



Increasing Access to Advanced Coursework in Texas

**By Kristen Hengtgen, Ph.D., Senior Policy Analyst, P-12 Policy, and
Hector Biaggi, Senior Analyst, P-12 Data & Analytics**

Introduction

[Research](#) says that when students have access to advanced coursework opportunities, they have higher confidence, are more engaged in school, and have fewer absences and suspensions and higher graduation rates. Advanced coursework also allows students to earn credits and credentials in high school, so they can get a head start in college and/or their career. Unfortunately, many Black and Latino students and students from low-income backgrounds lack equitable access to advanced coursework opportunities, such as gifted and talented programs in elementary school, eighth grade Algebra courses, Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), and dual credit (DC) programs in high school. As a result, these students are missing out on crucial opportunities that can set them up for success after high school.

Existing inequities in access to advanced coursework were exacerbated during the pandemic, when schools went online and AP, IB, and DC classes were quickly overhauled or canceled. Many already underserved students with limited access to technology, interruptions at home, and/or mental health issues were cut off from the additional resources and supports they needed to succeed and experienced a [significant amount](#) of unfinished learning. But, many schools and districts used federal emergency and recovery funds and new mechanisms to extend access to these students, and [data shows](#) that students with advanced coursework opportunities in middle school fared better than their peers, which suggests that investing in evidence-based instruction, programs, and practices can accelerate students' learning and reduce persistent inequities.

Increasing access to advanced coursework requires a commitment from state leaders to collect and analyze disaggregated participation and outcomes data and targeted, data-informed efforts to develop policies that increase access to, and success in, high-quality advanced coursework. This brief is designed to support these efforts by providing data analyses and a scan of policies and practices in Texas for advocates, educators, and policymakers who are leading this work at the state level.

Policy Context

Texas has done [exciting work](#) over the past two decades to broaden access to DC opportunities. DC has been growing quickly in the state, yet [completion](#) varies by household income and racial group, and rural districts and districts that serve large numbers of students from low-income backgrounds have struggled to offer this opportunity at no cost to the student. Additionally, rural districts may [face challenges](#) such as spotty internet access, funding disparities, and a lack of staff capacity or qualifications, while students may lack transportation to partner colleges, which can be 35 or more miles away. Because of the state's complex model of funding community colleges, students' access to affordable DC has, until recently, often depended on where they live.

To address this and other challenges, the 2023 Texas Legislature [codified a new model to fund community colleges](#), which guarantees a base level of state funds for smaller districts, rewards community colleges for positive student outcomes, bolsters college capacity, and increases affordability. The sweeping legislation introduces performance funding that is tied to completion of DC coursework, a financial aid program (FAST) that covers DC costs for students from low-income backgrounds, and a College Connect program that allows institutions to offer more flexible and accessible dual enrollment courses as an alternative to traditional DC.

This new model will fundamentally change the context of DC in Texas, particularly for students in underserved districts. This is important because Texas currently has [DC participation and completion gaps](#) along income and racial lines: Black and Latino students and students from low-income backgrounds are less likely to participate in and complete DC courses than their White, Asian, and wealthier peers.

While 1 in 5 Texas students in the graduating high school classes of 2019 and 2020 took DC courses, [over half](#) took advanced courses, which include AP and IB, in addition to DC. HB 8 isn't designed to change access to AP and IB classes, which remain popular in Texas — the state was [second in the nation](#) in the number of AP examinees in 2021-22, although Latino and Black students are also underrepresented in AP test-taking and credit earning.

The state has also partnered with [OnRamps](#), established in 2011 by the University of Texas (UT) as an alternative to traditional DC coursework. OnRamps offers virtual DC courses taught by high school teachers but designed and supported by OnRamps staff and UT faculty. OnRamps courses don't require students to take a placement assessment to qualify for a course, so students whose test scores or grades may not convey their readiness for college-level courses can still have access to advanced coursework. Additionally, students can choose to accept or decline college credit, depending on their goals and course performance. OnRamps also offers free online [professional development \(PD\) opportunities](#) for virtual and hybrid educators on the Texas Education Agency (TEA) website. The program has served as a model for other institutions of higher education across the state.

Explore Texas 2036's [Advanced Coursetaking Dashboard](#) to see gaps in access across regions, particularly in rural areas. Notably, 21% of 11th and 12th graders attend districts that offer 0-4 AB/IB courses in STEM. Additionally, 44% of Texas school districts do not offer any AP/IB courses.

To dig more into DC data in Texas — including access, course taking, and outcomes disaggregated by race, income, gender, urbanicity, and region, see the Community College Research Center and the University of Texas at Austin's 2023 [DC Data Dashboard](#). The tool highlights the importance of closing DC participation gaps by showing the remarkable effects of DC course participation on postsecondary outcomes: Taking any DC course all [but erases](#) college enrollment and first-year persistence gaps by race. The tool also shows that Black, Latino, and low-income students who access DC courses attempt more credits than other groups of students; in fact, low-income DC students are two times more likely to earn an associate degree in high school than their wealthier peers (10% vs. 5%), and Black and Latino students are three times more likely than their White peers to do so (10% vs. 3%).

