

Early College High Schools

In 2002, the early college high school (ECHS) initiative was developed and funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation as one approach to improving high school graduation rates and college readiness, especially for disadvantaged and minority students. The initiative is intended to improve the transition from secondary to post-secondary education. It stresses increased curriculum rigor, dual enrollment opportunities, and the alignment of high school graduation requirements with college entrance requirements. *Jobs for the Future* estimates from available data that there were 280 such programs enrolling about 80,000 students in 2012 (see reference list).

A recent demographic survey of ECHS enrollment reported

41% were Latino

25% were black

5% Asian

3% Native American

3% Mixed/Other

57% were from low-income families

45% would be first-generation college students

Jobs for the Future, 2014

Key Elements

The following are the major design features as summarized by *Jobs for the Future* (<http://www.jff.org/initiatives/early-college-designs/design-features>).

Design Features

Early colleges incorporate key features that promote success for all students and have proven particularly effective for students who have struggled academically. The six key features are:

- **Aligned curricula and instruction:** A coherent instructional framework aligned to college-ready standards, with consistent instructional practices across all content areas, establishes a strong college-going culture and prepares students for postsecondary success.
- **Personalization and student supports:** Student-centered learning environments promote personalization, engagement, and close relationships among students and staff, with assistance based on assessments that identify the needs of each individual.
- **Power of place:** Early college schools are located on or near college campuses and draw on that environment to enable high school students to experience real college coursework and build their identity as college goers.
- **College credit:** Students simultaneously earn a high school diploma and up to two years of transferrable college credit—tuition free.
- **Partnerships:** Strong partnerships with colleges foster shared responsibility for student success, with collaboration on the development of academic programs that meet secondary and postsecondary standards and provide appropriate student supports.

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As noted, key elements of the approach emphasize (1) college readiness, (2) partnerships with a college campus, (3) college-oriented teaching, and (4) supportive relationships. Each of these elements is briefly highlighted below.

College Readiness

To prepare and encourage students for college, the emphasis is on high standards courses that mirror college demands. Properly implemented, course sequences for college readiness are mapped out with the student as a way to enhance students’ understanding of and involvement in their educational plans. Some schools start students on a general education course track and then allow them to specialize through a highly focused and advanced academic track (DiMaria, 2013; Rosenbaum & Becker, 2011; Zalaznick, 2015). Some offer all appropriate classes as honors courses.

College Partnerships

ECHS-college partnerships are intended not only to enhance college readiness, but to promote student motivation, improve academic performance, accelerate progress, and support transition to higher education. Partnership colleges and/or school districts subsidize college classes so students can attend for little-or-no cost. One informal estimate is that students who earn an associate's degree save around \$6,000 in textbook and tuition costs

Many ECHSs are located on college partner campuses. This allows students to use college facilities and resources and join in campus activities. Interactions with college students also can provide high school students with advice on academic and career-related success (DiMaria, 2013; Edmunds, 2012; Haxton, Song, Zeiser, et al., 2016; Jobs for the Future, nd; Rosenbaum & Becker, 2011; Saenz & Combs, 2015; U.S. News and World Report, 2016; Zalaznick, 2015).

Edmunds (2012) suggests that in high school classes, students perceive themselves as high school students, but when on a college campus, they perceive themselves as a college students and try to behave as such. The chance to be on a college campus and call themselves college students probably enhances thoughts and feelings of status, trust, and autonomy that they would not want to jeopardize. Related to this is enhanced motivation to perform well. A principal noted: "When [ECHS students] go back to their mom and dad or attend a family reunion they can say, 'I'm in 9th grade, and I have eight, 10, or even 12 college credit hours' – that is so powerful" (quoted in Woodcock & Olson Beal, 2013).

College-Oriented Teaching

ECHS teaching aims include promoting a positive college-going and learning environment and reducing factors that encourage doubt and negative learning attitudes. There is a strong emphasis on building students’ sense of personal responsibility for their own success and their confidence that they are college-ready. The process aligns curriculum to prepare students for college and stresses individual attention. There also is an emphasis on “real life” project based learning (Born, 2006; U.S. News and World Report, 2016; Edmunds, 2012; Edmunds, Arshavsky, Lewis, et al., 2017; Edmunds, Bernstein, Glennie, et al., 2010; Rosenbaum & Becker, 2011; Saenz & Combs, 2015; Thompson & Ongaga, 2011).

In pursuing rigorous coursework, ECHS teachers increase instructional relevance for college readiness by simulating a college environment (e.g., using a syllabus, emphasizing critical thinking and writing). One ECHS graduate noted that some of her high school classes were more difficult and demanding than her college courses (cited in Woodcock & Olson Beal, 2013).

