



Why Early College: Educators' Motivation to Work on Early College

Perspectives from the UCAN and
RECN Programs

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This brief is based on interviews with and surveys of school administrators, teachers, and counselors from schools in the Urban College Acceleration Network (UCAN¹) and in the Rural Early College Network (RECN²). RECN and UCAN are programs at the Center of Excellence in Leadership of Learning (CELL³) at the University of Indianapolis. The networks, which operated from 2022 to 2024 (UCAN) and 2019 to 2025 (RECN), provided Indiana high schools with early-stage Early College programs with support from CELL and experienced mentor schools to achieve Early College endorsement. Staff from the [Early College Research Center](#),⁴ part of [SERVE](#)⁵ at UNC Greensboro, served as the external evaluators of the programs and conducted the interviews and administered the surveys.



EARLY COLLEGE GLOSSARY

Early College High School⁶ – A high school or a program within a school that is designed to support students with barriers to higher education, allowing them to earn substantial college credit while in high school and inspiring them to pursue postsecondary opportunities.

Core Principles⁷ – A framework with eight domains that guide Early College program implementation in Indiana.

Endorsement⁸ – An endorsed Early College program has been evaluated by CELL and found to be executing the Core Principles at a high level.

Dual Credit⁹ – Courses in which high school students can simultaneously earn both high school and college credit. These courses are taught by credentialed high school teachers or college faculty at high schools, online, or on college campuses.

School Leadership Team (SLT) – An organizing structure used to distribute leadership responsibilities for Early College among five to ten staff members. SLT members include administrators, counselors, dual credit teachers, higher education partner representatives, and district leadership.

Early College programs provide opportunities and experiences for students that they might not otherwise get in high school. However, operating Early College programs often requires extra work beyond the “typical” workload for teachers, counselors, and administrators, particularly during the early phases of launching an Early College program in an existing comprehensive high school. To establish an Early College, school leaders must get their staff to support the program and, in many cases, change their practices or routines and/or take on extra work. Members of a School Leadership Team (SLT) must establish and manage partnerships with one or more higher education partners and recruit and select cohorts of students for the program each year. They need to plan events, such as student trips to visit colleges and family nights, and supports to ensure students are prepared for and successful in college-level coursework. SLT members also need to find time to meet regularly and, if their school is participating in an Early College support program, such as UCAN or RECN, attend program meetings several times a year. School administrators typically take on coordinating their Early College team,

ensuring that they have adequate staff for Early College courses and supports, and communicating with their school community. Counselors require professional development so that they can support and advise Early College students and help them register for dual credit classes. If teachers are the instructors for dual credit classes, they must complete graduate coursework to get credentialed (more on this below). Teachers must also prepare to teach their classes at a college level and in alignment with their higher education partner's standards.

Individuals' motivation to support and engage with educational programs is a necessary ingredient for their buy-in¹⁰ and, ultimately, program success.¹¹ This brief provides a look at the motivating factors for educators who lead or contribute to their school's Early College program.

In interviews, leaders and key staff members from high schools with newly launched Early College programs explained what motivated them to take on the extra duties of standing up an Early College program. They also hypothesized about and provided insight into what motivated the teachers who are not on the SLT, but taught dual credit classes, to take on the extra work. The most common answer for all groups—from participating administrators/counselors and SLT teachers about themselves and regarding non-SLT teachers—was a belief that developing an Early College program is what is best for their school's students. However, teachers cited other motivating factors for signing on to the extra work required for Early College.

What's Best for Students

Research has shown that participating in Early College has a positive impact on the likelihood that students will enroll in college, the number of college credits students earn,¹² and the likelihood that students will earn some kind of college credential.¹³

Among the UCAN and RECN educators, there was broad consensus that the Early College model is valuable for students and that it was a reform that, as one principal said, helped them “improve as a school.” That is, Early College was a way for schools to do more, for more students, by providing them with a strong high school education that would also prepare them to continue their education after high school.

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Educators generally gave one of three different explanations for their belief that offering the opportunity to participate in Early College was what was best for their students; each of these reasons, in turn, corresponds to one or more Early College Core Principle. Some framed their support for Early College in terms of how the program meets the particular needs of their student population, acknowledging the Targeted Student Population Core Principle. Others expressed it in terms of helping students prepare for and transition to college, which comes from implementing the Curriculum & Plan of Study and College-Going Culture Core Principles. Others spoke of it as a way to fulfill their personal mission as educators to help students succeed, which reflects the Supports for Student Success Core Principle. However it was articulated, the educators shared a belief in the value of Early College and that the effort to develop and maintain an Early College program was worthwhile. As one principal said, “[Early College] is a lot of work, but it has to be done because it's for the kids, and it's what we need to do.”

