

# District Guidance for Developing an Advanced Course Participation Policy

CONNECTICUT STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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## Introduction

[Public Act 21-199](#) requires that by July 1, 2022, boards of education adopt a policy, or revise an existing policy, concerning the eligibility criteria for student enrollment in an advanced course or program. The statute defines advanced course or program as “an honors class, advanced placement class, International Baccalaureate program, Cambridge International program, dual enrollment, dual credit, early college or any other advanced or accelerated course or program offered by a local or regional board of education in grades nine to twelve, inclusive.”

The statute requires that local policies provide for multiple methods by which a student may satisfy the eligibility criteria for enrollment in an advanced course or program. While a student’s prior academic performance may be considered, it must not be the only measure considered for eligibility.

Additionally, boards of education must ensure the creation of an academic plan for every student. The plan must be designed to enroll each student in one or more advanced courses or programs, allowing students to earn college credit or result in career readiness before graduation from high school. In keeping with the State Board of Education’s commitment to equity and excellence for all Connecticut students, districts must provide these opportunities to all students regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, family wealth, zip code, language proficiency, or disability status.

The statute requires that the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) issue guidance and that local policy shall be developed in accordance with the guidance.

Local board policy that meets the requirements of PA 21-199 will include at a minimum two elements:

- the eligibility criteria for enrollment in an advanced course or program; and
- an academic plan designed to enroll a student in one or more advanced courses or programs.

## Advanced Coursework and Programs in Connecticut High Schools

Research shows that students who enroll in challenging coursework in high school are more likely to graduate and are better positioned for post-secondary success (Morgan, Zakhem, and Cooper 2018; Shields et al. 2021). Every high school’s program of studies should provide a variety of challenging options for all students including courses that allow students to earn college credit while in high school as well as earn industry recognized credentials for high-wage, high-skill, and in-demand careers.

Collectively, Connecticut high schools offer students a wide range of options through partnerships with higher education and industry. The [Next Generation Accountability System](#) measures the percentage of students in Grades 11 and 12 who participate in at least one of the following during high school: two Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), or dual enrollment courses; two courses in one of the

Career and Technical Education (CTE) career clusters; or two workplace experience courses.

When looking only at AP/IB/dual enrollment course participation, we find that 57.7 percent of Grade 12 students participated in such dual credit courses. This means that while approximately 70 percent of Connecticut's high school graduates are enrolling in a 2- or 4-year postsecondary institution within a year of graduation, many students are entering without having the distinct advantage of experiencing the rigor of college-level work beforehand and the opportunity for realizing substantial savings in college tuition.

In 2018-19, more than half of Connecticut Grade 11 and 12 students participated in a dual credit course (51.7 percent). However, the data show large differences in participation when disaggregated by race/ethnicity. While participation rates were high among Asian students (75 percent) and above the state average among White students (56.4 percent), they were below average among Black/African American (39.7 percent) and Hispanic/Latino (40.5 percent) students. Encouraging all students to take on the challenge of dual credit courses in high school will support their successful transition to post-secondary.

### [Principles to Guide Development of Local Policy](#)

Beyond traditional course eligibility criteria (i.e., grades and teacher recommendation), locally developed policies that address course access and academic planning for students should follow these guiding principles:

- Start in middle school;
- Partner with families;
- Increase supply; and
- Reduce barriers.

The sections that follow provide specific recommendations for each of the four guiding principles.

### [Start in Middle School](#)

Beginning in 2012, [Connecticut General Statutes 10-221a](#) required that districts work with every student starting in Grade 6 to create a [Student Success Plan](#) (SSP). This is an individualized student-centered plan based on the student's interests and strengths. The SSP has three core components: academic development, career development, and social, emotional, and physical development. The plan is designed to help students understand the relevancy of what they are learning in relationship to their long-term postsecondary goals. Public Act 21-199 re-emphasizes the importance of involving students and families in the development of an academic plan and requires that students eligible for advanced coursework have an academic plan that includes enrollment in one or more advanced courses or programs allowing the student to earn college credit or result in career readiness during high school. The SSP can serve as the academic plan required in Section 5 of P.A. 21-199 by intentionally focusing on

advanced course and program participation when developing the academic component of the plan.