Among teaching strategies frequently cited are (a) taking college placement exams early to provide information for meeting academic needs, (b) monitoring each student's progress, (c) providing individualized advising sessions with teachers or counselors, (d) enhancing student choice and decision making with respect to college courses, and (e) adjusting and scaffolding support. All these strategies are designed to enhance student motivation and success (Born, 2006; Edmunds, et al., 2010; Fischetti, MacKain, & Smith, 2011; Rosenbaum & Becker, 2011)

Because many ECHSs are located on college campuses, some high school teachers have used the opportunity to learn from and work with college instructors. For instance, at one school, teachers and professors communicated their expectations with each other and focused on improving curricula alignment. As a result of this collaboration, the teachers report having a better understanding of the college's expectations that guided teaching and development of materials and skills relevant to the college courses (Rosenbaum & Becker, 2011; U.S. News and World Report, 2016; Woodcock & Olson Beal, 2013).

Transition Support

90% of ECHSs offer some course or structure to help students with the high school-to-college transition and college success. Examples are (a) providing college admissions test preparations, (a) visiting colleges to enhance understanding of their resources, (c) assisting with financial aid and college applications, (d) offering special classes such as Advanced Via Individual Determination – AVID – that stress skills, attitudes, and behaviors necessary for college including time management, organization, talking with professors, self-accountability, and (e) informing parents about the college transition process (Born, 2006; Edmunds, 2012; Edmunds, Unlu, Glennie, et al., 2016; Edmunds, et al., 2017; Haxton, et al., 2016; Rosenbaum & Becker, 2011).

Supportive Relationships

The smaller schools and classes that characterize ECHSs enable positive relationships, personalized learning environments, and transition to college. To enhance motivation, support, and positive peer dynamics, some of the schools group students into small cohorts that share all the same classes.

Students report forming personalized relationships with one another and with teachers and state they view their specific school as a "close-knit environment" – even a "second family." Moreover, they emphasize the importance of all this in creating a safe, supportive, and positive learning environment as they pursue the high standards curriculum (Rosenbaum & Becker, 2011; Saenz & Combs, 2015; Thompson & Ongaga, 2011; Woodcock & Olson Beal, 2013).

Students rated their relationships with their teachers highly (3.3 on a 4.0 scale) and felt that their teachers truly care and support them. In contrast to traditional high schools, the smaller student-counselor ratios were seen as providing more student support, including identifying and responding to problems (Born, 2006; Edmunds, et al., 2010; Rosenbaum & Becker, 2011; Thompson & Ongaga, 2011).

Effectiveness of ECHS

The literature on the effectiveness of the ECHS model offers conflicting findings. For example, Haxton and colleagues' (2016) longitudinal study found no significant differences in graduation rates when compared to a control group of unselected ECHS applicants. However, several reports state that ECHS have higher graduation rates with the graduates more likely to (a) enroll in college, (b) be as prepared as their freshman counterparts, and (c) receive a college degree. Few subgroup analyses are reported, but what is available suggests greater outcomes for disadvantaged groups (Berger, Turk-Bicakci, Garet, Knudson, & Hoshen, 2014; DiMaria, 2013; Edmunds, 2012; Edmunds, et al., 2017; Jobs for the Future, 2014; Woodcock & Olson Beal, 2013).

While the schools generally increase collegiate preparedness, Edmunds and colleague (2017) report that a sample of professors rated ECHS students as "somewhat less prepared" than typical college peers in terms of writing (despite ECHS's stated strong emphasis on writing abilities). And Woodcock and Olson Beal (2013) noted a discrepancy between students' statements about interactions and performance at a college. Student statements indicated a lack of meaningful interactions and they reported receiving a C or lower grade for a college course, while also stating that the ECHS prepared them well for college.

On the positive side, the majority of ECHS students appear to earn at least some college credit. Estimates suggest the average student earns around 36 college credits, and 23% earn an associate's degree or a college certificate with their high school diploma. Fischetti, MacKain, and Smith (2011) report that ECHS students had comparable GPAs to college peers from other high schools. They also report that students often stated that their high school classes were rigorous and prepared them for their college courses.

On the negative side, even though ECHS students' GPA for the first two semesters was similar to other freshmen, the overall GPA of ECHS students dropped from fall semester (3.12) to spring semester (2.5) and fell below 2.0 (the mean GPA for other freshmen was 2.81). Fishetti, Mackain, and Smith (2011) speculate the drop in GPA was related to possible grade inflation and/or increased course load due to inflated perception of academic ability.

The random-assignment study from American Institutes for Research is the most widely reported evaluation of ECHSs. The report concludes that "students who attend early college high school are significantly more likely than their peers to graduate, enroll in college, and earn a degree. The multiyear study released in 2013, with an update in 2014, tracked the outcomes of students at 10 schools (http://www.air.org/files/AIR_ECHSI_Impact_Study_Report-_NSC_Update_01-14-14.pdf).

