

Lessons Learned About Early College Management Structures

Key Takeaways

Early college high schools combine the high school and college experience. To operate effectively, early colleges need to have management structures in place at the high school, district, and college levels. Our research suggests four crosscutting themes about these management structures:

- 1 There is a need for **dedicated personnel** who have time set aside for running the program.
- 2 **Structured opportunities for collaboration** across sectors are important, especially regular meeting times and opportunities to problem-solve.
- 3 Personnel should include individuals who can **understand the perspective of other levels**.
- 4 **Teams** (as opposed to individuals) provide a structure that promotes sustainability across turnover.

Julie A. Edmunds, Eric Grebing,
Nina Arshavsky, Bryan C. Hutchins

INTRODUCTION

Researchers estimate that “about 72 percent of jobs will require postsecondary education and training in 2031.”¹ One approach for increasing the number of students who earn postsecondary credentials is the early college model. Early colleges combine the high school and college experience, allowing students to simultaneously earn a high school diploma and an associate degree or substantial amounts of college credits. The model is growing rapidly; recent estimates suggest there are around 1,000 early colleges and related programs around the country.² The growth is partly due to the fact that rigorous research has shown that early college is effective, increasing students’ enrollment in college and their attainment of postsecondary credentials.³

WHAT IS EARLY COLLEGE?

Although the model differs in how it is implemented, our research indicates that early colleges share the following key elements:⁴

- *A focus on students who might need additional support to go to college.* Early colleges target students who are identified as being capable of

attaining a postsecondary degree, but who may need additional support to pursue college and succeed when they get there.

- *An aligned curriculum leading to a postsecondary credential.* Students in early colleges take high school courses that prepare them to be successful in college. They also gain access to college courses that give them both secondary and postsecondary credit and allow them to earn a postsecondary credential while still in high school.
- *College-going culture.* Early colleges create an environment that encourages all students to attend postsecondary education. They also pay explicit attention to ensuring that students develop college-readiness skills, including time and organizational management and self-advocacy.
- *Instructional practices that emphasize rigorous, student-centered instruction.* Early colleges engage students with instructional practices that ensure they have the skills and knowledge to be successful in postsecondary education.
- *Academic and affective supports for students.* Because of the emphasis on students who have not previously demonstrated high academic achievement and the higher expectations, early colleges provide students with the supports they need to succeed in more rigorous courses.
- *Strong relationships between secondary and postsecondary.* Early colleges rely on strong partnerships between high schools, districts, and colleges.
- *A professional working environment that promotes distributed leadership, ongoing learning, collaboration, and data use.* Early colleges are organized around a common vision of postsecondary opportunities for all students. The staff participate in job-embedded professional development and regularly

collaborate. The staff also regularly use diverse sources of data to identify students and improve their programming. Early colleges also use time and space creatively to support the implementation of the other practices.

Given the substantial interest in implementing early colleges, it is important to consider key aspects of implementation. This brief is one of a series that focuses on implementation issues related to early colleges; in this brief, we share insights around the management structures (i.e., the roles and responsibilities for different educational entities) that support early college implementation.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO CONSIDER MANAGEMENT STRUCTURES?

The early college model is different from the traditional high school model because it merges secondary and postsecondary systems. Thus, there are decisionmakers involved from the high school, the district, and the college. Some decisions are independent within each organization; others involve negotiations across organizations. This brief highlights lessons learned from our research about the management structures necessary to operate an effective early college.

WHAT ARE THE DATA SOURCES?

Key sources of this brief are interview and survey data coming from evaluations of the Rural Early College Network (RECN) and the Urban College Acceleration Network (UCAN) efforts led by the Center of Excellence in Leadership of Learning (CELL) at the University of Indianapolis.

Information from these two projects was supplemented by evaluations of other early college efforts in North Carolina, Texas, Colorado, Michigan, and Ohio.

EARLY COLLEGE MANAGEMENT STRUCTURES



The early college model is very complex and involves multiple partners. Each partner must consider their role in the early college and must have specific structures necessary to implement their program components and to work with their partner organizations. The remainder of this section is organized by three levels of education: 1) high school; 2) district; and 3) college. The final section identifies themes that cut across the levels.

