



**National Rural
Higher Education
Research Center**

An Overview of Dual Enrollment Policies in Three Southern States

Describing the Rural Dual
Enrollment Landscape

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A core study by the National Rural Higher Education Research Center, led by MDRC, is exploring the role of dual enrollment in expanding college access in rural settings. Dual enrollment gives high school students the opportunity to take courses offered by a postsecondary institution and to earn transcribed college credit upon successful completion of those courses. The study will look at rural areas across three Southern states—Alabama, North Carolina, and Tennessee—and use state-level data to examine participation rates and outcomes for students taking dual enrollment courses. The study will also collect survey and interview data to look at the goals for dual enrollment and the factors associated with implementing high-quality dual enrollment programs in rural areas.

This brief—the first of several publications related to this study—presents a detailed overview and comparison of each state’s dual enrollment policies. This summary and analysis establishes a foundational understanding to inform the upcoming study, and is illuminating in its own right by highlighting ways in which state dual enrollment policies may align or differ. The brief draws from a review of research literature and policy documents and conversations with state-level partners.



The Importance of Studying Dual Enrollment in Rural Settings

Schools in rural areas are generally less likely to offer dual enrollment compared with urban and suburban areas, but when they do offer it, rural students are more likely to take advantage of it.¹ Dual enrollment has been shown to benefit high school students in multiple ways including 1) building their academic, social, and behavioral readiness for college;² 2) allowing students to earn credits that count toward a college degree, potentially reducing the total cost of college;³ 3) increasing students' likelihood of attaining a postsecondary credential, and 4) reducing the time to obtain a degree.⁴

Dual enrollment can be particularly valuable for students in rural areas where access to other advanced course offerings, such as Advanced Placement courses, may be less common.⁵ Recent evidence suggests that dual enrollment makes more of a difference for students in rural settings, with larger effects on secondary and postsecondary outcomes than for students in urban and suburban schools.⁶

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Why Is the Upcoming Three States Study Important?

Although dual enrollment is particularly important in rural settings, most of the research carried out to date has focused on rural student participation rates, with very little research on impact and implementation for rural populations. In addition, dual enrollment policies are currently evolving rapidly on a national scale. The National Rural Higher Education Research Center study involving Alabama, North Carolina, and Tennessee is intended to show what these shifts in policy mean for dual enrollment impact and implementation in rural settings. The three study states have substantial overlap in their geographical and historical contexts, leading to some similar challenges within their rural settings, yet they are also implementing dual enrollment in different ways, which will allow researchers to engage in a robust exploration of different models of rural dual enrollment partnerships.

Overview of Rural Populations in Study States

The three states in this study — Alabama, North Carolina, and Tennessee — are all considered part of the Southeastern United States. In each state, nearly a third of students attend rural schools — about double the national average — and the percentage of rural students who live in poverty is above the national average.⁷

Alabama

Alabama ranks eleventh in the nation for the highest number of students attending rural schools. The National Rural Education Association has identified Alabama as the second-highest-priority state needing support in rural education due to low spending, low academic achievement, and high poverty rates.⁸ Alabama falls below the national average for the percentage of rural students who completed college. Rural districts are spread throughout the state.

North Carolina

North Carolina has the second-highest number of rural students in the nation, and its rural population is among the nation's most racially and ethnically diverse. Like Alabama, it is high on the National Rural Education Center's list of states needing support in rural education – in tenth place – due to high rural poverty, low spending, and low high school graduation rates.⁹ North Carolina is slightly above the national average for the percentage of rural students who completed college. Rural areas tend to be located along the state's perimeter.

Tennessee

According to the National Rural Education Center, Tennessee has the fifth-highest number of rural students in the country and ranks twenty-first in states needing support in rural education. Tennessee's rural students face the challenges of poverty and lower access to support for learning, but they also perform above average for rural students on national assessments. The state's rural high school students also graduate at a higher rate than urban students.¹⁰ Like Alabama, Tennessee ranks below the national average for the percentage of rural students who completed college. Rural districts are distributed throughout the state.

See Table 1 for additional details about these states' rural populations.

Table 1. Rural Population Data

Indicator (%)	U.S.	Alabama	North Carolina	Tennessee
Students in rural schools ^a	15.7	30.0	34.5	28.8
Rural residents who completed college (2020) ^b	21.1	16.2	21.3	16.9
Rural school-aged children living in poverty ^a	13.6	17.0	17.2	15.7

SOURCES: ^aSara L. Hartman, Jerry Johnson, Daniel Showalter, Karen Eppley, and Bob Klein, *Why Rural Matters 2023: Centering Equity and Opportunity* (National Rural Education Association, 2023).

^bJon Boeckenstedt, "Urban and Rural Gaps in Educational Attainment" (<https://www.highereddatastories.com/2023/07/urban-and-rural-gaps-in-educational.html>, 2023).

NOTES: Rurality was determined based on the three NCES Rural locale codes (Hartman et al., 2023).

Policy Highlights

The following section provides an overview of the specific policies in each state, with emphasis on the aspects of policy that are most consequential for students and schools, including funding mechanisms, eligibility policies, and credit transfer processes.