There is evidence to suggest that the middle school experience in terms of academic achievement and engagement are strong precursors to high school success (CSDE 2021; Hodara and Pierson 2018; Royster, Gross, and Hochbein 2015). Given the importance of the middle grades in setting the foundation for high school, districts must ensure that instruction across the middle grades and extending into and throughout high school is closely aligned to the Connecticut Core State Standards (CCSS) and Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS). When instruction in the middle grades adheres to grade level standards and students are provided just-in-time supports, more students will be prepared for the expectations of advanced coursework in high school.

#### Policy and Practice Recommendations for Starting in Middle School:

- Coordinate standards, instruction, and expectations across middle and high school by fostering regular communication among faculty districtwide.
- Encourage high school faculty to familiarize themselves with the Smarter Balanced system of assessments and NGSS assessments including interim assessment blocks, which can be used to measure student understanding and adjust instruction in Grades 9-12.
- Remind middle school faculty that their messaging to students regarding high school expectations has an impact on students. Students should be assured that if they are mastering middle school standards, they are prepared academically. Avoid characterizing learning at the next level as very difficult and dramatically different than middle school, which may discourage some students from considering advanced coursework.
- Use EdSight Secure to share students' middle school data with high school faculty. Sharing these data will improve the quantity and quality of information available for decision making, reduce unnecessary pre-tests and the administration of screening tools, and maximize instructional time.

#### Partner with Families

Research has shown the positive effects of engaging families throughout a child's educational experience (Wood et al. 2017; Ferguson et al. 2008). Districts should capitalize on these already developed systems of engagement to develop a communication and engagement plan focused on the transition to high school, a critical time for students and one when family engagement tends to decline (Mac Iver et al. 2015; Simon 2004).

Outreach efforts should build awareness for students and their families on the importance of experiencing the challenge of advanced courses in high school as a way of preparing for post-secondary. Keeping the student's SSP in mind when having conversations with families is key to showcasing the relevance of course selections.

Students and their families should be provided opportunities to ask questions directly of school staff about course expectations, available supports, and the benefits of earning college credit while in high school. Benefits may include skipping introductory courses in college, saving money on postsecondary tuition, learning exciting subjects in greater depth, and building confidence and skills needed to be successful in college.

The financial benefit of earning college credit while in high school must be emphasized. Explaining that students can leave high school with a semester or more of college credits on their transcript can yield real cost savings for families and may not be immediately obvious.

There will be students who are unsure of their ability to demonstrate success on an end-of-course exam. Teachers and school counselors can remind students of why they are a strong candidate, the supports that are available, and how experiencing and engaging in the coursework generates benefits in the future even if college credit is not awarded. The most effective approach to reach these students is through individualized counseling and conversations with staff they know and trust.

#### Policy and Practice Recommendations for Partnering with Families:

- During the middle school years, engage families in the development of the SSP.
- High schools should continue and improve upon effective systems of family engagement used in middle school.
- Ensure families are fully aware of all the benefits of taking college courses and earning industry-recognized credentials during high school. This information is particularly important for students from low-income families and first-generation college students.
- Communication should be ongoing and accessible to families (e.g., materials provided in multiple languages, translators available during information sessions).
- Provide families with a variety of options for engaging on the topic of course selection. Large group information sessions may work for some, but others may need more personalized support. Consider small sessions designed for families that have not experienced college.
- Invite students and families to express interest in advanced coursework and discuss those choices with their school counselor who can answer questions and serve as an advocate for the student.

#### Reduce Barriers

A local policy to identify students who are eligible for advanced coursework must be developed with attention to equity. National data show that there are student groups that are disproportionately underrepresented in advanced courses. This is true for students who are Black and Hispanic, students from low-income families, students with disabilities, and English learners (Patrick, Socol, and Morgan 2020; Spencer and Maldonado 2021; Umansky 2016).

Experiencing coursework focused on advanced content benefits students, especially students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Enrollment in advanced courses can increase overall student achievement and improve a student's sense of competence and self-esteem leading to better long-term outcomes (Umansky 2016; Zinth and Barnett 2018). In fact, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education characterizes advanced coursework as a service that can support postsecondary transition plans for students with disabilities. (USED 2020).

The CSDE has a long history of encouraging students to enroll in advanced courses. For the last nine years, CSDE has used assessment data to identify students who have the potential to succeed in rigorous courses. These students receive a letter directly from the Commissioner of Education encouraging them to explore rigorous coursework options. From 2012-13 through 2019-20 the criteria for identification was limited to PSAT scores and the letters were sent to students in Grades 10 and 11.

