

# Increasing Access to Advanced Coursework in Washington

**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 work harder and are more engaged in school, 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, and Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), and other dual credit (DC) courses 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 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 make 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 Washington for advocates, educators, and policymakers who are leading this work at the state level.

## Policy Context

Washington has done exciting work in the past few years to broaden access to advanced coursework opportunities. The 2023 legislative session culminated in the [elimination](#) of College in the High School (CiHS) fees, a [strengthening](#) of the state's High School and Beyond plan, which requires districts to identify all available advanced course sequences for students and families, and more options for students through [Summer Running Start](#), which lets high school students take college courses over the summer, including the summer after their senior year, so they can complete their associate degree.

The state also has been a national leader in academic acceleration policies that automatically enroll students who show readiness — through a test score or other identified criteria — in the next advanced class in a sequence. These policies attempt to address pervasive racial and equity gaps in advanced coursework enrollment caused by [barriers](#) such as a reliance on a teacher or counselor recommendation for placement or the need to opt in to the class, and, so far, studies suggest they are working. When advanced courses become opt-out instead of opt-in, [larger numbers](#) of students of color and students from low-income backgrounds enroll and succeed in advanced courses, researchers found.

After some districts in Washington started adopting their own automatic enrollment policies as early as 2010, the [promising rise](#) in the number of students of color enrolling in and completing advanced classes led the state to pass a [law in 2013](#) incentivizing other districts to adopt acceleration policies. In 2019, Washington lawmakers expanded that policy by passing [a law](#) requiring each district to adopt an acceleration policy by 2021-22, and the state became the first in the nation to adopt an automatic enrollment policy for advanced math, English, and science classes in all high schools.

**Although the state's focus on academic acceleration is commendable, there are still some districts that have yet to adopt an acceleration policy, while others have moved, or are ready to move, beyond policy adoption to implementation of best practices.**

Additionally, while recent policies have extended dual credit access, some barriers remain, such as fees for AP tests and Career and Technical Education (CTE) certifications. Finally, while the state has shown an interest in expanding access to dual credit courses and has high student enrollment in “advanced coursework,” it is unusual that the state includes CTE DC courses under the umbrella of advanced coursework (many states do not). Successful completion of CTE DC classes may not always lead to postsecondary credit and/or credentials. For example, a recent [study](#) by the state's Education Research and Data Center found that only 3% of on-time graduates from the class of 2017 who took CTE DC courses and later enrolled in a community or technical college earned college credits.<sup>1</sup> It's important that the state regularly reviews the data on CTE DC courses and provides guidance to ensure that these courses are rigorous and lead to postsecondary opportunities.

To better understand existing inequities and how the pandemic may have changed those patterns, we analyzed state- and district-level data from the Washington State Report Card on student enrollment and completion in dual credit classes from the 2018-19 and 2021-22 school years.<sup>2</sup>

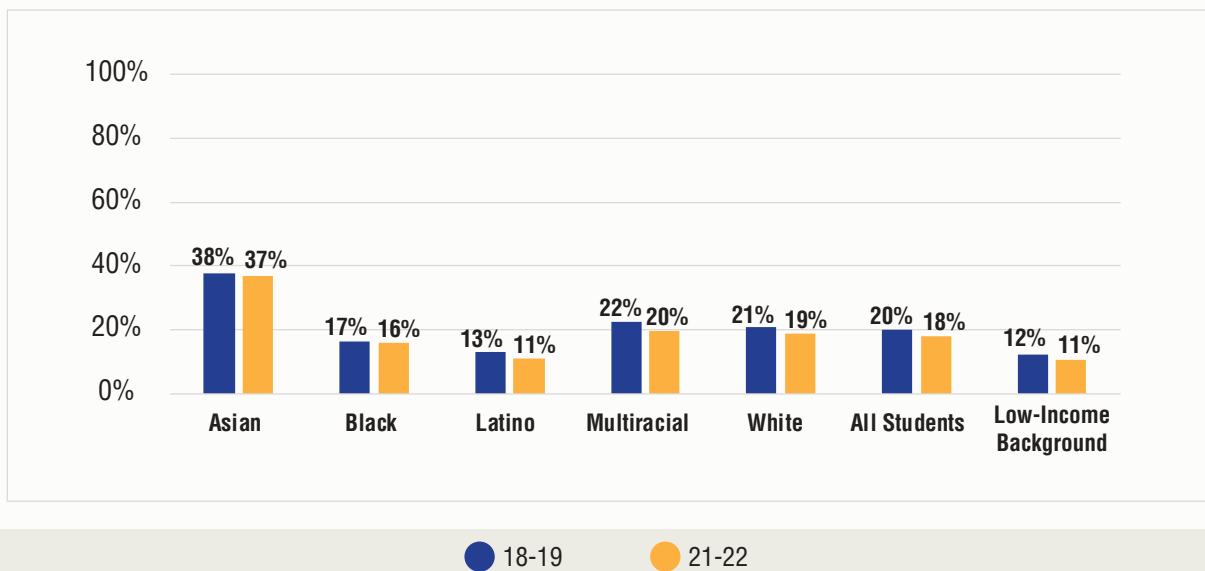
## Enrollment in Dual Credit Courses

### Access Statewide

Washington has a broad definition for dual credit courses that includes AP, IB, Cambridge International, CTE, CiHS, and Running Start. In this analysis, we looked at AP, CiHS, Running Start, and CTE specifically, as well as completion in any one DC course, which casts the widest net.

From 2019 to 2022, AP enrollment declined slightly — by 1-2 percentage points — among all student groups. Existing gaps for Black and Latino students and students from low-income backgrounds did not change, but national trends continue to show that these students are [under-enrolled](#) in advanced courses, due to systemic causes such as resource inequities, educator bias, and racialized tracking.