Program Pathways

Alabama and North Carolina offer multiple dual enrollment pathways for students to choose from. In Tennessee, while students have choice, options are embedded within a single pathway. (Although this report uses the term “dual enrollment” to refer to all types of dual enrollment, the three states discussed in this brief use different terminology, as reflected in the descriptions below.)

Alabama

- The following pathways are available in Alabama:
 1. Dual Enrollment for Dual Credit, which is managed by the Alabama Community College System (ACCS), allows students to earn high school and college credit by passing a college course at an Alabama community college. ACCS has established dual enrollment agreements with high schools.
 2. Four-year colleges and universities also offer college enrollment to accelerated high school students. Students may also receive high school credit for these courses.

North Carolina

- North Carolina’s Career and College Promise (CCP) program offers three pathways:
 1. The College Transfer pathway, in which students take courses toward an associate’s degree or the general education requirements of a four-year institution
 2. The Career and Technical Education (CTE) pathway, which involves courses that lead to technical credentials or workforce-based majors
 3. The Cooperative Innovative High Schools pathway, in which students attend “early colleges,” or small schools that allow students to earn an associate’s degree or two years of college credit along with their high school diploma
- CCP programs are collaboratively managed by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, the North Carolina Community College System, the University of North Carolina System, and the North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities.

Tennessee

- Through Tennessee's Early Postsecondary Opportunities (EPSO) program, high school students can take dual enrollment courses offered by both two-year and four-year institutions.¹¹ They can take CTE dual enrollment courses offered by the Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology (TCATs) and two-year institutions.

Authorization and Funding

All three states have formal legislation approving dual enrollment.

Alabama

- The most recent dual enrollment legislation, Act 2025-66, requires that all schools (and other education agencies) provide high school students with opportunities for dual enrollment at either a two- or four-year institution.
- Alabama funds state scholarships that provide varying amounts of support for dual enrollment students taking courses at two-year institutions, potentially covering tuition, fees, books, and supplies. Any remaining program costs are the student's responsibility. However, students taking courses at four-year institutions must cover all costs, as state scholarships do not apply.¹²

North Carolina

- CCP was established in 2011 (S.L. 2011-145), providing tuition-free college credit opportunities for qualified high school students.
- While North Carolina provides funding for tuition costs, districts, schools, or students may need to cover the cost of books, supplies, transportation, and other fees.

Tennessee

- Through the Tennessee Education Lottery Scholarship program, students can receive a Dual Enrollment Grant (DEG) that covers tuition and mandatory fees.¹³ There is a minimum grade point average (GPA) requirement in college courses for students to continue receiving the DEG. Colleges can charge students for costs of books, materials, and other fees.
- Recent legislation (Public Chapter No. 227) now allows private postsecondary institutions to charge dual enrollment students tuition and fees above the grant amount; however, tuition and mandatory fees for public institutions cannot be more than the amount of the grant.

Statewide Eligibility Criteria

Each state has eligibility criteria for dual enrollment. Individual partners within each state may have additional eligibility criteria that vary.

Alabama

- Alabama allows students in grades 10 through 12 to participate by meeting the minimum GPA requirement, obtaining approval from their principal or counselor, and completing some course-specific prerequisites.¹⁴

North Carolina

- Eligibility for North Carolina's CCP program differs by pathway.
 - College Transfer and CTE pathways are mostly available to students in grades 11 and 12 with a qualifying GPA, demonstrated readiness via an assessment, and administrator recommendation (some CTE pathways require only an administrator recommendation). There are also some course options for students in grades 9 and 10.
 - Students can apply to a Cooperative Innovative High School beginning in eighth grade, with eligibility determined by high school-postsecondary partnerships. This pathway prioritizes first-generation students, students at risk of dropping out of high school, and students who would benefit from accelerated instruction.

Tennessee

- For Tennessee, the only state-level eligibility requirements are based on grade level.
 - Students taking courses at TCATs can do so in grades 9 through 12.
 - Students taking courses at two-year and four-year institutions are eligible in grades 11 and 12.
- Additional criteria for student eligibility (for example, minimum GPA) can be determined by the partner institution.

Instructor Requirements

In all three states, dual credit courses are taught by college faculty or credentialed adjunct faculty, including qualified high school teachers.

Credit Transfer

Since most dual enrollment credits are earned at community colleges, statewide agreements to facilitate transfer of those credits to four-year institutions are necessary to maximize the impact of the dual enrollment pathways. Alabama and North Carolina have statewide articulation agreements for transferring credits from a two-year to a four-year institution. In Tennessee, there is a statewide policy that ensures transfer of credits from community colleges to universities through established pathways. In addition, there is an effort to expand the transfer of clock hours earned at TCATs to community colleges and universities that operate on a semester credit-hour system.

Data Availability

The extent to which dual enrollment data are publicly available in the three states varies widely, with data pertaining to topics such as enrollment trends, course outcomes, and grant utilization publicly available in only some cases. This variation makes comparison across the three states challenging; the National Rural Higher Education Research Center's upcoming study is intended to help to address this issue.