Beginning in 2020-21, the CSDE reevaluated the identification methodology and determined that performance on the Smarter Balanced assessment administered in middle school could effectively be used for identification. Unlike PSAT, Smarter Balanced is administered to all students. Smarter Balanced also provides a broad array of accommodations and supports to ensure that students have the tools necessary to effectively demonstrate what they know. Using Smarter Balanced results instead of PSAT provides more students an opportunity to be identified and increases the diversity of the recipient list. The improved methodology considered scores for each grade (6, 7, 8) and subject (mathematics and English language arts) combination separately. Therefore, rather than limiting identification to a single score, this approach looks for strengths on any of the indicators. The 2020-21 notifications were also sent to parents and guardians for the first time. Additional improvements to the process were implemented in 2021-22 based on recommendations and feedback from educators and families including:

- Letters were sent to students in Grades 9 and 10 (instead of 10 and 11) to allow students more time to plan their course pathway in high school;
- The timing of the letters was adjusted to a January mailing so students and families have time to plan course selection in advance of initial registration deadlines; and
- Schools were provided secure access to the list of students receiving the letters so principals and counselors would know in advance which students would receive the letters.

Local school district efforts to encourage more students to enroll in advanced courses should complement and extend beyond the CSDE's efforts. Schools have a tremendous amount of information about every student. Those data as well as recommendations from teachers, administrators, school counselors or other school personnel should be considered together. Additional criteria to consider include GPA improvement over time, scoring near benchmark on local assessments, student interest, and persistence (Zinth and Barnett 2018). When making decisions about the appropriateness of courses or

programs, consideration of as much information as possible will lead to the best and most equitable decisions.

There have been ongoing efforts to remove financial barriers for students who choose to enroll in an AP course or a dual enrollment course. While there is no cost to high school students who choose to enroll in an AP course, there is an examination fee. The CSDE covers the cost of AP exam fees for students from low-income families. There are registration fees associated with dual enrollment courses offered through the Connecticut State Colleges and University System and the University of Connecticut. Again, those fees are waived for students who qualify.

It is possible that there are students who have economic need but do not qualify for these waivers. Districts are encouraged to use available funds to eliminate financial barriers for students when possible. This could include covering certification exam fees for students seeking to earn industry-recognized credentials. Communicating that financial assistance is available to students who need it can influence whether a student believes that enrollment in advanced coursework is possible (Watkins 2022).

School counselors have a major role in encouraging students to enroll in advanced courses and supporting them throughout the process. Connecticut's School Counseling Framework (2020) puts academic achievement and success for all students at the center of its model. School counselors support their students' academic needs and career aspirations as well as their social/emotional needs to achieve these goals. School counselors are uniquely positioned to ensure students are treated fairly and have access to the resources necessary to meet their needs. Their decisions are informed by the relationships they have developed over time with students, relevant data, and their collaboration with subject area teachers. A school counselor may advocate for a student to level up into a more challenging course better suited to a student's postsecondary plans, and they may identify additional resources such as tutoring for students who need extra support to be successful.

#### Policy and Practice Recommendations for Reducing Barriers:

- Use EdSight Secure to provide school counselors and teachers with lists of students identified by CSDE as having potential for success in rigorous courses. Staff may wish to reinforce the Commissioner's message, answer questions, and provide support to students as they consider their course selections for the next school year.
- Share descriptive statistics with faculty showing advanced course enrollment over time and disaggregated by student group. These data can be used to track progress, discuss effective strategies, identify challenges, and generate potential solutions.
- Urge staff to pay special attention to student interests and potential rather than past performance when recommending advanced coursework for students. If the goal is to expand access, recommendation decisions based on past performance exclusively will not spur change.



- Communicate directly with students from low-income families that registration fees and exam fees for advanced coursework will be waived.
- Encourage students to self-advocate based on their individual goals and plans for the future.
- Monitor course registrations throughout the enrollment period and encourage students to reconsider selections if the student has potential to be successful in more challenging courses.

## Increase Supply

Providing a range of advanced courses that appeal to the greatest number of students is an important step toward increasing access and participation in advanced coursework. Schools must provide a variety of pathways for students to achieve the goals outlined in their SSPs. Appealing to students' interests and long-term plans creates relevance for students and increases engagement, which is positively related to student achievement (TNTP 2018).

Advanced course offerings should provide multiple entry points for students. A student who may not be ready to enroll in advanced coursework in Grade 10 may be prepared to succeed in Grade 11. Options must be open and available for students while at the same time promoted by educators. As students progress through middle school and high school, they develop a sense of identity that can be dramatically influenced by their peers and adults who surround them. Educators play a key role in encouraging students to assess their interests and pursue coursework that is challenging.