The study compared early college students with students who wanted to attend early college but lost out in an admissions lottery. The randomized design allowed researchers to conclude that early college helps students succeed—and do better than similar kids at traditional high schools who were just as motivated but didn't get the chance to enroll.

Among the major findings:

- Early college students had significantly higher English language arts assessment scores in high school than comparison students.
- Early colleges had significant impacts on underrepresented students.
- Early colleges were particularly effective at helping female students, students of color, and lower-income students earn college degrees.
- 86% of early college high school students graduated from high school compared to 81% of comparison students in surrounding districts.
- 81% of early college high school students enrolled in college, compared to 72% of comparison students
- One year past high school, 21% of early college students had earned a college degree, compared to 1% of comparison students. Two years past high school, 25% had earned a degree, compared to 5% of comparison students."

Some General Concerns

In interviews, students noted that the increased personal freedom for academic decisions requires considerable maturity and personal responsibility. For instance, some make poor college course selections, and the lack of accountability while on the college campus leads some to skip classes. Another common concern is that the emphasis on academics and the lack of traditional high school and extracurricular activities. To counter this, some schools enable students to participate in clubs and activities provided by the partner college or at the student's original school; some offer their own clubs, activities, and organizations (DiMaria, 2013; Fischetti, MacKain, & Smith, 2011; Woodcock & Olson Beal, 2013).

The following Exhibits from the literature synthesize (1) hardships experienced when new ECHSs are established and (2) a synthesis of the advantages and disadvantages of the approach.

Hardships Experienced When Implementing New ECHS

Principals:

- Must Develop Relationships and Trust with Partnership College and Stakeholders
- Must Understand and Follow Policies and Regulations of Different Organizations
- Act as the “Bridge” Between the Different Organizations
- Often Requires Different Mindset and Skill Set than Traditional Principals (More Collaborative and Organizational Leadership Skills)
- Attend Meetings for Both Organization (May Attend Many Meetings)
- May Have Limited Access to Partnership College’s Resources/Trainings/Facilities
- Must Develop Cross-Organizational Communication between Organizations

Teachers

- College Professors May Look Down Upon Them Due to Lower Educational Merits (“Not Equals Academically”)
- Understand and Pressured to Meet District’s and Partnership’s College’s Expectations and Standards (Expectations May Differ Between Two Groups)
- Can’t Truly Teach Like College Professors as Restricted by State Testing
- Test Score Pressures
- Teacher Burn Out/Exhaustion from Implementing and Creating New ECHS

The Early College High School Model

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▲ Earn college credits (possibly an associate’s degree) while in high school for little-to-no costs ▲ More rigorous and relevant coursework and higher academic expectations ▲ More choice/flexibility in college classes and schedule; students can explore possible majors or enroll in classes that interest them ▲ Small class and school size (“Close-knit family community”) ▲ Try to teach students behaviors, skills, and self-advocacy to succeed in college ▲ College transitional and academic support classes (AVID, seminar, tutoring, study hall, academic prep) ▲ Supportive and motivated teachers/staff (positive student-teacher/staff relations) ▲ Better understanding of college life and processes; smoother college transition ▲ College-going culture; students more likely to graduate and enroll in college ▲ High school and partner college collaborate on resource allocation ▲ Often on a college campus; may have access to college’s resources/facilities ▲ Opportunity open to all students (not just high achievers) with a primary focus on disadvantaged students ▲ Feelings of accomplishment/pride 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▼ Lack of some traditional high school aspects (sports, some extracurricular activities, etc.) ▼ May require extra hours of studying and homework than traditional high schools; may have to “sacrifice” free time ▼ Requires self-motivation, self-accountability, and maturity due to increased responsibility and freedom ▼ May have to “leave” friends who attend traditional high schools ▼ Requires students to learn how to adapt to a college environment and develop necessary college skills to succeed ▼ Often apply while in middle school; may be seen as an early age to make the decision ▼ Often accept only freshman applicants; may rarely accept transferring students ▼ Gossip/rumors spread more quickly due to smaller class size ▼ May induce sense of overconfidence in one’s academic abilities; may enroll in too many classes than can handle ▼ Age gap with traditional college peers in same classes ▼ Requires hard work and dedication in beginning by ECHS staff and partnership college to develop and implement the ECHS model

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Websites about Early College High Schools and a Few Other Resources

Early College Designs: Reinventing High Schools for Postsecondary Success
<http://www.jff.org/initiatives/early-college-designs/schools>

List of Early College High Schools – by state and websites if available
<https://www.greatschools.org/gk/articles/early-college-high-school/>

Explanation of Early College High Schools
http://www.serve.org/uploads/docs/Gen%20Documents/Smoothing_the_way_to_college.pdf