AP Enrollment, by Race: SY 2018-19 & 2021-22

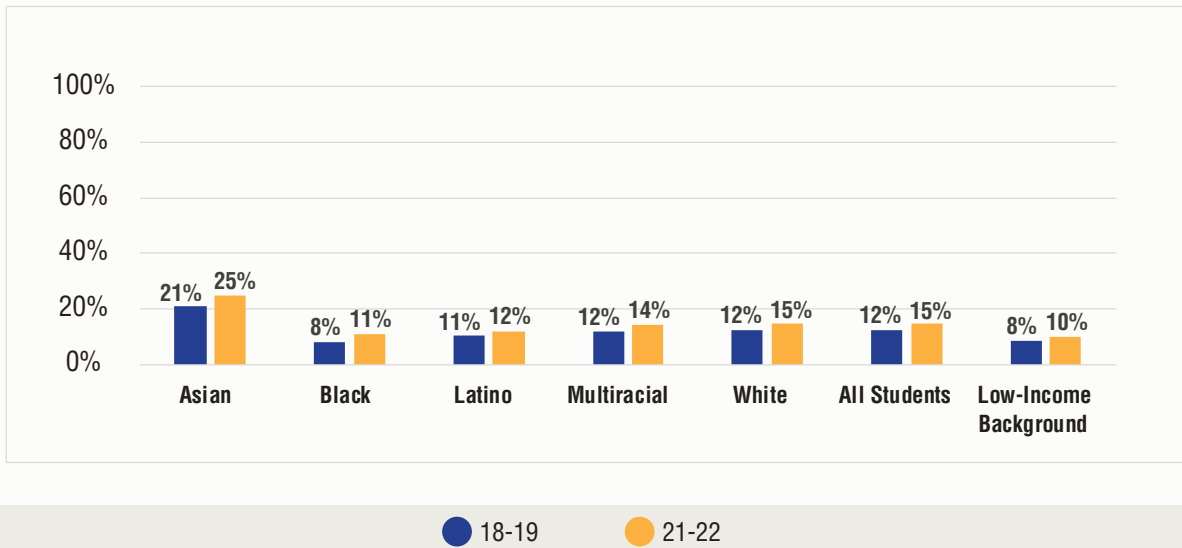


Source: [Washington State Report Card](#) (Accessed April 2023)

**Reading this figure:** In 2021-22, 11% of students from low-income backgrounds were enrolled in AP courses.

In comparison, enrollment in a College in the High School program — which allows high school students to earn college credits for college-level courses taught by high school teachers at their high school — stayed about the same or increased very slightly between 2019 and 2022. (For example, between 2019 and 2022, enrollment rates for Black students rose by 3 percentage points, and by 1 percentage point for Latino students.) Colleges partner with high schools to approve teachers and ensure that the course rigor is comparable to that of the corresponding college course. Starting this fall, students in the state will no longer have to pay tuition fees to receive college credit for CiHS courses, thanks to the passage of recent legislation that requires schools to offer these courses at no cost.

## College in High School Enrollment, by Race: SY 2018-19 & 2021-22

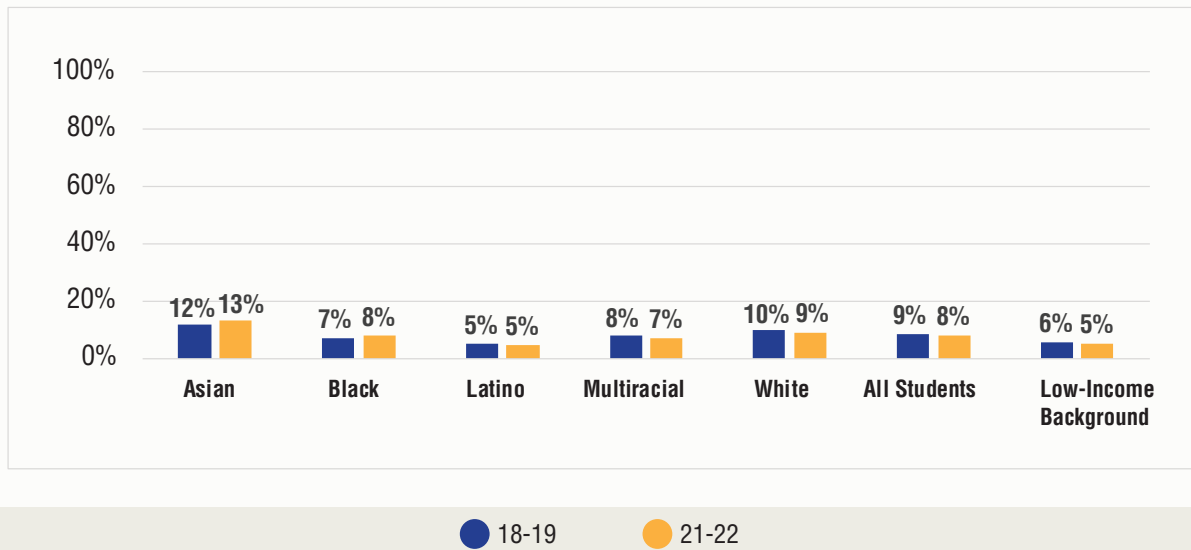


Source: [Washington State Report Card](#) (Accessed April 2023)

**Reading this figure:** In 2021-22, 11% of Black students were enrolled in College in High School.

Running Start lets 11th and 12th graders take college courses at certain higher education institutions in the state and simultaneously earn high school and college/university credit, but the program is small, with 8% of Washington students enrolled in 2022. While course fees are covered, the costs of transportation, books, and student fees are borne by students. During the 2018-19 academic year, students in the 2017 cohort who took Running Start courses were [more likely](#) to earn college credit than students in other DC programs. In our analysis, enrollment in Running Start was relatively unchanged from 2019 to 2022 — for every student group we examined. It remains to be seen whether students who were unable to participate in DC opportunities during the regular school year will enroll in the Summer Running Start program, but this might be something for state advocates to watch.

### Running Start Enrollment, by Race: SY 2018-19 & 2021-22



Source: [Washington State Report Card](#) (Accessed April 2023)

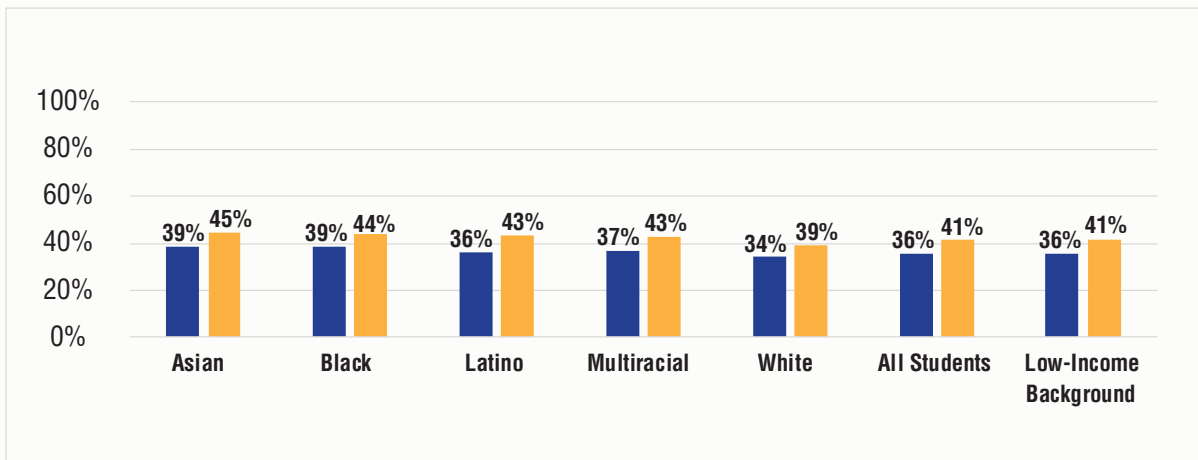
**Reading this figure:** In 2021-22, 5% of Latino students were enrolled in Running Start.