While coursework must be appropriately challenging, prerequisite knowledge should be examined periodically and its necessity evaluated to ensure that unnecessary prerequisites are not creating artificial barriers for students expressing an interest in the content area and with the motivation to succeed. [Public Act 12-40](#) recommends embedded supports for students in credit-bearing courses in colleges and universities as a way to avoid remedial coursework. High schools should consider that same approach with their course offerings. Rather than requiring extensive prerequisites, considering corequisites may be a more effective approach to getting students enrolled in courses that are of high interest to them.

Over the years, districts have successfully transformed traditional courses to dual enrollment courses in partnership with higher education institutions. For example, the [University of Connecticut's Early College Experience Program](#) (ECE) is in nearly every Connecticut high school. The program currently offers 83 courses across 34 disciplines. Students who successfully complete an ECE course during high school earn credit toward high school graduation while simultaneously earning college credits that will appear on a student's University of Connecticut transcript. College credits earned during high school provide students with a distinct advantage in terms of course load and cost when enrolling in college.

Increasing supply can present a challenge when there are limited staff available or few students interested in certain content areas. In these cases, remote course options may be an effective way to increase the supply of advanced courses for some students. [VHS Learning](#) is one organization that Connecticut high schools have used to supplement local offerings.

#### Policy and Practice Recommendations for Increasing Supply:

- Re-evaluate prerequisites so that educators identify what is needed to succeed IN the course rather than BEFORE the course.
- School counselors and teachers should promote enrollment in advanced courses to students in all grades. Students must be assured that even though they may not have taken an advanced course at the beginning of high school, there are many opportunities to do so throughout high school in every grade.
- Review the current program of studies to identify courses with the potential to be offered in partnership with a college or university.
- Leverage remote options to expand the range of courses available to students.

#### Summary

The guidance makes clear that a student's academic plan and course selections have tremendous influence on graduation and post-secondary outcomes. While students should drive the process, responsibilities for planning and selection are distributed among a variety of individuals including district and school leaders, teachers, school counselors, and other staff members all in partnership with families. Collectively, this network of support influences outcomes sometimes through deliberate and coordinated actions and other times through the most common subtle daily interactions. It all matters.

By July 1, 2022, in accordance with this guidance, all districts must have local policies specifying student eligibility criteria for advanced courses and programs and a provision requiring the creation of an academic plan for all students. The CSDE anticipates that some districts will use this guidance to document and formalize their efforts into new local board policy. Others with long-standing formal written policy will use the guidance to reflect and expand on existing policy. Regardless of the approach taken, all efforts should remain focused on improving the high school experience and post-secondary outcomes for our graduates.

## Glossary of Terms

Advanced Placement (AP)—The [Advanced Placement Program](#), authorized by the College Board, offers college-level courses and exams students take in high school.

Cambridge International Program—[Cambridge Assessment International Education](#) provides internationally recognized academic programs for students aged 5 to 19. High school level courses, available only through approved Cambridge International Schools, provide students the opportunity to earn postsecondary credit that is accepted by colleges in the U.S. and abroad.

Career and Technical Education (CTE)—This is coursework that is designed to prepare students with technical, academic, and employability skills for success in the workplace and in further education. The courses represent a wide range of industries and occupations.

CTE Career Clusters—Career clusters are groupings of CTE courses concentrated in a particular industry or occupation. Connecticut's 12 Career Clusters are:

- Agriculture, Food, and Natural Resources
- Architecture and Construction
- Business Management and Administration
- Education and Training
- Finance
- Health Science
- Hospitality and Tourism
- Information Technology
- Manufacturing
- Marketing
- Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM)
- Transportation, Distribution, and Logistics

Dual credit— Students who successfully complete a dual enrollment course earn credit toward high school graduation as well as college course credit that appears on a student transcript issued by a college or university. Dual enrollment courses are often referred to as dual credit courses.

Dual enrollment—Dual enrollment courses are college courses offered by high schools in partnership with a college or university. Students taking these courses in high school are simultaneously enrolled with the partner higher education institution.

International Baccalaureate (IB)—[The International Baccalaureate](#) offers international education through four programs for students aged 3 to 19. The four programs are: Primary Years, Middle Years, Diploma Program, and Career-related Program. Schools must be authorized to teach IB programs. Every authorized school is known as an [IB World School](#).

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