Texas approved another significant policy in the 2023 legislative session to connect more students to advanced coursework. [SB 2124](#) requires school districts and open-enrollment charter schools to automatically enroll sixth grade students who performed in the top 40% on the fifth grade State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR), or on a comparable local assessment, in an advanced math course, unless the student's parent opts them out. It also requires districts to develop middle school advanced math programs to ensure those sixth graders students can enroll in Algebra I when they are in eighth grade. This new law should help expand access to advanced math classes in high school and circumvent [educator bias](#) by no longer relying exclusively on teachers to refer students for advanced math opportunities. Similar local policies successfully [eliminated](#) wide racial disparities among high-performing students accessing advanced math in middle school.

TEA is still developing guidance for SB 2124 and suggests that districts and schools develop their policies as soon as practicable. Successful implementation of this policy will require a strong commitment from districts, as well as efforts to create more positive school climates, high expectations for all students on the part of educators, and improved foundational math instruction that reduces learning disparities prior to fifth grade and ensures that students who have been historically underenrolled in advanced courses are included. Above all, it's important that there is effective statewide implementation of both SB 2124 and HB 8 to ensure that underserved students have greater access to essential advanced coursework opportunities that lead to college and career readiness and postsecondary completion.

To better understand existing inequities and how the pandemic may have changed those patterns, we analyzed state- and district-level data from the Texas Education Agency's Texas Academic Performance Report (TAPR) on student enrollment and completion in dual credit classes from the 2018-19 and 2020-21 school years.

Statewide

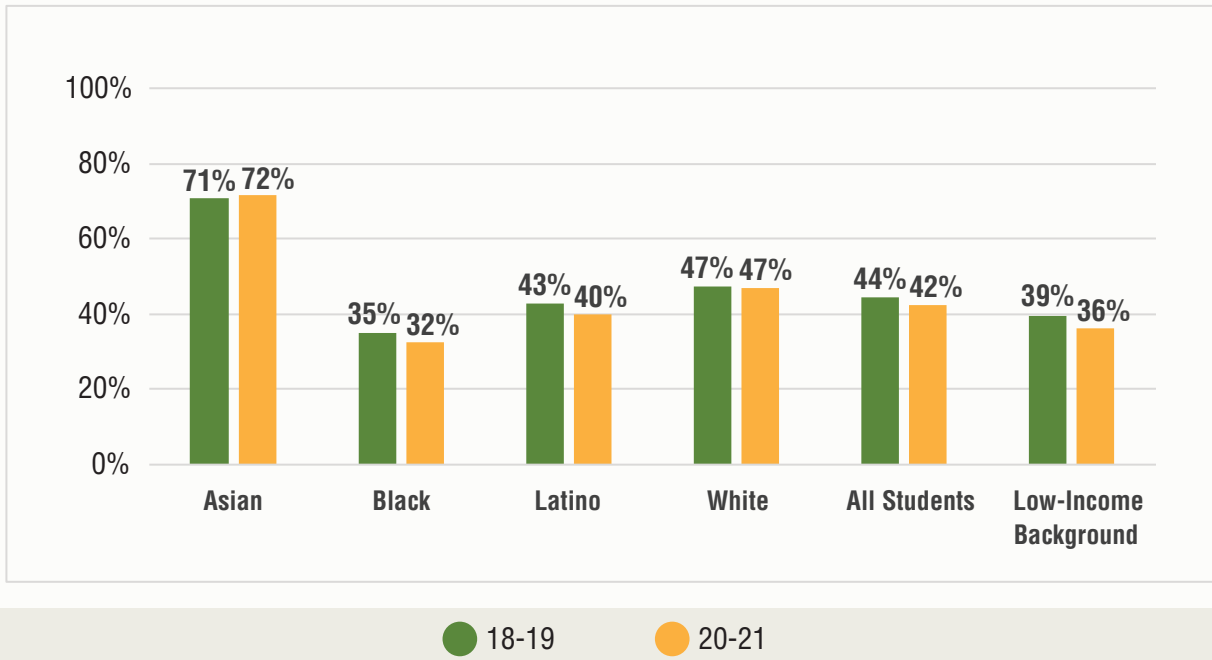
Advanced Course Completion

From 2018-19 to 2020-21, the first full school year navigating pandemic restrictions, advanced coursework completion fell only slightly, with 42% of students completing an advanced course in 2020-21. The slight decrease in completion was due to a widening of existing disparities in schools, where Black and Latino students and students from low-income backgrounds lack supports needed to complete advanced courses at the same rate as their peers.

Notably, completion of an advanced course represents access more than success. These data do not tell us if schools and districts are ensuring that advanced coursework opportunities lead to postsecondary credit — for example, supporting students completing an AP or IB class to pass their exam.

However, advanced courses, and DC courses in particular, can connect students to high-demand jobs and postsecondary pathways, while giving them confidence that they can succeed in college: A [2018](#) study in Texas found that DC students were twice as likely to graduate in four years as those with no DC, and were more likely to say their exposure to college courses gave them confidence in college, which is particularly important for first-generation students.

All Advanced Coursework Completion, by Subgroup: SY 2018-19 & 2020-21



Reading this figure: In 2020-21, 32% of Black students completed an advanced/dual credit course.