By far the largest share of students is enrolled in CTE courses — previously known as “Tech Prep” — which are taught by certified high school instructors and allow students to earn college credit at a community or technical college. That’s likely because under state [graduation requirements](#), students must take at least one CTE course, and while not all CTE courses are considered CTE DC, the requirement may be driving up overall participation. High schools and colleges enter into articulation agreements that ensure that the courses offered align with college programs, prepare students for careers and/or postsecondary education, and can lead to college credit. These courses fall within a career pathway and can move a student toward completion of a technical certificate or associate degree in that field.

However, there are some questions about the value of CTE DC courses because students don’t always get postsecondary credits for them. Credit acceptance varies by district and college, and some programs automatically transcribe credits, while others require students to submit a formal request for credits, which can only be applied at the community or technical college offering the course. As previously noted, according to Washington’s [Education Research and Data Center](#), only 3% of all students who completed a CTE DC course have community and technical college credit that they are taking to college. And, a recent [study](#) by the state’s Education Research and Data Center found that Black students are most likely to enroll in CTE DC courses but are among the least likely to earn college credit. This suggests that there is an urgent need to ensure that CTE DC courses provide value for students and lead to postsecondary credit, particularly because so many students in the state are participating.

Enrollment increased by roughly 5 percentage points for all students between the 2019 and 2022 school years. In addition, differences in enrollment between student groups — in both years — are relatively small.

### CTE DC Enrollment, by Race: SY 2018-19 & 2021-22



● 18-19 ● 21-22

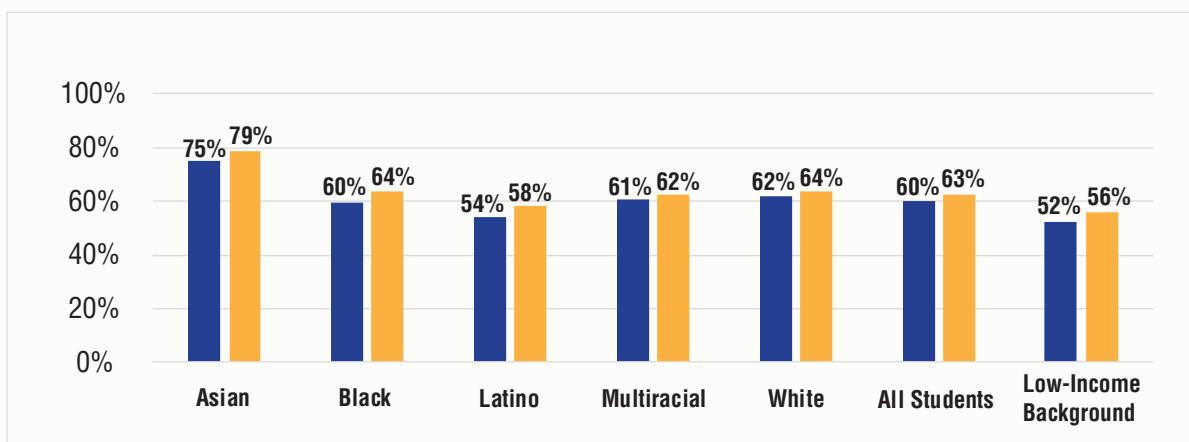
Source: [Washington State Report Card](#) (Accessed April 2023)

**Reading this figure:** In 2021-22, 39% of White students were enrolled in CTE Dual Credit courses.

### Statewide Completion

Overall, advanced coursework completion, or the completion of at least one DC course, rose slightly between the 2019 and 2022 school years. Completion rates for Black and Latino students and students from low-income backgrounds increased by 4 percentage points, which is similar to the 3 percentage point increase for all students.

### Advanced Coursework Completion, by Race: SY 2018-19 & 2021-22



● 18-19 ● 21-22

Source: [Washington State Report Card](#) (Accessed April 2023)

**Reading this figure:** In 2021-22, 79% of Asian students enrolled in advanced coursework completed their course.

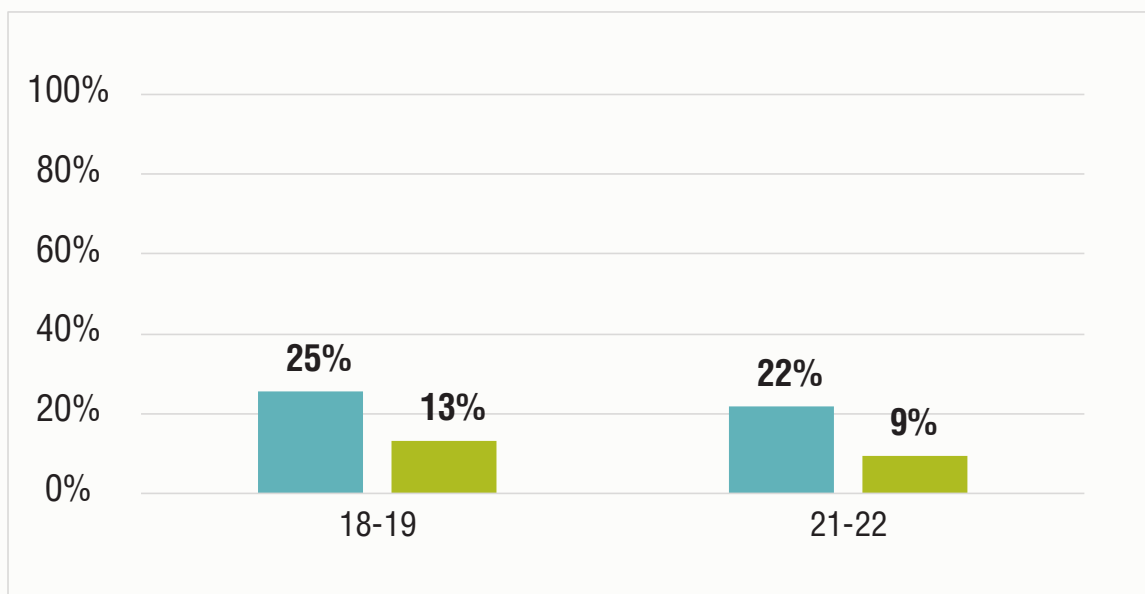
Washington is in an enviable position, since 2 out of 3 public high school students in the state are completing a course that could earn them college credit and give them a leg up on their postsecondary journey. But the state must ensure that Black and Latino students and students from low-income backgrounds have the access and supports they need to participate and succeed in these courses — especially AP courses — at the same rate as their peers, and that all DC opportunities lead to college credit that students can use.