For some educators, the notion that Early College is "what's best for students" was related to the population that Early College is intended to serve. The Targeted Student Population Core Principle directs Early College programs to focus on students in the school who have shown potential to be successful in college but who need additional support to be prepared for and transition to college. Educators noted that many of their students needed the suite of supports, resources, and opportunities provided by Early College in order to value higher education and even think of college as attainable, let alone make future plans that included college.

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Early College's focus on students needing extra college readiness support and on "middle of the pack" students inspired some educators who felt a personal connection to this group of students. One teacher mentioned being drawn to work on the program because they "would've fit into this Early College mold" as a high school student. Teachers recognizing similarities between themselves as high school students and the students they work with was also mentioned by a counselor who said that some of the teachers at their school had been first-generation college students and are motivated to support Early College because "it fills their emotional tank to be able to give back in a way that they were given to."

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In many cases, participants spoke about Early College being in the best interest of students because it prepared them well for their transition to postsecondary education. They noted that it both gave students a strong academic foundation, guided by the Curriculum & Plan of Study Core Principle, and prepared them holistically for education beyond high school by developing their "soft skills" and other aspects of college readiness, guided by the College-Going Culture Core Principle. The latter also directs Early College programs to make the transition to college attainable by developing students' college-going identity and helping them with the practicalities of the application process. A teacher said that "feeling like [students] are as well-prepared as we can make them before they graduate is really rewarding."

For some educators, the belief that Early College was a way to increase postsecondary access and success, particularly for their students who need the extra support Early College provides, tapped into their more general motivation to work in education to make a difference in the lives of students. They said they supported the program because it was a good way to help students succeed, which was personally fulfilling for them. With the Supports for Student Success Core Principle, Early College programs provide not just academic support, but social-emotional and other supports, as needed, to help students be successful in high school and prepare for college. For one counselor, Early College was a way to meet the needs of students who did not have

many educational opportunities or advantages. They explained,

I would say the motivation for this isn't really different than any other motivation that I have, [which is] to do what's best for the kid. Whether it's getting a kid a coat, helping with a scholarship, or helping with Early College, just to know that you are making life better for one of your students... And this program does help with that, with... giving [students] support to earn dual credits. And so, my motivation is just doing what's best for our kids.

A teacher summed up this perspective, saying, "I'm a teacher because I really think that I really can make a difference for students who really need it. ... And I think this program is going to really benefit our students. ... But really, I just think it's good for the kids, and I want to do what's good for the kids whenever I can."

Additional Motivators for Teachers

The belief that Early College was the best way to help students be successful was the main motivation for undertaking the program for administrators and counselors. Teachers shared this motivation; however, many also noted the benefits that come from teaching dual credit classes as a reason for taking on the extra work of Early College. Agreeing to teach dual credit was a significant commitment for many teachers due to the credential requirement (more on this below). Still, the opportunity also came with perks: the opportunity for career development, more desirable teaching assignments, and, for some, financial benefits.

The UCAN and RECN high schools offer dual credit courses within their own buildings, taught by high school teachers. Teachers of dual credit courses need

to be credentialed from an institution of higher education in their respective subjects; credentialing requires a teacher to have either a master's degree in their subject area or a master's degree in another discipline plus 18 graduate credit hours in the content area they teach. For many teachers, signing on to support their school's Early College through teaching dual credit classes meant signing on to take the graduate-level coursework they needed to get credentialed. Although taking graduate classes while teaching full-time adds significantly to a teacher's workload, in recent years, Indiana teachers have been able to get the costs of the credentialing classes covered by state-funded programs.¹⁴ Several teachers shared that they would not have opted to get a master's degree, even if they wanted one, if they had to pay for the classes themselves. One teacher explained that the opportunity to earn their master's degree through STEM Teach Indiana was a big part of their motivation to teach in their Early College, saying that getting credentialed was "going to be a lot of work," but that they also saw it as valuable professional development because "in the end, it should benefit my students in terms of helping them prepare and know what to expect in college."

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In addition, many schools compensate teachers for having a dual credit credential and/or for teaching dual credit classes. So, for many teachers, taking on the extra work to get credentialed was a short-term investment of time and effort for greater compensation in the long run, with the bonus of

getting their master's degree paid for. A teacher explained that although their school's dual credit stipend is modest, "having a little bit of extra money, because it is some extra work, that's motivating as well."