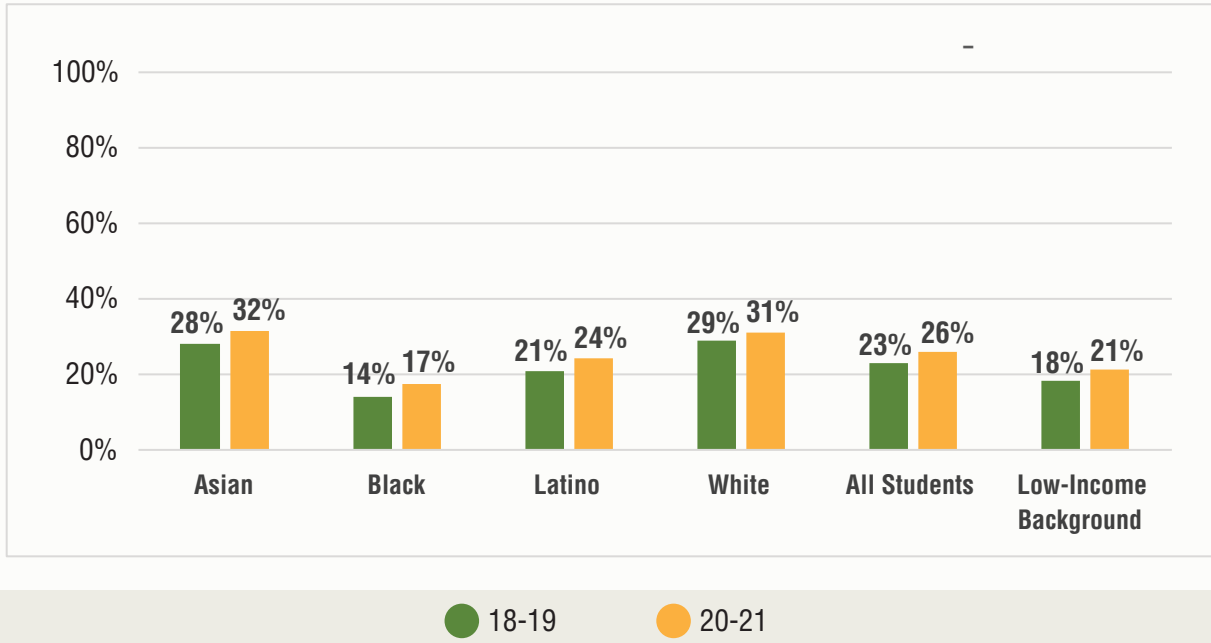
Source: EdTrust analysis of the [Texas Academic Performance Reports](#) from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) (accessed July 2023).

Note: Texas' definition of advanced courses includes AP, IB, and dual credit classes.

Graduates With Dual Credit

In Texas, a graduate with DC is defined as a graduate who has completed and earned at least three credit hours in English language arts (ELA) or mathematics, or at least nine credit hours in any subject, as a part of Texas's demonstration of College, Career, or Military Readiness (CCMR). A slightly higher share of graduates in the 2020-21 school year finished with some DC compared to graduates in the 2018-19 school year. The share of Black and Latino students and students from low-income backgrounds with some DC also increased by 3 percentage points (aligned with the trend for all students); however, longstanding disparities between groups remain.

Graduates With Dual Credits, by Subgroup: SY 2018-19 & 2020-21



Reading this figure: In 2020-2021, more Latino students graduated with dual credit (24%) than in 2018-19 (21%).

Source: EdTrust analysis of the [Texas Academic Performance Reports](#) from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) (accessed July 2023).

Note: Students could have taken DC courses at any point in their high school career, so any changes observed for the class of 2020-21 could reflect changes in course-taking patterns from as early as the 2017-18 school year.

The Use of Multiple Measures for Placement May Increase Access to College-Level Courses

To be eligible to enroll in DC courses, students must show college readiness by either (1) meeting [Texas Success Initiative](#) (TSI) score requirements for their specific DC course load, or (2) meeting certain score requirements on [other assessments](#), such as the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR), ACT, or SAT.

While using cut scores — i.e., a minimum selected score used to separate examinees who show readiness from those who do not show readiness — can ensure that students of color who have clearly demonstrated readiness are not shut out of advanced coursework because of educator biases, these scores should be a floor, not a ceiling, as they may keep students out of DC courses who may be ready even if they don't have standardized test scores to show it. Other advanced course options, including AP and OnRamps, do not require a certain test score. Institutions may expand similar kinds of DC course offerings under the College Connect program introduced by HB 8.

Due to the pandemic, TSI administration was disrupted or [canceled](#) in many school districts in 2019-2020, and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) [allowed](#) colleges and universities to use multiple measures of eligibility to assess a student's readiness to enroll in DC opportunities if a student's TSI status was unknown.

Notably, research shows that high school GPA is a more [reliable predictor](#) of preparedness for entry-level college courses than standardized exam cut scores. The use of a single score to place students disproportionately limits access to college-level courses for students who are Black, Latino, and from low-income backgrounds, because these students are [less likely](#) to meet TSI standards. Using multiple measures can ensure that students have many ways to demonstrate readiness and interest in engaging in advanced courses.