## Access in Rural and Urban Districts

The analysis below looks at advanced course enrollment in rural districts compared to urban districts. Eight percent of students in Washington attend rural schools, primarily in the central and eastern parts of the state. These rural districts often lack the resources to attract and hire enough qualified instructors for DC courses or can only offer courses that align with the expertise of educators who are already on staff. As a result, we see large disparities in AP and CTE DC course enrollment across urban and rural districts. Because there aren't large differences in Running Start and CiHS enrollment across urban and rural districts, we did not include those DC categories in the analysis below. However, we should explore why Running Start and CiHS courses have comparable access, while AP and CTE DC courses have larger disparities in rural areas.

The percentage of students enrolled in AP classes in rural districts was much lower than the percentage of students enrolled in AP classes in urban districts, and both types of districts saw slight declines from 2019 to 2022.

### AP Enrollment, by Locale: SY 2018-19 & 2021-22



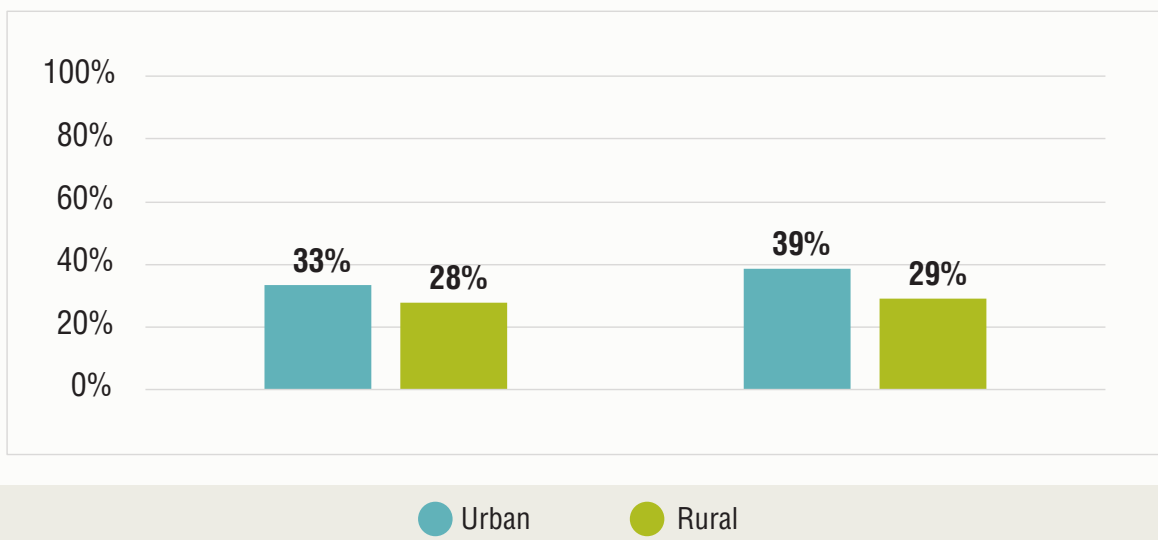
● Urban ● Rural

Source: [Washington State Report Card, NCES Common Core of Data](#) (Accessed April 2023)

**Reading this figure:** In 2021-22, 9% of students in rural districts were enrolled in AP courses.

Urban districts also had a higher proportion of students in CTE DC courses than rural districts in 2018-19; and urban districts experienced more growth in CTE DC enrollment than rural districts during that same period, which helped widen the gap in access between urban and rural districts.

### CTE DC Enrollment, by Locale: SY 2018-19 & 2021-22



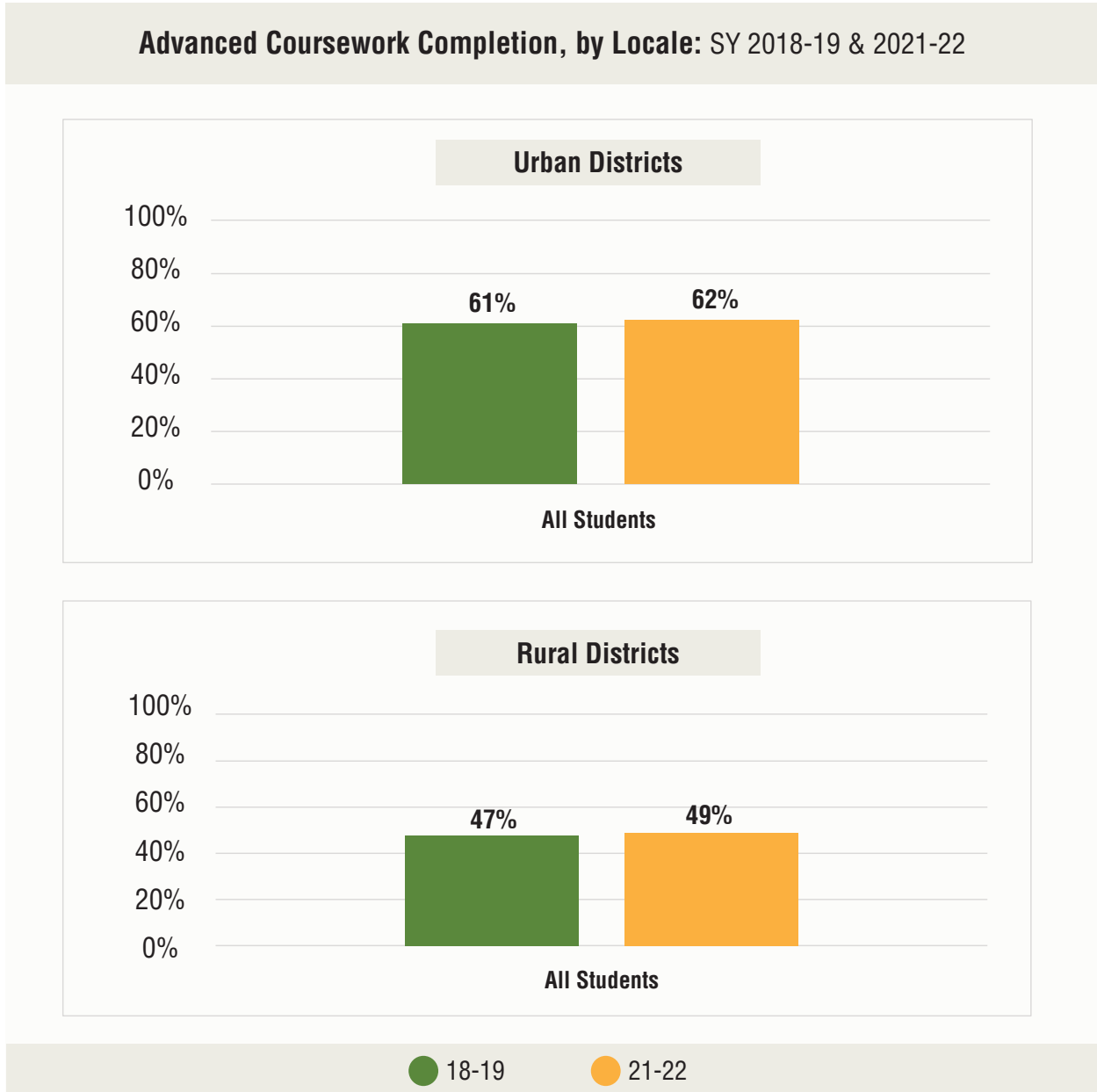
Source: [Washington State Report Card, NCES Common Core of Data](#) (Accessed April 2023)

