districts to cover non-tuition costs for FAST-eligible students.

The creation of FAST reflected broad bipartisan support for dual credit. To support FAST, the state Legislature provided $78.6 million in new funding for the first biennium, making it an entitlement and ensuring the per-credit-hour rate rises with inflation. Texas policymakers and community college leaders hoped that by eliminating cost as a barrier to dual credit, they could finally address participation gaps between economically disadvantaged and non-economically disadvantaged students.

FAST is administered by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), with support from TEA. Some colleges had to revisit their MOUs with their school districts to account for costs not covered by the state's reimbursement rate and capped funding levels. Participating colleges may charge a school district for course-related expenses other than tuition for an eligible student or address them through cost-sharing agreements. Texas provides full per-pupil funding to K-12 districts for all students, regardless of their participation in dual credit programs. Public, four-year institutions are also eligible for FAST.

In the 2023-24 school year, the first year of the FAST program, dual enrollment participation among economically disadvantaged students grew to about 260,000 from 102,000 the year prior, representing an increase of more than 150% (TEA, 2024b). The Legislature approved $165 million for FY 2026–27 — more than doubling the appropriation from the current biennium.

Incentivizing Dual Credit in the Funding Formula

In Texas, dual credit is seen as a strategy to increase college access for disadvantaged populations, which means there needed to be a place for it in the new funding formula. The formula rewards colleges with $3,500 for each student who achieves 15 semester credit hours along an academic and workforce dual credit pathway that meets the requirements of a degree or workforce credential by graduation. By linking funding to this milestone, the state encourages colleges and school districts to design *intentional pathways* rather than random course-taking. In this way, dual credit students are encouraged to take a coherent set of courses that directly apply toward certificates, associate degrees, or transfer pathways.

> "FAST expands access and opportunity to dual credit much further than before."
> *— Del Mar College Trustee Carol Scott*

The formula also allows colleges to earn additional funding if students achieve credentials of value. For instance, colleges are rewarded anywhere from $1,000 to $4,500 for high school students completing a certificate or associate degree. In FY25, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) estimated that the dual credit completion component of the formula would account for 18% of the performance funding, totaling $198.4 million (THECB, n.d.).

In 2025, the Legislature strengthened HB 8's outcomes-based framework through SB 1786, which established clearer standards for what constitutes a credential of value (Texas Legislature, 2025a). The law requires that graduates' cumulative earnings, within defined timeframes, meet or exceed the median wages of high school graduates and reach at least a self-sufficiency wage, while also covering the net costs of attendance. The legislation also recognizes that Texas cannot meet its workforce needs without credentialing more teachers and healthcare professionals. It authorizes the THECB to classify certain education and healthcare credentials as credentials of value even when they fall short of standard earnings benchmarks.

Dual Credit at Kilgore College

Kilgore College has seen a 52% increase in the number of students enrolled in dual credit since Fall 2023, according to Brandon Walker, the college's dean of dual credit. High school students now make up most of Kilgore's student population. President Brenda Kays, who was a member of the Texas Commission on Community College Finance, is an unabashed advocate for the state's new approach to funding dual credit. "FAST funding helped immensely to open the door for those who weren't previously involved in dual credit," she says.

Since the passage of HB 8, Kilgore has seen a significant increase in career and technical education (CTE) dual credit. Kilgore has a dean responsible for dual credit, as well as a dual credit coordinator who serves as the liaison between the college and school districts in Kilgore's geographic area. In Texas, 8th grade students are required to choose among broad academic and career education clusters in preparation for high school. On the CTE side, 13 state-defined programs of study (created under the Texas Education Agency's (TEA) CTE framework) organize large numbers of high school course sequences into clear, state-approved career pathways. Each program of study has a coherent sequence of courses spanning 9th to 12th grade, often offering dual credit opportunities and an industry-recognized credential.

For example, Kilgore developed a Patient Care Technician certification pathway within the Diagnostics and Therapeutic Services Program of Study with its school districts in East Texas. Dual credit students can receive three certifications—in phlebotomy, patient care, and electrocardiography—by the time they graduate from high school. All three areas are in high demand among employers and can lead to opportunities in medical assisting and pharmacy technician roles. They are also components of an Associate of Applied Science degree.

To achieve this level of alignment, there must be tight coordination between the school districts and the college. Kilgore offers career nights at middle schools to explain future dual credit pathway opportunities. Dual credit courses are taught mainly on the high school campus by either high school teachers who have the proper credentials to teach college-level coursework or adjunct staff certified by the college. Both the college and the high school benefit from awarding the credentials. The state's high school funding formula rewards school districts for students completing credentials, and colleges are rewarded for dually enrolled students completing 15 credits in a pathway.

Lessons Learned

By making dual credit courses free and providing incentives to integrate them into college and career pathways, colleges and school districts in Texas have significantly expanded access to dual credit coursework. They are providing middle school students with college and career exploration opportunities, enabling them to hit the ground running with dual credit coursework when they enter high school. They are also changing how dual credit is delivered, stacking courses into a pathway leading to high-quality college credentials and careers, and contributing to the state's economic competitiveness.