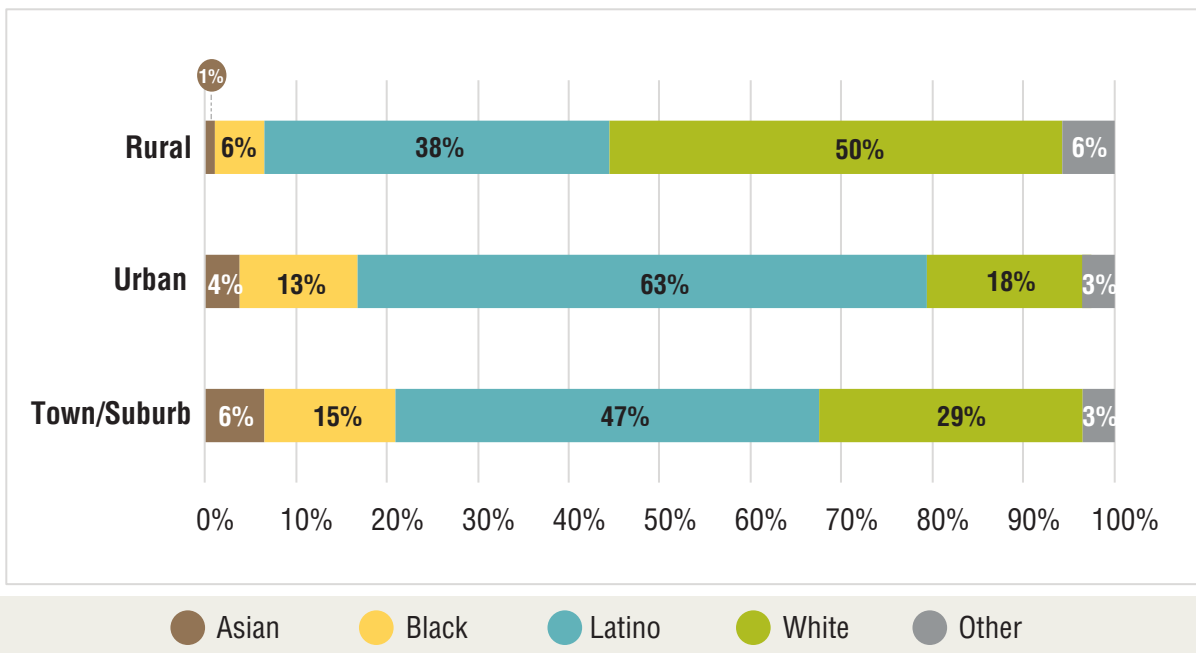
At this time, there is little data available on how colleges chose their eligibility measures and whether the use of more expansive measures broadened access for students who are typically excluded by cut scores. Community colleges across the nation saw a [concerning](#) drop in enrollment in the fall of 2020, and Texas was not the only state that allowed postsecondary institutions and school districts to adopt more flexible requirements for enrollment in DC due to pandemic-related testing challenges. However, the THECB and other advocacy groups should strive to understand how the use of multiple measures — as opposed to the traditional placement policy, which used only the TSI to determine eligibility — impacted DC enrollment and consider whether there might be other proven ways for students to show readiness for DC courses moving forward.

Urban and Rural Districts

The analysis below examines rural districts compared to urban districts.¹ Texas has [more](#) rural schools than any other state, and 14% of Texas high school students attend rural schools, which primarily serve White and Latino students. Rural districts [often](#) lack the resources to attract and hire a sufficient number of qualified instructors for advanced courses and can only offer courses that align with the expertise of educators already on staff. These districts also may be far from the nearest college, which may limit student access to DC courses.

Urban districts in Texas serve many more students than rural districts (42% of the state's high school students) and have larger numbers of Black and Latino students and fewer numbers of White students. Because of their historic challenges compared to districts in towns/suburbs, we focus on urban and rural districts in the following analysis.

District Enrollment Demographics by Locale: SY 2020-21



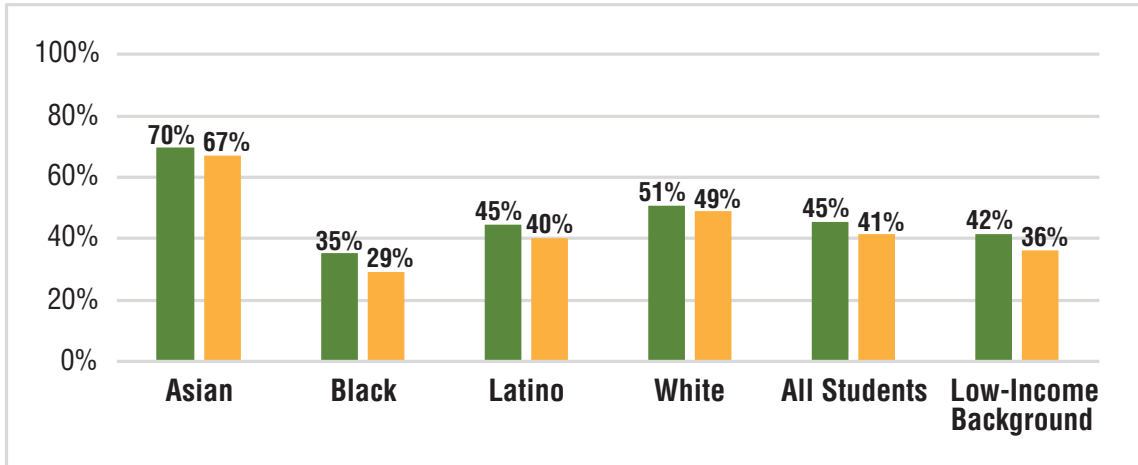
Reading this figure: In rural districts, 50% of students who are enrolled in school are White.

Source: EdTrust analysis of the [Texas Academic Performance Reports](#) and [District Type data](#) from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) (accessed July 2023).