**Reading this figure:** In 2021-22, 39% of students in urban districts were enrolled in CTE Dual Credit courses.



## Completion in Rural and Urban Districts

More students in urban districts are enrolling in and completing DC courses compared to rural districts, which suggests that more resources may be needed to give rural students equal opportunities to earn postsecondary credit in high school. This pattern held steady from 2019 to 2022 across both urban and rural districts.



Source: [Washington State Report Card, NCES Common Core of Data](#) (Accessed April 2023)

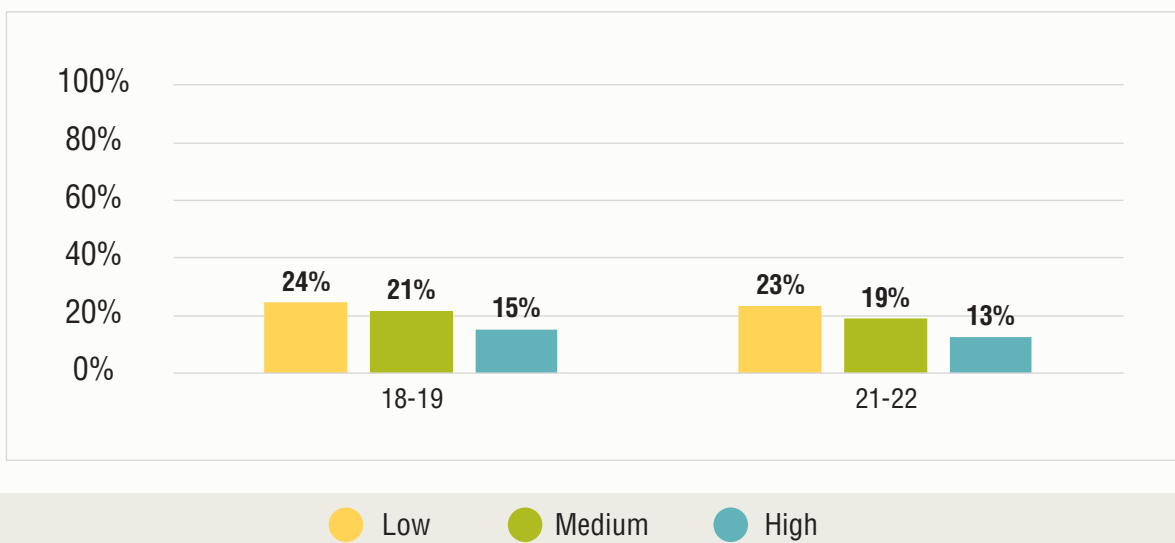
**Reading this figure:** In 2021-22, 49% of students in rural districts completed their advanced coursework.

## Access in Schools With Large Percentages of Black and Latino Students

Previous research shows that Black and Latino students are [under-enrolled](#) in advanced courses. To better understand how pandemic-related disruptions affected how these students access and complete advanced coursework, we also looked at schools with higher and lower percentages of Black and Latino students. In the following analysis, we found some disparities at schools that serve larger numbers of Black and Latino students, as well as an interesting finding about CTE DC noted below.<sup>3</sup>

Aligned with [national data](#), schools with higher percentages of Black and Latino students enroll fewer students in AP. AP enrollment stayed about the same across school types after the pandemic.

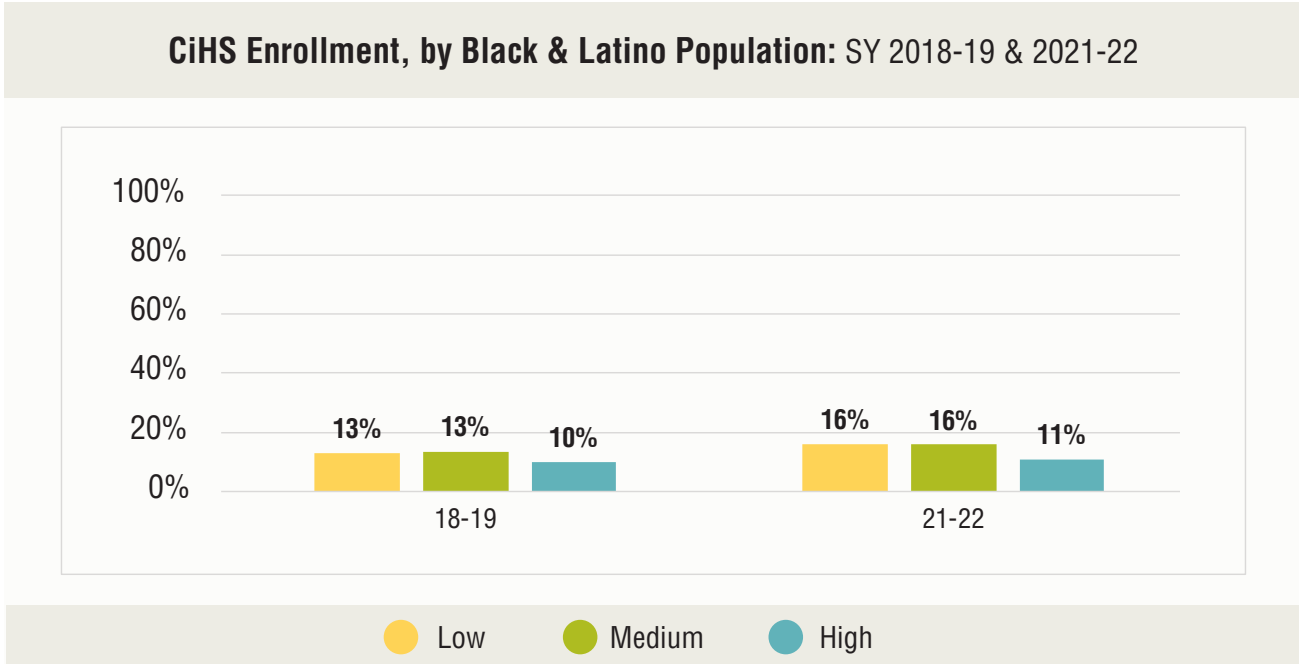
### AP Enrollment, by Black & Latino Population: SY 2018-19 & 2021-22



