

## MIDDLE COLLEGE AND EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOLS<sup>1</sup>

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The roots of the academic pathway associated with middle college high schools can be found at LaGuardia Community College in New York. When it began in the mid-1970s, the “middle college high school” offered a formally combined high school and community college education. Since their inception, the preponderance of middle college high schools have been located on community college campuses. Characteristics of middle college high school programs include:

enhanced comprehensive credit-based transition programs that provide academic and social preparation for college ... [to] give students the chance to ease their transition from high school to college through small class sizes, close relations with teachers, and developing familiarity with a college campus (DTI Associates, Inc. and the Community College Research Center, n.d.).

During the past few years, a separate but highly related model called the “Early College Initiative” was deployed nationally, with substantial funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation as well as other foundations and private sponsors. The initiative has the two-fold goal of starting new early college high schools where no such approach previously existed and of applying the early college model to redesign existing middle college high schools. Since the early 2000s, and particularly in the last two years, the early college high school model has blossomed and grown, stimulating new policies and practices, engaging underachieving youths, and enhancing their opportunities to engage in college-level studies at both the secondary and postsecondary levels. Building on the community college’s commitment to open access, many middle college and early college high schools express the explicit goal of assisting underserved students who are deemed to have the potential to attend college but who are not reaching their full potential in high school (Cunningham & Wagonlander, 2000). Sometimes acting as alternative high schools, middle college and early college high schools create curriculum options that accelerate students through the secondary level, expedite their entry into and through the first two years of college, and encourage transfer to the baccalaureate level. In particular, student participants in early college high schools are encouraged to earn an associate degree or the equivalent of two years of college credit toward a bachelor’s degree while still enrolled in high school, graduating students with both a high school and associate degree in a 5-year period.

Both the middle college and early college high school models emphasize small classes and peer mentoring, along with academic and support services such as counseling to enable students to access high school and college-level courses and move from high school through the two-year associate degree at an accelerated pace. More than 25 middle college high schools have existed nationally for a number of years (Cunningham & Wagonlander, 2000). This small group of schools has been supported since 1993 by a national organization called the Middle College National Consortium that was formed to provide professional development for secondary and postsecondary public-sector educators. The Consortium provides technical assistance to existing and new middle college high schools that are actively implementing school reforms conducive to enhancing student success and offering professional activities to help underachieving students meet high academic standards.

By 2008, the Gates Foundation, with support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Ford Foundation, and the Kellogg Foundation, hopes to establish over 170 early college high schools throughout the country. Drawing on lessons learned from dual enrollment programs and small school reform initiatives, other models that combine various aspects of high school and college, and studies on the effectiveness of the senior year of high school, the Early College High School Initiative has established its vision and goals for increasing college access and success for students “for whom a smooth transition into postsecondary education is now problematic” (Jobs for the Future, n.d.). Partners of the initiative believe that early college high schools can inspire underachieving youths to remain in high school and continue into postsecondary education by offering youths who are in danger of dropping out of high school an opportunity to engage in accelerated college-level studies.

The 50-state APASS survey results showed officials within 22 states identified the middle college or early college high school pathway model as one that is being implemented within their borders. According to the APASS study, middle college

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<sup>1</sup> Obtain additional information about middle college or early college high schools by using the APASS website, including searching by state. References appearing in this report are available upon request.

and early college high school initiatives are some of the most dedicated academic pathway models to address the needs of underserved student populations. Special efforts to reach underserved students were identified by state personnel in 19 states. Low-achieving and at-risk youth, and racial and ethnic minority students were the target underserved populations identified by the majority of states reporting having middle college or early college high schools. Low-income students were also identified as a target population by nearly half the states.

Support for these initiatives is mainly provided by external funding supplied by foundations and private sponsors and supplemented by public funding that supports K-12 schools. Fourteen state agencies reported some dedicated oversight or funding for this pathway, with a few more states at the initial discussion stage regarding providing more support. Both California and Washington designated community colleges as the lead higher education partners for their early college or middle college high school initiatives, and some of these partnerships identified particular underserved student populations as the primary groups the initiatives were to serve. For example, Antioch Seattle Community College established an Early College Consortium for Native American students with a goal of increasing college access and success.

At this time, only a limited number of evaluation studies exist revealing the scope and impact of middle college or early college high schools. Because of the limited and rudimentary nature of these initiatives, much of the evaluative results are produced by organizations funding initial implementation or intimately engaged in the start-up of new programs. Jobs for the Future has been instrumental in documenting the initial scope and scale of implementation of early college high schools, reporting 67 schools in 24 states opened as of September 2005 enrolling over 12,000 students. Nearly two-thirds of the early college high schools are public; most of the rest are charter schools. Almost two-thirds of the total is attributed to start-up schools, and slightly over half are located on a postsecondary campus. Nearly 60% are affiliated with a two-year institutional partner, 28% with a four-year partner, and 13% with two-year and four-year partners.

An evaluation of 10 early college high school sites that started with the Early College High School Initiative or redesigned middle college high schools showed high school student enrollment in college courses was very common (Kim & Barnett, 2004). Nearly all of the early college high schools associated with the Middle College National Consortium had either all or most students enrolled in at least one college course during both semesters of their initial year or two of implementation. Precisely 70% of the college course work was academics, including math, science, letters and humanities, social sciences, and fine and performing arts, while 30% were career-oriented courses, including agricultural and natural resources, business and marketing, health care, and public and human services. Interestingly, over 30% of the total college course enrollments were in physical education, with three sites accounting for a sizeable proportion of this physical education enrollment. An impressive 96% of the early college students were retained in the college courses they took.

An evaluation of the Early College High Schools Initiative funded by the Gates Foundation examined local implementations as well as the state and federal context (American Institutes for Research & SRI International, 2005). Results showed that schools were making concerted efforts at implementation and students appreciated the personalized treatment they received in their early college high schools. However, teachers did not always receive training on new methods of instruction, nor did they view themselves as part of a professional community. Student support activities varied among the schools, with some being highly developed and others barely visible. Moreover, early colleges connected with 4-year higher education institutions struggled to establish credibility; faculty were skeptical that early college high school students were prepared adequately for college.

With respect to the context for implementation, state policies governing charter schools, dual credit and dual enrollment, and credentialing requirements influenced implementation. Where supportive legislation was in place, local implementation was facilitated; where it was lacking, implementation faltered. The No Child Left Behind legislation had an adverse impact on local implementation because Adequate Yearly Progress was measured on 4-year rather than 5-year high school graduation rates; the latter is consistent with the early college high school model. Further, federal laws prevented illegal aliens from receiving federal financial aid and state tuition dollars to attend public higher education institutions. Jobs for the Future and other technical assistance providers, referred to as intermediary agencies, continue to work actively to assist local organizations with implementation, including overcoming implementation barriers.



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