Alabama

- Alabama's Commission of Higher Education provides two-year and four-year institution dual enrollment trend data.¹⁵

North Carolina

- For all three CCP pathways, North Carolina's Community College System provides public dashboards that include data such as dual enrollment rates, course outcomes, and four-year transfer statistics. The State Board of Education collaborates with other North Carolina education entities to submit an annual report to the North Carolina General Assembly. This report includes CCP participation data by student race/ethnicity and by district and outlines a cost analysis of the program.¹⁶

Tennessee

- The Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) tracks dual enrollment trends at TBR institutions, reflecting dual enrollment participation at community colleges and TCATs.¹⁷ TBR dashboards visualize student access data, course-taking patterns, and success rates, with data spanning the past decade for community colleges and the past five years for TCATs. The Tennessee Higher Education Commission maintains data on Tennesseans who use the DEG to pay for college courses.

Accountability Systems

Each of these three states incorporates dual enrollment data into its school and state accountability systems. These accountability frameworks are used to evaluate dual enrollment programs and monitor indicators related to students' readiness for postsecondary education.¹⁸

Alabama

- Alabama distributes school and state-level report cards that include a college and career readiness metric. The metric is fulfilled when a student completes one or more indicators such as earning college credit while in high school or earning a career or technical industry credential.¹⁹

North Carolina

- North Carolina school report cards measure student participation in advanced courses, including those in CCP pathways.²⁰

Tennessee

- Tennessee reports the Ready Graduate rate.²¹ To meet the Ready Graduate criteria, students must participate in a certain number of EPSOs, which can include dual enrollment, but also encompass Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses.

Dual Enrollment Pathways at a Glance

Table 2 below provides a side-by-side comparison of the dual enrollment pathways in each state.

Table 2. Dual Enrollment Pathways: A Side-by-Side State Comparison

Alabama	North Carolina	Tennessee
PATHWAYS		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dual Enrollment for Dual Credit • Dual enrollment at four-year institutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • College Transfer • Career and Technical Education • Cooperative Innovative High Schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dual enrollment
STATE FUNDING		
Dual Enrollment for Dual Credit: Scholarship funds for students provided to community colleges	Funding provided to postsecondary institution	Grants for students provided to postsecondary institution
TUITION COST RESPONSIBILITY		
Student, postsecondary institution, and state	State	Student, state, and postsecondary institution
ADDITIONAL FEES PAID BY STUDENTS		
Yes	Yes	Yes
COURSE LOCATION		
High school, postsecondary institution, or online	CT, CTE: Not mentioned in state policy CIHS: Separate schools in partnership with postsecondary institutions	High school, postsecondary institution, or online
POSTSECONDARY COURSE PROVIDERS		
Community colleges, public and private 4-year institutions	CT, CTE: Community colleges CIHS: Community colleges, public and private 4-year institutions	Technical colleges, community colleges, and 4-year institutions

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Alabama	North Carolina	Tennessee
STATEWIDE CRITERIA FOR STUDENT ELIGIBILITY		
10th – 12th grade, principal or counselor approval, GPA cutoff, some prerequisites	<p>CT: typically 11th – 12th grade (some 9th – 10th grade), GPA cutoff, other measures of readiness</p> <p>CTE: typically 11th – 12th grade with some programs in 9th – 12th; GPA cutoff but waiver offered</p> <p>CIHS: typically 9th – 13th grade (some 11th – 13th)^a</p>	9th – 12th grade for TCAT DE, 11th – 12th grade for 2-year and 4-year institutions, GPA requirement for grant renewal, advising
CREDIT TRANSFER		
Statewide Transfer Articulation Reporting System supports statewide credit transfer for dual enrollment	Certain CCP credits are transferable under the NC Comprehensive Articulation agreement to all University of North Carolina System institutions	Transfer Pathways advising tools, state statute, and other statewide programs support credit transfer; CTE courses may be allowed for credit transfer
ACCOUNTABILITY		
College and Career Readiness indicator measures if students earn a college credit in high school	Advanced Class Enrollment indicator includes CCP classes	Ready Graduate indicator measures if students meet criteria demonstrating readiness for education and employment after high school

SOURCES: Review of research literature and policy documents and conversations with state-level partners.

NOTES: Abbreviations are as follows: CCP = Career and College Promise; CIHS = Cooperative Innovative High Schools; CT = College Transfer; CTE = Career and Technical Education; DE = Dual Enrollment; GPA = grade point average.

^aGrade 13 refers to some CIHS programs that are five-year programs by design or some schools that may offer an optional fifth year for students.

Conclusion

Examining and comparing dual enrollment policies in Alabama, North Carolina, and Tennessee provides insight into the intended structure and function of dual enrollment in these states. This insight will inform the design and direction of the National Rural Higher Education Center’s subsequent research on dual enrollment policy implementation and impact in rural areas. Going forward, this project will allow policymakers, educators, and researchers to assess the effectiveness of dual enrollment programs in rural settings and develop informed strategies that drive meaningful progress in early postsecondary education.

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