HIGH SCHOOL-LEVEL MANAGEMENT STRUCTURES

In the early college, the high school generally has primary responsibility for the students. When the early college is an entire school, the school leader (principal or assistant principal) has overall responsibility for the programming. In settings where the early college is an academy or program within a school, implementation is more successful when there is a coordinating group that is responsible for early college programming.

In stand-alone schools, like those in North Carolina, the early colleges have their own principal or other leader. In Texas, all early colleges, regardless of whether they are stand-alone or a program within a larger school, must have an early college director, who is an administrator dedicated to ensuring that the early college programming is implemented. According to the Texas Early College High School Blueprint, each high school needs to have “An ECHS leader who has autonomy for course and instructor

scheduling, staff and faculty hiring, and budget development.”⁵

In Indiana, all 20 participating RECN and 16 UCAN schools had a School Leadership Team (SLT) that was responsible for coordinating the early college work. The SLT included an administrator (a principal or assistant principal), one or more counselors, and 2-3 dual credit teachers, with the college partner sometimes participating in team meetings. The teams met regularly to discuss early college issues, including developing a common vision for the programming, selecting students, and creating supports. Interviewees believed that the SLT was a good vehicle for program implementation and that it facilitated problem-solving, helped develop a sense of community, and helped develop teacher leadership (see box). The SLT meetings provided regular time dedicated to the early college and gave a structure for planning and accountability for actions, which led to schools making more rapid progress in implementation. RECN and UCAN interviewees and survey respondents also believed that the SLT was a key strategy in helping sustain the early college work; because multiple people were involved, the work would be more likely to be sustained in cases of turnover. An additional benefit was that the SLT increased buy-in as the early college was not being led simply by an individual but by a team with team members serving as ambassadors to their departments.

This [SLT] has replaced any sort of leadership that we've had in the building. And it's been so much better than anything that we've ever had. So, in many ways, it decentralizes leadership, and that's very positive.

- RECN Principal

DISTRICT-LEVEL MANAGEMENT STRUCTURES

Districts play a critical role in supporting early colleges as districts make key decisions about strategic priorities and allocation of resources, and because the postsecondary partnerships are usually negotiated between the district and the postsecondary institution. Many of the projects with which we worked created a district-level management team whose membership included early college principals, relevant district staff (which may include instructional coaches), and, frequently, postsecondary partners.

These management or coordinating teams would meet regularly – often monthly – to identify priority areas and problem-solve challenges. One of the strongest examples of this was in a Texas district implementing a federally-supported effort to adapt early colleges to the comprehensive high school setting (see box). These types of coordinating teams were extremely important if the districts saw early college as a core activity in the district affecting more than just a single school.

A superintendent from a district in Indiana commented that they had a leadership team that included eleven staff from both buildings. He noted, “That’s been very beneficial, sharing ideas across the district.”

In cases of small districts or districts with an early college at only one school, there may not need to be a separate management structure at the district level; instead, district staff may be regular attendees at the high school-level management meetings. This occurred in one Indiana district where the assistant superintendent participated regularly in meetings with the school leadership team: “A lot of times I’m just there to listen...because [the school staff] are there every day working with the students and working with the program, but when it comes to how to utilize funds or maybe what curricular path

The Cabinet in Brownsville, Texas met monthly and was responsible for coordinating the early college efforts within the district. Its members included: the district superintendent; area superintendents; representatives from advanced academics, college readiness, the research and data department, curriculum and instruction, guidance and counseling, special education and bilingual education; early college principals and staff; college liaisons; the postsecondary dual enrollment team and staff from other partners. During the meetings, there was always a review of relevant data—measures of student readiness, student coursetaking, and student success. The district, college, and high school staff also spent time problem-solving together.

to follow, then that’s kind of where I can jump in and provide some guidance.”

COLLEGE-LEVEL MANAGEMENT STRUCTURES

The early college requires significant participation from the postsecondary level.

