

## Accelerated Learning Options: A Promising Strategy for States

Increasingly popular among state policymakers and practitioners alike, accelerated learning options are often viewed as a promising strategy for making high school curricula more rigorous; improving college preparation; and providing cost savings for states, students, and families. Although these options show promise, there is little evidence-based research confirming that they are effective at accomplishing their stated and implied objectives. Further, as more states turn to them as a way to reach economically disadvantaged and minority students, there is even less information to show that accelerated learning is a wise investment for these students.

To better understand the effectiveness and overall policy context of accelerated learning in the U.S., the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) conducted a study of state and institutional policies and practices. Funded by Lumina Foundation for Education, the study examined issues of effectiveness, quality, financing, and availability in an effort to explore whether accelerated learning is a viable strategy for increasing access to and success in postsecondary education among low-income and underrepresented students.

This issue of *Policy Insights* draws on findings from WICHE's report *Accelerated Learning Options: Moving the Needle on Access and Success* to lay out some of the important policy issues that decision makers might consider when adopting new state policy related to accelerated learning or modifying policies already in existence. The publication describes the results of several research components, including an audit of state-level policies, literature review, survey of institutional policies and practices, transcript analysis, student focus groups, and data collection activities that concentrate on the financing of these options.

### The Policy Environment

As of early January 2006, 45 states had policies related to accelerated learning (either in state statute or board rule in the state K-12 or higher education agency); only Alaska, Delaware, New Hampshire, New York, and Rhode Island did not have state-level policy. As shown in Figure 1, 32 states have state-level policy related to AP, 42 have state-level policy related to dual/concurrent enrollment, 12 have state-level policy related to IB, and 13 have state-level policy related to Tech-Prep.

### Advanced Placement

Of the 32 states that have adopted state-level policy related to Advanced Placement (AP), most have legislation, and nearly one-third have board policy. Overall, states approach AP in countless ways with a

variety of goals. Many of the state policies simply define it and describe its function. An example is Arkansas, which describes an AP course as a course of instruction that qualifies for college credit and is approved for high school credit by the state board of education. There are no states that have policy that defines AP and remains silent on other issues; in other words, all states that define AP in some manner have also adopted additional policies that build on their definitions.

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Arkansas' Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate Diploma Program is arguably the most comprehensive state policy related to AP; when this legislation was adopted, the approach was unprecedented in the states. According to state law, all school districts must offer one College Board AP course in each of the four core areas – math, English, science, and social studies – beginning with the 2008-09 school year.

In addition to differences in state policies, *Moving the Needle* documents variations among colleges and universities in how AP credit is awarded to students. A survey of postsecondary institutional policies and practices conducted for the report

showed that institutions do not always provide the same amount or type of college credit for the same score on an AP test. There is also variability between different departments on the same campus. In an effort to overcome some of this ambiguity, a few states have adopted policies to provide consistency and transparency. For example, West Virginia high school students scoring at least a 3 on an AP examination receive credit at any state college or university. Similarly, University of Wisconsin System board policy specifies that scores of 3, 4, or 5 on AP examinations will be accepted for degree credit by its institutions.

Some states have adopted policies that incent schools and districts to succeed. For example, schools and teachers in Texas are rewarded for successful performance on AP tests; schools may receive a one-time \$3,000 equipment grant for providing an AP course and \$100 for each student who scores a 3 or better on an AP test; and teachers may be awarded a one-time award for teaching one of these courses and a share of the teacher bonus pool.

While there is tremendous variation in how state policy treats AP, the financing of this program is relatively consistent across states. Most funding for AP courses comes from the traditional per-pupil allocation of combined state and local school district revenue. Students must take AP exams, however, to earn college credit, and each AP exam costs \$82. Many states receive federal funding to offset these costs for low-

income students, but some states – including Arkansas, Georgia, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin – pay for AP exams as a result of state policy.

### **Dual/Concurrent Enrollment**

Of the 42 states that have state-level policy related to dual/concurrent enrollment, most have statutes, and nearly one in three has adopted board policy. States vary widely in how they regulate dual/concurrent enrollment. Policies adopted by various states specify program eligibility, indicate how credit is awarded, identify who pays for dual/concurrent enrollment programs, require counseling and information sharing, and implement institutional accountability provisions.