Source: [Washington State Report Card](#) (Accessed April 2023)

**Reading this figure:** In 2021-22, 23% of students in districts with low levels of Black and Latino students enrolled in AP courses.

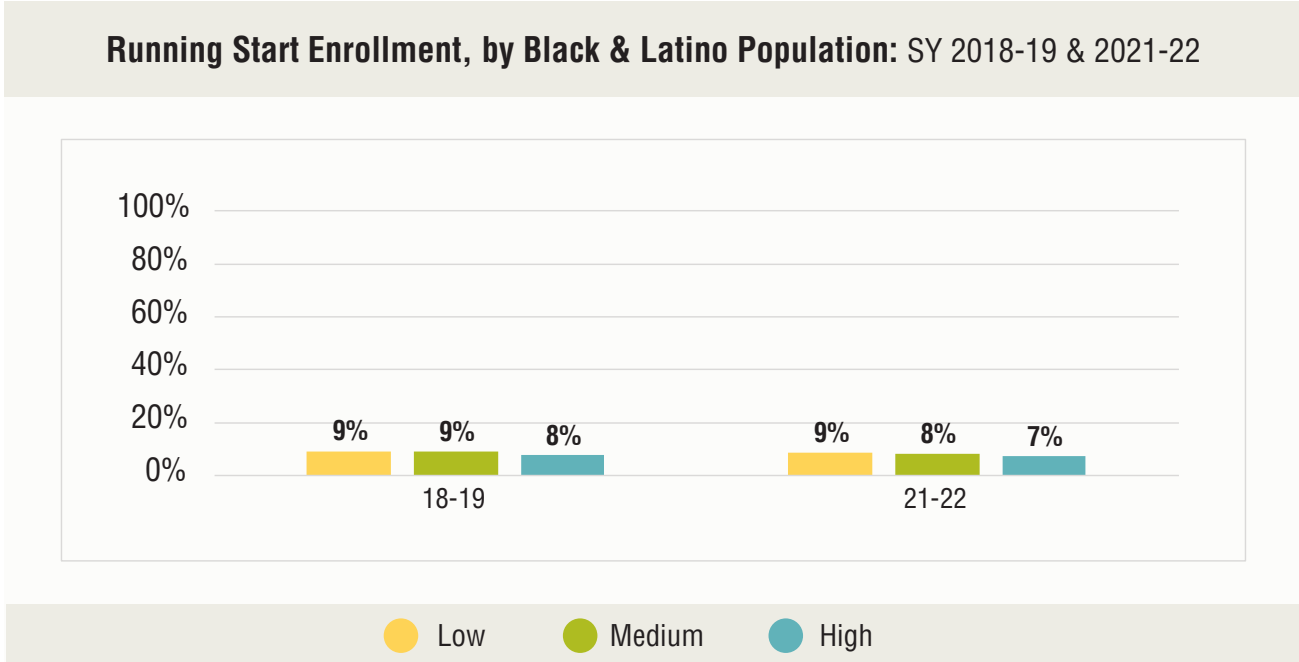
CiHS enrollment rose slightly (by 3 percentage points) in districts with low to medium concentrations of students of color and remained largely unchanged in districts with high concentrations of students of color.



Source: [Washington State Report Card](#) (Accessed April 2023)

**Reading this figure:** In 2021-22, 11% of students in districts with high levels of Black and Latino students enrolled in College in High School.

Enrollment in Running Start was similar across school types and largely held steady during the pandemic. Running Start students are more likely to earn college credit than students in other DC programs; however, a relatively small number of students participate in this program.



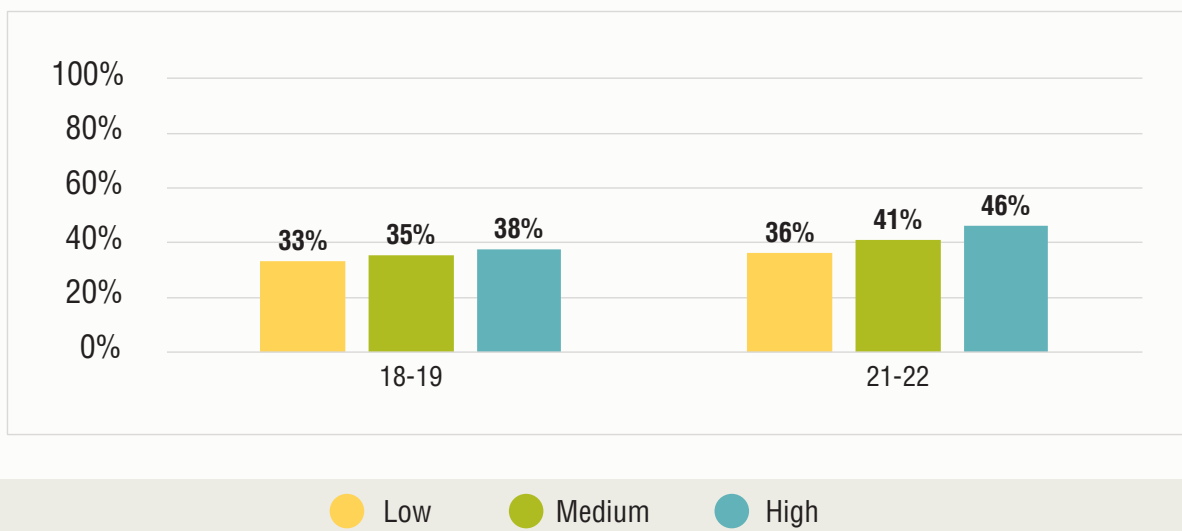
Source: [Washington State Report Card](#) (Accessed April 2023)

**Reading this figure:** In 2021-22, 8% of students in districts with medium levels of Black and Latino students enrolled in Running Start.