Teachers and administrators also explained that teaching advanced classes, such as dual credit classes, was seen by many teachers as a more desirable assignment. While teaching dual credit may be more work outside of class hours due to the amount of preparation or grading required, it could also be easier while actually in the classroom with students: teachers and administrators said that students in advanced classes in general tended to behave better and be more motivated. One teacher explained, "I don't have to do very much classroom management in a dual credit class because, for the most part, the students are there because they want to be there." Staff and administrators reported that Early College students in particular were more focused and engaged compared to other students. A teacher speculated that their school's Early College program would attract more academically focused students to their school over time, which they believed would make their job "easier and more fun."

For some teachers, teaching dual credit classes was desirable because they enjoyed the opportunity to teach more rigorous classes and more advanced material. A dual credit English teacher said that they taught dual credit classes, even though it was more work, because "I just really love teaching it, and I love all the planning that goes into it; I love the reading, I love teaching writing." An Early College coordinator observed that for teachers not on their school's SLT, being part of their Early College could feel prestigious or like an achievement. They explained, "I think the idea that it kind of sounds like an exclusive club to be in... There's benefits, and they

see what it does for students, and I think it also is exciting for teachers to be able to say, 'Yeah, I'm teaching a college-level class,' too. ... The idea of saying, 'Yeah, I get to teach college-level biology,' or college-level algebra, or college-level anything—I think it's enticing." In addition to the prestige, according to one high school administrator, the challenge of revising their curriculum to teach at the college level was attractive to veteran teachers who might otherwise be tempted to leave teaching for new pursuits. Noting that many teachers want their jobs to evolve throughout their careers, they said that teaching dual credit allowed teachers at their school to become subject matter experts and "take [their] career to another level," which has kept those teachers engaged with their work.

Implications

Implementing Early College in a comprehensive high school, particularly in the initial years of launching a program, requires committed administrators and staff to agree to add responsibilities to their already significant workload. District and school leaders looking to find colleagues who will not only buy into and support the program but be willing to dedicate extra time to developing and implementing the program need to pitch the work in terms that will motivate them. For many educators, appealing to their interest in helping students who need extra support to get to college and framing Early College as an ideal way to help students succeed in both high school and postsecondary education may be enough to motivate them. Leaders can easily lay out the many ways that participating students benefit from the program.

If schools need to develop a corps of dual credit teachers who need to be credentialed, leaders will likely need to use additional inducements to encourage staff to do the coursework to be

credentialed. Incentives that provide a more tangible benefit, such as financial rewards and the opportunity to earn a graduate degree, or the promise of teaching a more desirable class, can be powerful motivators.



For more information about the UCAN and RECN evaluations, please contact Eric Grebing at egrebing@serve.org. To learn more about the Early College Research Center and for more resources about Early College, see EarlyCollegeResearch.uncg.edu.

Endnotes

- ¹ <https://cell.uindy.edu/our-work/early-college-high-school/ucan-project>
- ² <https://cell.uindy.edu/our-work/early-college-high-school/recn-project>
- ³ <https://cell.uindy.edu>
- ⁴ <https://earlycollegeresearch.uncg.edu>
- ⁵ <https://serve.uncg.edu>
- ⁶ <https://cell.uindy.edu/our-work/early-college-high-school>
- ⁷ <https://cell.uindy.edu/our-work/early-college-high-school/#core-principles>
- ⁸ <https://cell.uindy.edu/our-work/early-college-high-school/cell-early-college-endorsement>
- ⁹ <https://www.in.gov/doe/students/dual-credit>
- ¹⁰ Grebing, E. M., Edmunds, J. A., & Arshavsky, N. P. (2023). The relationship between buy-in and implementation: Measuring teacher buy-in to a high school reform effort. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 97(2023), 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2023.102224>
- ¹¹ Dariotis, J. K., Bumbarger, B. K., Duncan, L. G., & Greenberg, M. T. (2008). How do implementation efforts relate to program adherence? Examining the role of organizational, implementer, and program factors. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 36(6), 744-760. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.20255>
- ¹² Edmunds, J. A., Unlu, F., Glennie, E., Bernstein, L., Fesler, L., Furey, J., & Arshavsky, N. (2017). Smoothing the transition to postsecondary education: The impact of the early college model. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, 10(2), 297-325. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19345747.2016.1191574>
- ¹³ Edmunds, J. A., Unlu, F., Furey, J., Glennie, E., & Arshavsky, N. (2020). What happens when you combine high school and college? The impact of the early college model on postsecondary performance and completion. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 42(2), 257-278.
- ¹⁴ See the [STEM Teach Indiana](https://stemteachindiana.org) (<https://stemteachindiana.org>) and [Teach Dual Credit Indiana](https://teachdualcredit.org) (<https://teachdualcredit.org>) programs.

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