The story of the development and expansion of dual credit pathways policies in Texas offers significant lessons for community college leaders and trustees in other states looking to expand access and opportunity for all students.

1. **Make dual credit coursework free:** Although the majority of Texas high school students are economically disadvantaged, they are underrepresented among dual credit participants (TEA, 2024a). By providing free dual credit coursework, Texas eliminated the most significant barrier to dual credit access. Even modest costs for dual credit can discourage participation, especially for low-income families. Textbooks, lab fees, and technology requirements can add hundreds of dollars per course. When cost-sharing varies by district or college, as it did in Texas, students in wealthier communities may receive free or subsidized dual credit, while students in lower-income areas face more out-of-pocket expenses. Since the state now provides funding to cover the tuition costs of dual credit for low-income students and subsidizes the costs for others, school districts still receive their full per-pupil state allocations. They aren't penalized when students take dual credit courses, as they are in some states. The numbers speak for themselves. Record levels of dual credit were awarded due to the changes in HB 8. Just one year after implementing FAST, 260,000 low-income students enrolled in dual credit—a 22% increase from the prior year. Across Texas, students saved $1.46 million per semester credit hour.

2. **Ensure dual credit coursework is embedded in a coherent pathway that leads to credentials of value and/or transfers to higher levels of postsecondary education**: One of the strategies that makes Texas stand out from its peers is its focus on building dual credit pathways into careers and college. By making dual enrollment coursework purposeful and structured, pathways are especially powerful for first-generation and low-income students, who may not otherwise have a clear map to navigate higher education. The new funding formula, which rewards colleges when students complete a 15-credit college and/or career pathway, with additional money for credentials and degrees, helps ensure that students' dual credit courses propel them forward in their career plans.

3. **Level up investments in career and technical education (CTE):** Before HB 8, colleges offered dual credit coursework disproportionately in the academic transfer realm. In 2018, only 15% of dual credit coursework was in CTE (Fraire, 2018). CTE courses like welding, nursing, information technology, and advanced manufacturing require specialized equipment, labs, and credentialed instructors, making them far more expensive to offer than academic dual credit. Uneven cost sharing, with no statewide standard, resulted in a cost burden that varied by region. Some school districts subsidized courses for students, while others passed costs directly to families—creating barriers for low-income students. Unlike academic dual credit, CTE coursework wasn't consistently tied to performance funding or supported through broad grant programs, leaving colleges little financial incentive to expand offerings. Through the combination of outcomes-based funding that rewards CTE credentials and financial aid for low-income students, HB 8 transformed the environment. According to staff at Kilgore College, dual credit has grown by 46%, with the number of CTE students now equal to those in academic transfer dual credit.

4. **Investing in dual credit pathways strengthens a state's workforce and economic competitiveness:** Dual credit links high school, college, and careers, reducing the time and cost to complete degrees and industry-recognized credentials while ensuring more students reach key postsecondary milestones. By entering the labor market sooner and with stronger qualifications, students help employers fill pressing skill gaps. When pathways are aligned with regional demand—such as healthcare, advanced manufacturing, information technology, and petrochemical—they produce job-ready graduates who attract and retain employers. Texas's approach of rewarding colleges for helping dual credit students complete credentials of value reflects this priority. Expanding access to dual credit for low-income students broadens the talent pipeline, which is vital in an era of skilled labor shortages. Ultimately, communities with higher educational attainment are better positioned to attract investment, sustain innovation, and grow their economies, while each additional credential raises individual earnings and boosts state revenues. As Kilgore College President Brenda Kays notes, "This is about workforce development. Because of access to free or reduced price dual credit, more students are participating, so that means we're getting more students into the academic transfer pathways or career-technical pathways that go directly into the workforce. As the Commission worked on these policies, we were motivated by the fact that we saw a shortage of qualified workers for new and existing business and industry. Dual credit is serving as an on-ramp to workforce development" (personal communication, March 27, 2025).

5. **Integrate dual credit into the state's broader strategic vision:** Texas has long recognized the importance of increasing dual credit participation to meet its postsecondary goals and remain economically competitive. The move to expand dual credit spanned two higher education strategic plans. 60x30TX, unveiled in 2015, called for at least 60% of young adults to hold some type of postsecondary credential by 2030, and that at least 550,000 students in 2030 would complete a certificate, associate, bachelor's, or master's degree from a postsecondary institution in Texas (THECB, 2015). It identified increasing the participation of economically disadvantaged high school students in dual credit and other college-level courses as a potential strategy to support the completion goal. Building a Talent Strong Texas, the state's latest strategic higher education plan, calls for 60% of Texans ages 25-64 to achieve degrees, certificates, or other postsecondary credentials of value by 2030 (THECB, 2022a). Dual credit is a crucial component of ensuring that Texas achieves this goal. Embedding dual credit within career and college pathways that lead to quality jobs and rewarding colleges for doing so strengthens Texas's ability to draw new employers seeking a highly-skilled workforce.