CTE DC enrollment rose during the pandemic, especially in schools with high concentrations of Black and Latino students (which experienced a spike of 8 percentage points between 2018-19 and 2021-22 — from 38% to 46%). This rise is notable, particularly considering the [controversial history](#) of CTE (also previously called vocational education), which was often reserved for students of color and other marginalized populations, who were funneled away from college-prep pathways and toward low-wage trades with limited career opportunities.

The CTE of today is very different. High-quality CTE DC courses can connect students to careers that pay a living wage and open up degree pathways for students who, having earned postsecondary credit, may see themselves as college material in a way they did not see themselves before. As we have noted, Washington is one of the few states that sees CTE as a part of the advanced coursework and DC spectrum. To advance racial equity, and because so many Black and Latino students are enrolling in these courses, the state must ensure that CTE DC courses are of high-quality and seamlessly translate into college credit. Additionally, the state must improve how it evaluates the impact of these courses on students' postsecondary pathways and consider whether all students are seeing the same benefits when they earn college credit through different types of DC courses.

### CTE DC Enrollment, by Black & Latino Population: SY 2018-19 & 2021-22



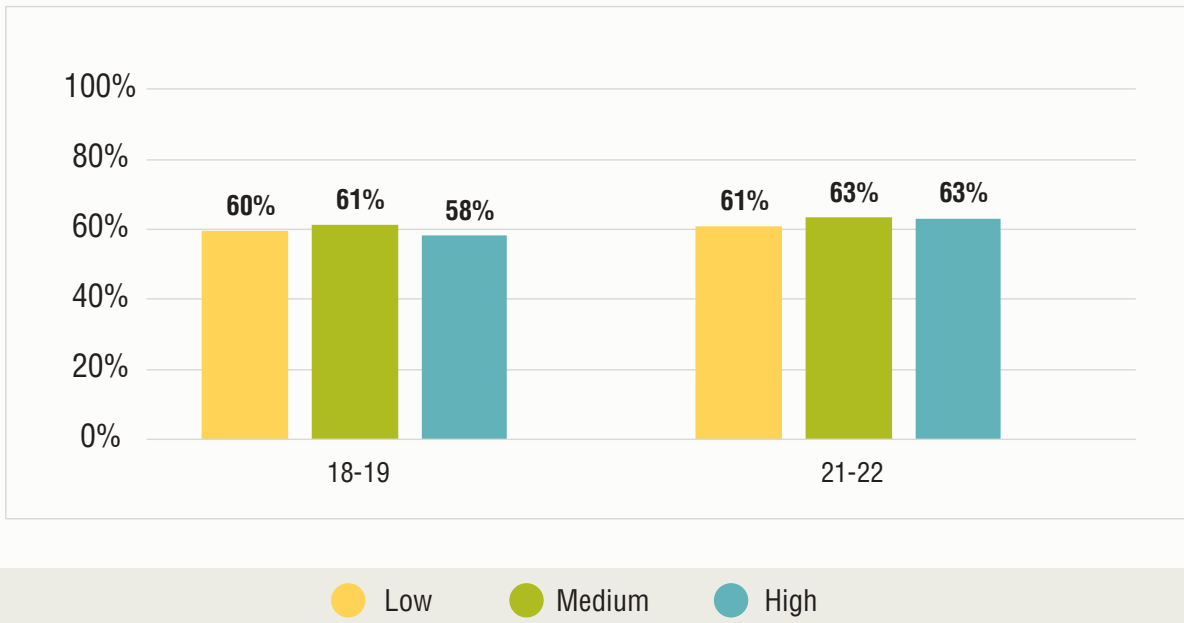
Source: [Washington State Report Card](#) (Accessed April 2023)

**Reading this figure:** In 2021-22, 46% of students in districts with high levels of Black and Latino students enrolled in CTE Dual Credit courses.

## Completion in Schools With Large Percentages of Black and Latino Students

Advanced coursework completion rose the most in schools with the most Black and Latino students. This is likely the result of more students enrolling in CTE Dual Credit courses, since enrollment in other advanced coursework opportunities didn't increase much. Given how many Black and Latino students are enrolling in CTE DC courses, and the question of whether these courses pay off, we must evaluate whether these students are getting the same benefits from CTE DC courses as they would from other types of DC courses.

### Advanced Coursework Completion, by Black & Latino Population: SY 2018-19 & 2021-22



Source: [Washington State Report Card](#) (Accessed April 2023)

**Reading this figure:** In 2021-22, 63% of students in districts with high levels of Black and Latino students completed their advanced coursework.

## --- PROMISING PRACTICE ---

In 2020, an educator at Eisenhower High School in Yakima County, which serves a student body that is largely Latino and from low-income backgrounds, noticed that students lacked equitable access to dual credit opportunities, and asked [Washington STEM](#) — a nonprofit working to expand access to STEM education — to investigate the school’s dual credit options. With a grant from the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), Washington STEM gathered data so it could create a scalable approach to improving equity in dual credit programs.

Their data [found](#) that Eisenhower students who were enrolled in dual credit courses saw postsecondary benefits compared to students not taking any dual credit coursework. It also found that there were significant barriers to dual credit course access, enrollment, and completion, particularly for Latino students. The partnership administered student and staff surveys to better understand student aspirations and experiences, as well as staff knowledge about dual credit options, and noted that there was a disconnect in communication between students and school staff. Students wanted more information about their options and needed stronger relationships with caring adults in their schools.

In the wake of those findings, the partnership created an [Equitable Dual Credit Toolkit](#) to help practitioners consider where there are existing equity gaps in schools and how students navigate the dual credit course experience. In 2021, Eisenhower also implemented changes in response to these findings, including student panels in which upperclassmen share information with ninth and 10th graders, as well as schoolwide professional development for teachers to better equip them to support students’ dual credit journeys.

[Data](#) from the 2021-22 school year is promising: Enrollment in CTE DC courses jumped for all students, from 15% in 2019 to 49% in 2022, with the same percentages for Latino students. Rates for students completing any advanced coursework class also increased from 28% in 2019 to 63% in 2022. This is no surprise: Student surveys showed that they have high aspirations for their futures and want access to rigorous coursework — and dual credit programs can provide that challenge.