Advanced Course Completion

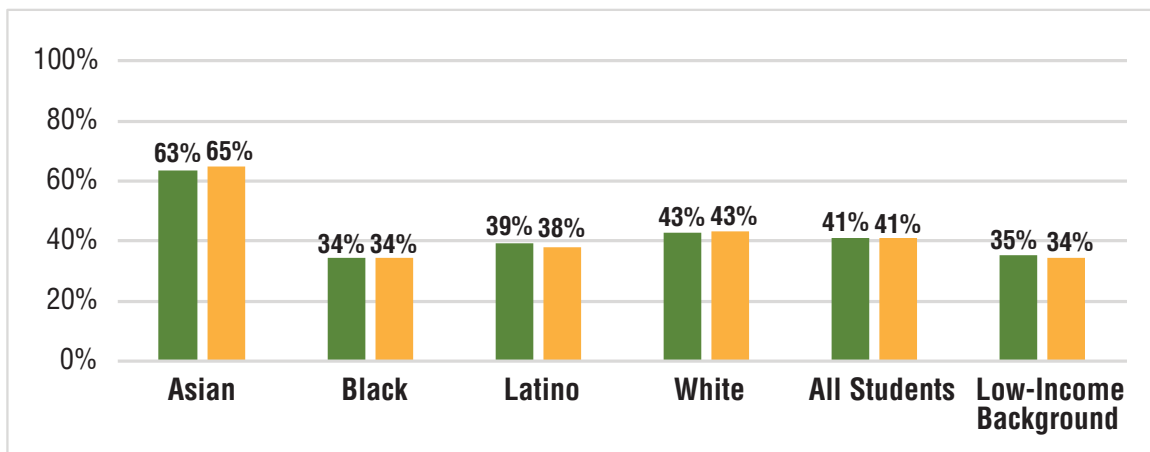
The pandemic hurt advanced coursework completion in urban districts more than it did in rural districts, which saw comparatively no change. In urban districts, drops in completion for Black and Latino students and students from low-income backgrounds stand out.

All Advanced Coursework Completion in Urban Districts, by Subgroup: SY 2018-19 & 2020-21



● 18-19 ● 20-21

All Advanced Coursework Completion in Rural Districts, by Subgroup: SY 2018-19 & 2020-21



● 18-19 ● 20-21

Reading this figure: In urban districts, 40% of Latino students completed advanced coursework in the 2020-21 school year.

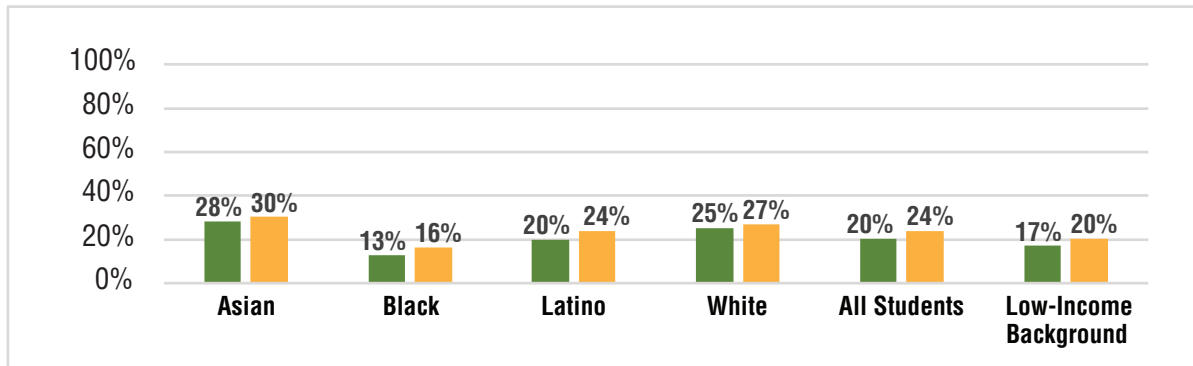
Source: EdTrust analysis of the [Texas Academic Performance Reports](#) (TAPR) and [District Type data](#) from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) (accessed July 2023).

Graduates With Dual Credit

There were slight increases in the number of graduates with DC in both urban and rural districts. Overall, urban districts had slightly larger increases from 2018-19 to 2020-21 than rural districts; however, in both years, every student group in rural districts had slightly more graduates with dual credit compared to urban districts.

Graduates With Dual Credits From Urban Districts, by Subgroup:

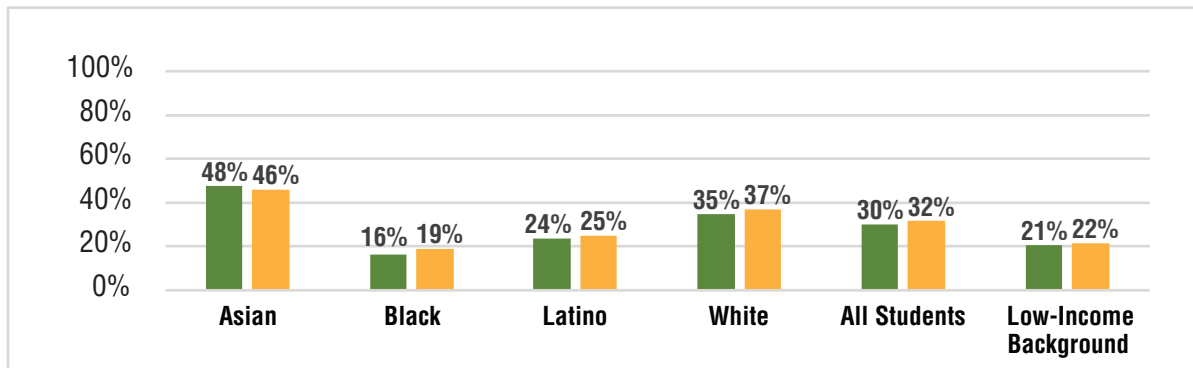
SY 2018-19 & 2020-21



● 18-19 ● 20-21

Graduates With Dual Credits From Rural Districts, by Subgroup:

SY 2018-19 & 2020-21



● 18-19 ● 20-21

Reading this figure: In rural districts, 22% of graduates with a low-income background graduated with dual credits in the 2020-21 school year.