6. **Ensure students have the academic supports to succeed:** High schools and colleges have often offered academic supports and advising for dual credit students on an ad hoc basis. Recognizing their importance, the Texas Legislature in 2017 required the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) and the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to embed support expectations into local MOUs between school districts and colleges. State rules now mandate that all dual credit students receive advising, college readiness guidance, and access to support services to help them complete courses and reach the 15-credit-hour goal. Colleges and school districts provide these supports through advising, counseling, tutoring, and readiness programs—often funded through the extra resources provided by the community college funding formula for dual credit. For example, Lee College's Vision 2028 calls for face-to-face advising for every dual credit student before their first class and again at 15 credits (Lee College, 2022).

7. **Build a strong coalition motivated by student success:** The Texas story underscores the importance of relationships and how strong leadership with a commitment to broadening student access and success can lead to substantial investments in dual credit. The dual credit provisions in HB 8 emerged from extensive stakeholder engagement and reflected a broad consensus across Texas that had been built over several years. Community college and university leaders, education advocates, business leaders, the Texas Association of Community Colleges, THECB, and students all rallied behind the goal of expanding access to dual-credit college and career pathways for underrepresented students. Employers emphasized the urgency, highlighting that expanded dual credit access is crucial to meeting regional labor market needs in areas such as healthcare, education, and advanced manufacturing. Advocates underscored the persistent gaps for low-income, rural, and students of color. Commission members, state legislators, and other policymakers listened, developing recommendations and legislation responsive to their priorities. People trusted one another, and the results were much greater than anyone could achieve on their own.

8. **Develop a plan to upskill high school teachers so they have the qualifications to teach dual credit or build in alternatives to support expansion:** Many states expanding their dual enrollment offerings struggle with a lack of qualified teachers. Teachers at the high school who teach college courses have stricter credential requirements to teach college-level coursework in their subject area. A recently passed House bill, HB 1868, addresses a key barrier by conducting a study on the capacity of the state's workforce to teach dual credit courses. This shortage is felt acutely in rural areas. By examining workforce capacity, credentialing, and recruitment, the study may identify strategies to expand access while maintaining quality.

9. **Invest in research for casemaking:** Not every state invests heavily in research, but Texas demonstrates how a mix of locally and nationally funded studies helped push policymakers to continually build on their efforts to expand access to high-quality pathways. A 2017 RAND report documented strong student outcomes, reassuring policymakers that expanding access was worthwhile, but also flagged persistent problems with uneven implementation and participation gaps (Miller et al., 2017). A 2018 report from the American Institutes for Research offered a striking return on investment analysis, showing that the benefits of dual credit are five times greater than the cost of delivering it, and confirmed that dual credit courses are as rigorous as college-only courses (Miller et al., 2018). Yet familiar challenges remained: advising was inconsistent, leaving too many students with credits that didn't advance them toward a degree or career pathway, and costs continued to deter low-income students from participating. These facts ensured that dual credit made it on the Commission's agenda when the time came for monumental changes.

CONCLUSION

Dual credit and dual enrollment students now make up the majority of students at some community colleges. Expanding the promise of dual credit and dual enrollment means reaching more students—especially those historically underrepresented in higher education—while also ensuring they take high-quality courses, receive strong advising and academic supports, and follow pathways that clearly connect to their college and career goals. Texas's story illustrates with buy-in across the board from political leadership, state agencies, school districts, community college presidents and trustees, education advocates, and business, comprehensive dual credit policy and practice reforms are within reach.

Community college trustees can play a critical role in shaping policies and partnerships that make these opportunities possible. They can set clear institutional priorities by championing the adoption of dual enrollment as a strategic goal in board policy and the college's strategic plan. They can ensure broad access by encouraging prioritizing underserved students. Trustees can address affordability barriers by approving tuition and fee policies that reduce or eliminate costs for high school students, especially those with low incomes, and advocating for state and local funding to cover textbooks, technology, and transportation. Trustees can help strengthen dual credit and dual enrollment pathways and quality by requiring that dual enrollment courses be embedded in structured college and career pathways leading to degrees or credentials of value, not just stand-alone classes. And they can monitor student success data (credit accumulation, transfer rates and credential completion) to ensure quality and alignment.

Trustees can also play an influential role in the policy process. They can provide testimony or guidance to policymakers showing how dual enrollment expands opportunity and strengthens local economies and can support legislation and funding formulas (like Texas HB 8) that incentivize broad access and high-quality dual credit pathways. And, finally, by fostering strong partnerships with K–12 schools, employers, and policymakers, trustees can remove barriers and make dual enrollment a driver of both student opportunity and workforce readiness. By supporting dual credit and dual enrollment pathways, trustees can expand access to higher education, accelerate student success, and help secure their state's economic future.

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