College leadership. Colleges had different structures for managing their early college partnerships, which were generally coordinated with the broader dual enrollment work. For example, a college in Ohio that was running a large early college grant had a senior leadership team that coordinated their dual enrollment work, including a Superintendent for School and Community Partnerships (who had been a school superintendent at the district level and could bring the K-12 perspective to the table), a Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs, and a Senior Vice President of Enrollment Management.

When the grant ended, the college wanted to institutionalize the work, so they created a Senior Director of K-12 Partnerships who reported to the Chief Academic Officer at the college. Additionally, at the college, there were individuals tasked with specific aspects of implementing early college and dual enrollment, including working with the schools to develop pathways, providing advising and other supports, and supervising dual enrollment instructors.

In Indiana, the postsecondary partners had personnel dedicated to implementing the early college programming. One college noted that their Memorandum of Understanding with the local district mandated the number of full-time personnel that would be dedicated to dual enrollment based on the number of students taking dual enrollment courses. One of the private universities that offers extensive dual enrollment programming through Indiana had a well-articulated management structure, including a Director of K-12 Initiatives who coordinated early college, dual enrollment, and career centers. This director had two staff members each with separate responsibilities for the academic and career center activities. Each of these staff then supervised a collection of Assistant Deans who both worked with individual schools and may have also supervised site directors at specific schools. One Assistant Dean described how they were extremely involved with the high schools' School Leadership Teams, "I don't want them to make a decision without thinking about the repercussions. So, I do try to be very active in their SLT teams."

College liaison. Across all of the projects we have evaluated, schools and colleges identified a need for a college liaison or early college coordinator, an individual whose primary responsibility was coordinating work between the high school and college. In some settings, these individuals may also have worked with dual enrollment more broadly. For example, the college partners in Indiana had

designated individuals who were responsible for helping schools and their early college programs make connections with the college. These individuals were located at least part-time (and often full-time) on the high school campuses.

Many schools originally tried to have their counselors take on this responsibility, but almost all found that counselors had too many other responsibilities and needed to possess college-specific knowledge that they did not have.

Recognizing this issue, the Texas ECHS Blueprint requires that early colleges have a college "liaison with decision-making authority who interacts directly and frequently (in-person or virtually) with the ECHS leader and the dual credit provider."⁶ The college liaison is often located at the college but may in some cases be housed at the high school; for example, the College Connection Coach in Indiana is an employee of the community college. In all cases, however, the college liaison must be able to navigate between the two different systems.

How one College Connection Coach in Indiana described their work:
 "When we're fully staffed, it is two days a week that we offer onsite support at [the high school]. That time may be used with meeting with students directly. I'm currently there on Mondays to support students, from...looking at dual credit to reviewing the admission process, to getting them set up with advising appointments for them to come to campus. But it could also be meeting with instructors to sort out some strategies for Early College or participating in career fairs or something of that nature."



College liaisons/coordinators generally take on a range of responsibilities that can differ depending on whether the early college courses are offered by the college or by adjunct faculty at the high school (see box for how the liaison position was conceptualized in one state). The responsibilities can also vary depending on how they are distributed between college-based or high school-based staff:

- Advising students on dual enrollment courses. College liaisons assist students in identifying the courses that they need to take. For example, in Indiana, these individuals advise students on courses that they need to take to complete the Indiana College Core or the equivalent of a student's first year in college. In cases where the courses are taught by college faculty, the liaisons may also provide guidance around scheduling and finding professors who have experience instructing early college students.
- Test taking. College liaisons may coordinate any testing required for entrance into specific college courses. For example, one Indiana College Connection Coach described helping students complete any required knowledge assessments.
- Course registration. The liaisons often have primary responsibility for either registering students or helping students register for dual enrollment courses.
- Logistical coordination between high school and college. There are often many logistical issues that need to be coordinated between the two education sectors. Liaisons will help address issues such as scheduling challenges, transportation, and physical space needs, among others. These responsibilities are particularly important when the dual enrollment courses are either offered at the college campus or by college faculty.