Source: Ed Trust analysis of the [Texas Academic Performance Reports \(TAPR\)](#) and [District Type data](#) from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) (accessed July 2023).

Promising Practice: Dallas ISD Improves Graduates With DC

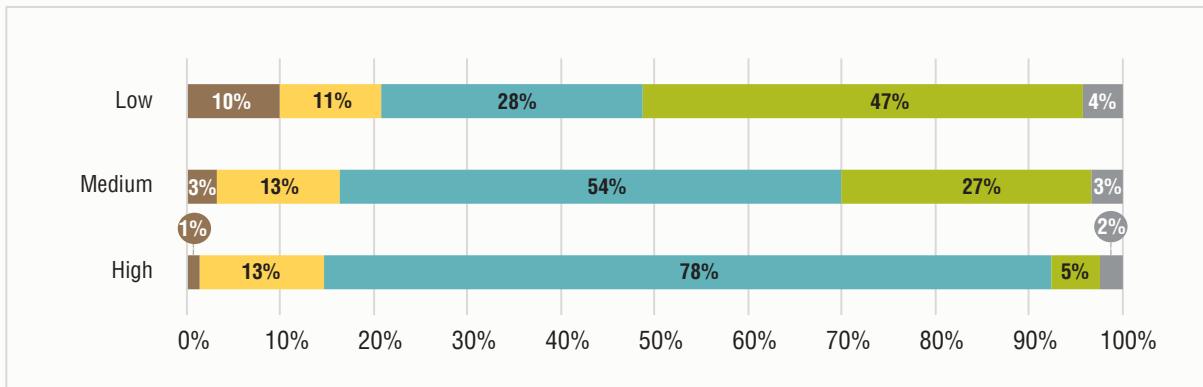
Since [2016](#), Dallas Independent School District (ISD) has gone all in on increasing access to DC through Early College partnerships with regional institutions and the expansion of the [Pathways to Technology](#) (P-TECH) Early College High model to every comprehensive high school in the district. P-TECH intentionally includes Career and Technical Education programs, where students can earn associate degrees and industry certificates while completing their high school requirements, all tuition-free. Dallas ISD's P-TECH and Early College programs offer a [variety of pathways](#), such as criminal justice, pre-med, software development, and business, and schools have industry partners that provide career exposure, internships, and employment opportunities. The programs also target first-generation students and students from historically underrepresented groups in higher education and offer additional supports like tutoring and mentorship.

Efforts to expand access to DC courses are working, even amidst disruptions from the pandemic. From 2018-19 to 2020-21, Dallas saw a massive increase in graduates with DC across all student groups, with sizable jumps for Black (9% to 30%), Latino (15% to 31%), and economically disadvantaged students (13% to 31%). In fact, Dallas's increase was the greatest, by far, among the state's larger districts. And Dallas ISD [notes](#) that 65% of its 2022-23 graduates who were enrolled in P-TECH/Early College earned at least 60 credit hours or attained an associate degree. As DC continues to expand, Dallas ISD shows how the P-TECH model can target students who have been historically underserved by DC courses; connect them with tuition-free work-based learning, career exploration, and credentials; and support their paths to college and in-demand careers. For more, see Texas Education Agency's [P-TECH Blueprint](#).

Districts With Low to High Percentages of Students From Low-Income Backgrounds

The analysis below compares districts with high, medium, and low percentages of students from low-income backgrounds. In the average district, 60% of students are from low-income backgrounds, so we organized districts into three different categories: In Low districts, fewer than 45% of students are from low-income backgrounds; in medium districts, between 45-80% of students are from low-income backgrounds; and in High districts, more than 80% of students are from low-income backgrounds. In Texas, Latino students make up a much larger share of students in low-income districts than in high-income districts, while the opposite is true for White students.

District Enrollment Demographics by % of Students From Low-Income Backgrounds:
SY 2020-21



Asian
 Black
 Latino
 White
 Other

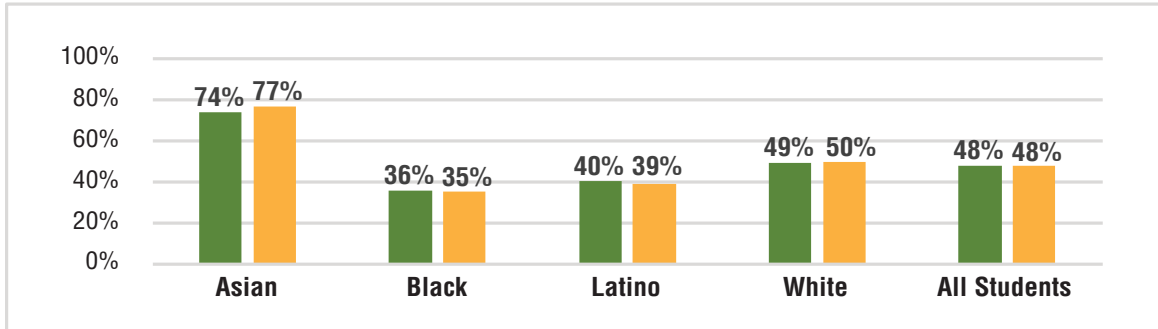
Reading this figure: Districts with higher percentages of students from low-income backgrounds serve a disproportionately higher rate of Latino students (78%) and a disproportionately lower rate of White students (5%).