Washington STEM is scaling this work to 50 schools across multiple districts in Washington in 2023-24. For more about how a nonprofit-government partnership can support data-informed decision-making in schools, and to review the updated Toolkit in December 2023, see [here](#).

## Policy Recommendations

To increase equitable enrollment in dual credit classes and increase the benefits of taking these classes, including saving students time and money by earning college credit, Washington state leaders and policymakers should:

- Support districts that have not yet adopted an automatic enrollment policy, and strengthen implementation in districts with existing policies
  - Washington’s [2019 law](#) requires each district to adopt an acceleration policy by 2021-22, yet a Stand for Children Washington analysis [found](#) that nearly a quarter of districts still have not adopted one. The state must ensure that these districts have a plan in place to implement their policy as soon as possible and provide resources and guidance to support districts in the process and to enroll more under-identified students in advanced courses.

- For districts that have already adopted an acceleration policy, the state can elevate promising practices and successes from districts that have implemented equitable dual credit policies. It is important to note that merely establishing a policy does not equate with success. If teachers do not have buy-in, students and families aren't aware of the policy and its goals, or students do not feel like they belong in advanced courses, the policy's effect will be diminished. To make the most of an acceleration policy, districts must review and publish disaggregated data on DC enrollment and attainment and make plans to address disparities, provide professional development to teachers to help them understand the policy's intent, and pass bills, such as [HB 1146](#), that require districts to notify high school students and their families about available dual credit programs and any available financial assistance.
- Schools and districts can also invest in recruiting and retaining DC teachers of color, provide guidance through near-peer mentors, utilize culturally sustaining curricula, share information with families and students about advanced coursework opportunities in [middle school](#), and offer targeted supports — such as DC bootcamps in the summer or separate study sessions for English learners — to build students' confidence and foster a sense of [belonging](#) in advanced courses.

For district leaders interested in implementing more on-ramps to rigorous and accelerated coursework, see:

- The Alliance for Resource Equity's guidebook on [Empowering Rigorous Content](#)
- Washington STEM's [dual credit toolkit](#), which includes tools for data analysis, sample student and staff surveys, and sample student empathy interviews in English and Spanish
- Stand for Children Washington's [resource page](#), which includes a guide for districts, model policy language, and implementation resources, including policies and practices that drive equitable enrollment
- Equal Opportunity School's [resources](#) and supports for districts, including the [Student Insight Card](#), to ensure that multidimensional, equity-centered data that includes student voice is used to make decisions about academic opportunity and enrollment

- Eliminate barriers to advanced courses for students from low-income backgrounds, such as course and exam fees
  - While 2023's SB 5048 eliminated CiHS fees, and HB 1316 expanded summer Running Start, there are still fees for students who participate in Running Start, as well as fees for AP, IB tests, and CTE certifications, depending on the school a student attends. The current framework of fee waivers or subsidies for students who are eligible for free and reduced lunch requires them to self-identify to receive a subsidy and leaves out low-income students just above the FRL income threshold. The state should build on the universal access model they created in SB 5048 and work to eliminate fees for all students in other DC programs.
- Increase the rate of students earning transferable college credit for CTE DC courses
  - CTE courses that are labeled as DC must give students opportunities to earn postsecondary credit and/or credentials that they can take to other institutions across the state and ensure that students are getting valuable, rigorous, and career-relevant experiences. This means that CTE DC classes must be high-quality and correspond with an equivalent college course, be aligned to postsecondary and career pathways, and aligned with local or state labor market needs.

- To improve this pathway, the state can cover the transcription cost for students, so students do not need to pay an additional fee to receive their transcript.
  - Additionally, community and technical colleges can partner with K-12 schools to conduct direct outreach with students enrolled in CTE DC courses and provide an aligned advising experience, including more transparent information about how a CTE DC course transfers across the state and fits into a program of study.
  - Implement the program, practice, and policy recommendations outlined by the [CTE Dual Credit Project](#). Their report highlights the urgent need for improvements to data systems, student advising, and K-12/college partnerships to increase the number of CTE DC students who earn college credit.
- Ensure that the state collects and clearly reports essential data, so it can monitor access to advanced classes and student success in them and ensure that they are equitable
    - Currently, Washington’s [school report card dashboard](#) broadly defines “dual credit completion” and lumps together all DC opportunities. While the category disaggregates data by race, ethnicity, and student group, to better identify inequities across course types, the state should also share completion and proficiency data separated by advanced course type.
  - Link student records across all education levels and agencies via a single course and credit earning system used by all DC programs in the state
    - It is essential that students and advocates know that the DC credits they earn are portable and can be applied at higher education institutions. Unfortunately, the state provides limited data on who is earning college credit from CTE DC courses and where those students go after graduation. To address equity gaps, the state must be transparent about who is earning credits and where.
    - One promising example of a state effort to make DC data transparent is Kentucky’s robust [school report card](#), which includes data on CTE and DC participation and completion in multiple program areas and is disaggregated by 17 subpopulations. Additionally, the state’s Kentucky Center for Statistics’ (KYStats) interlinked data system also provides clear, publicly available [information](#) on K-12 CTE completers, including postsecondary metrics like college-going, first-year GPA, and employment rates by local workforce region, although this data is not broken down by student-level or disaggregated by race/ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic status.
    - An interlinked data system would be a large effort, although it would have an important impact on credit earning for students. Even if the state does not prioritize this effort, it can still work toward stronger data transparency.
    - To see how some other states are working to collect high-quality data and improve and interconnect their statewide data systems, see Advance CTE and the College in High School Alliance’s resource on [The State of CTE](#).



## Endnotes:

1. The [report](#) acknowledges data limitations, noting that the state's P20W data warehouse can only identify students who subsequently enrolled in the community or technical college where they earned the credit, suggesting "it is likely that far more than 3% of those who enrolled in a CTE Dual Credit course actually earned college credit." Even so, it is concerning that the state can only identify a miniscule number when thousands of students are taking these courses and should be confident that they can take their credits with them across the state.
2. Unless otherwise noted, all charts are based on analyses of data from [the Washington State Report Card](#) from the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI).
3. The median school in Washington has a Black and Latino population of about 24%, so we divided schools into three categories: Low, or schools with less than 15% Black and Latino students (N=527; 28% of all students), Medium, or schools in which 15% to 35% of students are Black and/or Latino (N= 638; 36% of all students), and High, or schools in which more than 35% of students are Black and/or Latino (N=575; 31% of all students).