- Monitoring student performance. A liaison is often the primary person tracking how well students are doing in college classes and then sharing this information with high school counselors or other support staff.
- Developing students' college readiness skills. Liaisons will often teach students about the skills they need to navigate a college experience successfully. The liaison may also teach a College Success Course that gives students college credit or may coordinate college awareness activities, including visits to college campuses.

Because college liaisons have a foot in both the secondary and postsecondary worlds, they need a specific set of skills.⁷ We have found that effective college liaisons have had experience with both high school and college and can understand the goals and perspectives of each institution. Liaisons also benefit from political skills that allow them to interact effectively with different groups of people.

Although liaisons usually have a single formal supervisor, their work is generally guided by both the high school principal and a senior staff member at the college; this means that liaisons need to have the skills to prioritize work while responding to the needs of multiple bosses.

College liaisons are also most effective when they are able to coordinate with the other counselors and advisors at both the high school and the college. One Indiana College Connection Coach (who is a community college employee) described how they coordinated with the high school counselor, "So I work very closely with the school counselors... we're constantly in connection with going over completions. And like I said, I go into the classrooms with them when they're scheduling just to kind of be like a resource to the kids... So yeah, we talk daily and we're just trying to stay on the same page."

CROSS-CUTTING THEMES

When we look across the levels, we see some common themes around the management structures that different organizations should have in place to assist with early college implementation.

THEME 1: DEDICATED PERSONNEL

In order for early colleges to function appropriately, individuals or teams who have explicit responsibilities for running the program are needed. Additionally, the early college model is such a complex model that it cannot be simply added to the current workload of already overburdened staff such as counselors. In most cases, schools and colleges have found the need to hire additional personnel or redirect current personnel to ensure that adequate attention is paid to early colleges.

THEME 2: STRUCTURED OPPORTUNITIES TO COLLABORATE ACROSS THE SCHOOL, DISTRICT, AND COLLEGE LEVELS

The early college is, by design, a cross-sector program that combines the secondary and postsecondary sectors. Therefore, effectively managing the early college requires that members of the secondary and postsecondary sectors meet regularly to collaborate on planning and problem-solving. These meetings should be purposefully planned with agendas and minutes and include the opportunity to review data. The content of the meetings and the participants may differ depending on whether the courses are being taught primarily by college instructors or by high school instructors.

THEME 3: INDIVIDUALS WHO CAN UNDERSTAND THE PERSPECTIVE OF OTHER LEVELS

The cross-sector nature of the program also means that groups come to the table with different levels of understanding. It is extremely useful to have college

staff who understand the high school perspective and high school staff involved who can understand where the college is coming from. Roles such as the college liaison, with explicit responsibilities to navigate the different systems, require understanding both systems.

THEME 4: TEAMS TO ALLOW FOR SUSTAINABILITY ACROSS TURNOVER

Schools and colleges have found that it is more effective to have teams whose members represent the different points of interaction that dual enrollment needs with systems. For high schools, this would include administrators, instructors, and counselors. At the college level, this might include administrators, registrars/enrollment management, or department heads. Teams allow for connections across people with relevant responsibilities. They also provide a structure that can increase buy-in for the model, which can help ensure sustainability when there is staff turnover.

Endnotes

¹ <https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/Projections2031-ES.pdf>, p.5

² See a current list of early college programs at

<https://airtable.com/appImdVNzCvY6Xrgj/shrgjCTvv6FTsZaXr/tbl8nOCOR2aWyB25J>

³ See *Early Colleges as Model for Schooling: Creating New Pathways for Access to Higher Education* (Edmunds, Unlu, Glennie & Arshavsky, 2023).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ The Texas ECHS Blueprint can be found at <https://tea.texas.gov/academics/college-career-and-military-prep/2020-21-echsblueprint6.8.20final.pdf>.

⁶ <https://tea.texas.gov/academics/college-career-and-military-prep/2020-21echsblueprint5-28-20final.pdf>

⁷ Here is a link to a job description for a college liaison for Texas Southmost College:

https://www.tsc.edu/images/Departments/HumanResources/job_descriptions/Early%20College%20High%20School%20Liaison%2003.22.2018.pdf

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