Source: EdTrust analysis of the [Texas Academic Performance Reports \(TAPR\)](#) and [Economically Disadvantaged Status Reports](#) from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) (accessed July 2023).

Advanced Course Completion

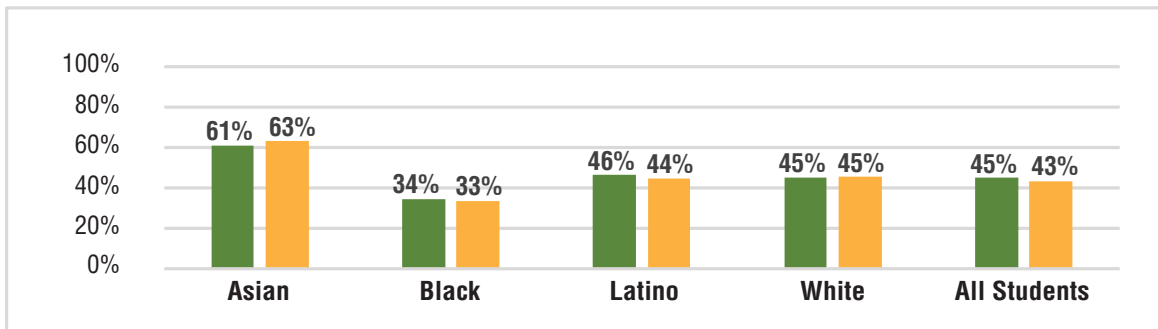
In districts with fewer students from low-income backgrounds, students completed advanced coursework at higher rates overall. Yet in districts with more students from low-income backgrounds, Latinos completed advanced courses at somewhat higher rates. In districts with low percentages of students from low-income backgrounds, advanced coursework completion did not change much between 2018-19 and 2020-21; however, completion rates declined slightly in districts with high percentages of students from low-income backgrounds.

All Advanced Coursework Completion in Districts With Low Percentages of Students from Low-Income Backgrounds, by Race: SY 2018-19 & 2020-21



● 18-19 ● 20-21

All Advanced Coursework Completion in Districts With High Percentages of Students from Low-Income Backgrounds, by Race: SY 2018-19 & 2020-21



● 18-19 ● 20-21

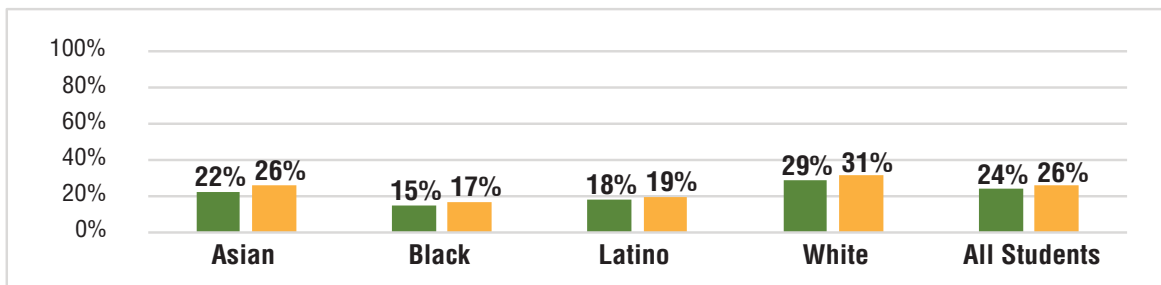
Reading this figure: In 2020-21, 44% of Latino students in districts with high numbers of students from low-income backgrounds completed an advanced course.

Source: Ed Trust analysis of the [Texas Academic Performance Reports \(TAPR\)](#) and [Economically Disadvantaged Status Reports](#) from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) (accessed July 2023).

Graduates With Dual Credit

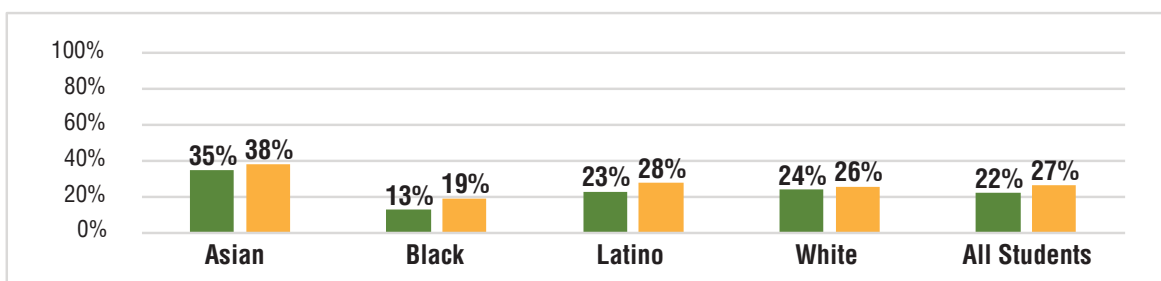
As noted earlier, from 2019 to 2021, the rate of graduates with DC increased in districts with high and low concentrations of students from low-income backgrounds. Overall, in 2018-19, high-poverty districts had slightly lower shares of graduates with DC than low-poverty districts. Growth in the share of Black and Latino graduates with DC in high-poverty districts contributed to the fact that, in 2020-21, high-poverty districts had just slightly *higher* shares of graduates with DC than low-poverty districts. Again, Latino students, in particular, graduate with DC at higher rates in districts with more students from low-income backgrounds.

Graduates With Dual Credit from Districts With Low Percentages of Students from Low-Income Backgrounds, by Race:
SY 2018-19 & 2020-21



● 18-19 ● 20-21

Graduates With Dual Credit from Districts With High Percentages of Students from Low-Income Backgrounds, by Race:
SY 2018-19 & 2020-21



● 18-19 ● 20-21

Reading this figure: In 2020-2021, more Latino students graduated with dual credits in districts with high proportions of students from low-income backgrounds (28%) than to districts with lower populations of the same students (19%).

Source: Ed Trust analysis of the [Texas Academic Performance Reports](#) and [Economically Disadvantaged Status Reports](#) from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) (accessed July 2023).

Policy Recommendations

To increase equitable enrollment in DC classes, enhance the benefits of taking these classes, and help students earn college credit that can save them time and money, Texas should:

- Collect and clearly report essential data and monitor access to and success in advanced classes
 - The Texas reporting system broadly defines advanced course completion and lumps together AP, IB, and DC courses. While the data in this category is disaggregated by race, ethnicity, and student group, to better identify inequities across course types, the state should also share completion and proficiency data that is separated by advanced course type and income status, so it can monitor the impact of HB 8, and FAST specifically, in the future. These data collection and reporting changes should incorporate new College Connect programs to better understand outcomes, especially for students who are exempt from meeting TSI thresholds prior to enrolling in these courses.
 - Additionally, the THECB should share disaggregated enrollment data from colleges that used multiple measures to determine eligibility for DC courses during the pandemic and look at which criteria colleges used to better understand how academic requirements such as TSI criteria may or may not act as barriers to entry for students who are underrepresented in DC courses. If more students of color and students from low-income backgrounds were enrolled in DC courses via multiple measures, and colleges' DC passage rates were unchanged, the state can promote the use of more expansive DC frameworks that include more students.
- Support districts to expand eligibility for and access to advanced courses
 - SB 2124 should help increase access to advanced courses in middle school and put more students on pathways to advanced coursework in the future. To maximize the impact of this policy, districts should make its purpose and intentions clear to all school staff and provide teachers with needed training and support, particularly to ensure that they adopt a growth mindset toward their students. Districts should also emphasize foundational math instruction in elementary grades to ensure that SB 2124 leads to more equitable access. Some districts will also need to focus on staffing to ensure that they can offer advanced math.
 - Schools and districts must clearly communicate with families about the benefits of advanced coursework and what this new policy change means. School districts should also collect and publicly report data, disaggregated by gender, race and income, to ensure all high-achieving students benefit from this policy.
 - Texas should also extend its automatic advanced-course enrollment policy to high schools. EdTrust's 2023 report "[Opportunities Denied: High-Achieving Black and Latino Students Lack Access to Advanced Math](#)" finds that even high-achieving and students from low-income backgrounds who access and succeed in eighth grade Algebra are less likely to take advanced math courses in high school, suggesting that state policy can do more to ensure that advanced math in high school is not a privilege, but a pathway open to all students. The state can look to [North Carolina](#), which passed a policy that automatically places all students in grades three and up who score at the highest level on their end-of-grade math test into an advanced math class.

- Districts should also prioritize strong and proactive advising, so students are aware of their coursework options. Additionally, existing policies and procedures within school districts for identifying students who are eligible to take advanced coursework will need to change as higher-education institutions start to utilize College Connect or other avenues that are more inclusive of students who do not meet college-readiness thresholds through TSI, but can still benefit from DC courses and receive credit toward high school graduation.
- Foster positive school climates and a sense of belonging in advanced classes
 - Creating a sense of [belonging](#) is fundamental to student success in advanced courses. Yet the onus should not be on the students themselves — schools and systems must create environments that ensure that students of color can fully engage with their peers and classroom content. To do so, schools and districts can invest in recruiting and retaining teachers of color, providing guidance through near-peer mentors, utilizing culturally sustaining curricula, sharing information with students and families about advanced coursework opportunities in [middle school](#), and offering targeted supports, such as Bootcamps in the summer or separate study sessions for Emergent Bilingual Learners, to help students build confidence.
 - For more, see EdTrust’s resource on [5 Questions to Ask District and School Leaders About Access to Advanced STEM Coursework in High School](#)
- Ensure that the state clearly signals the value of advanced coursework within its accountability indicators for College, Career, and Military Readiness (CCMR)
 - At the local level, school system leaders should also adopt rigorous CCMR goals and progress measures, like those aligned to the state’s CCMR Outcome Bonus, which provides additional funding to districts that meet certain thresholds. EdTrust’s [district-level policy scan](#) provides criteria, rubrics, and guiding questions for district board members and administrators to use and follow.

Endnotes

1. Urban, rural, and town/suburb categories are determined by NCES classification. For more information, see the [NCES Locale Definitions](#).