An element of state policy common to over one-half of the states is minimum eligibility requirements. The details of the requirements differ across states, but they often include minimums for class standing, grade point average, class rank, and/or score on a standardized test. Additional requirements involve securing a recommendation from a school administrator; completing an application form; and/or meeting specified institutional requirements or course prerequisites.

In general, state policy specifies how dual/concurrent enrollment credit is applied. Most states that speak to this issue offer an opportunity to earn both high school and postsecondary credit. Minnesota requires students to designate the type of credit to be awarded at the time of enrollment. In Colorado, when a high

For purposes of the WICHE study, the term *accelerated learning* is used to describe programs that allow high school students to take college-level courses which may lead to college credit. These include:

- **Advanced Placement (AP):** The College Board's AP Program is a cooperative educational endeavor between secondary schools and colleges and universities that allows high school students to take college-level courses and national examinations developed by the College Board in a high school setting. If a student achieves a minimum score on these examinations, he or she may be awarded college credit, depending on the requirements of the postsecondary institution.
- **Dual/Concurrent Enrollment:** Dual/concurrent enrollment programs allow high school students to enroll in and earn credit for college-level coursework while they are still in high school.
- **International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Program:** The IB Diploma Program is a comprehensive two-year international pre-university course of study available in English, French, and Spanish that leads to examinations and an IB diploma. It generally allows students to fulfill the requirements of their national or state education systems; internationally mobile students are able to transfer from one diploma program school to another.
- **Tech-Prep:** Tech-Prep is a federally funded program that includes a combination of at least two years of secondary education and two years of postsecondary education in a nonduplicative, sequential course of study leading to an associate's or baccalaureate degree, or a postsecondary certificate, in a specific career field. Tech-Prep also includes in-service training for secondary teachers, postsecondary faculty, counselors, and administrators.

Accelerated learning can also include a variety of other programs, including early college high schools, and bridge programs, but *Moving the Needle* focuses specifically on these four options.

Figure 1. Summary of state-level policies related to accelerated learning, 2005

State	Advanced Placement		International Baccalaureate		Dual/Concurrent Enrollment		Tech-Prep	
	Statute	Board Policy	Statute	Board Policy	Statute	Board Policy	Statute	Board Policy
Alabama*						X		
Alaska								
Arizona	X				X			
Arkansas	X		X		X	X	X	
California	X		X		X		X	
Colorado	X		X		X	X		
Connecticut*	X	X			X	X	X	
Delaware								
Florida	X		X		X		X	
Georgia*	X		X		X	X		
Hawaii					X			
Idaho		X			X			
Illinois*	X							X
Indiana*	X				X			
Iowa	X				X			
Kansas					X	X		
Kentucky	X		X		X		X	
Louisiana*	X							
Maine					X			
Maryland					X			
Massachusetts*	X				X			
Michigan					X			
Minnesota*	X	X	X	X	X	X		
Mississippi			X		X			X
Missouri	X							
Montana	X				X			
Nebraska		X				X	X	
Nevada		X			X	X		
New Hampshire								
New Jersey	X				X			
New Mexico	X				X			
New York*								
North Carolina*					X			X
North Dakota					X	X		
Ohio	X				X			
Oklahoma	X	X	X	X	X	X		
Oregon	X	X			X	X		
Pennsylvania*					X			
Rhode Island*								
South Carolina	X				X			X
South Dakota					X			
Tennessee*					X			
Texas*	X	X	X		X	X		X
Utah	X				X	X		
Vermont	X				X			
Virginia	X		X		X			
Washington	X		X		X			X
West Virginia	X	X			X	X		X
Wisconsin*	X	X			X			
Wyoming					X			

\*WICHE provided each state's higher education executive office with a summary of the state's policies. An asterisk denotes that the state did not respond to the request for approval.

school student enrolls in postsecondary courses, the school district and the higher education institution must enter into a cooperative agreement that specifies the high school academic credit to be granted for coursework successfully completed by the student and the requirement that the coursework apply toward a postsecondary degree or certificate.

States also approach the financing of dual/concurrent enrollment in different ways. For instance, the Pennsylvania Department of Education awards grants to school districts and area vocational-technical schools with students participating in concurrent enrollment programs. These grants, which cover tuition, books, fees, and transportation, are designed to offset the cost of postsecondary coursework completed under an approved concurrent enrollment program. In Maine, the state department of education pays 50 percent of the in-state tuition for the student's first three credit hours taken each semester and up to six credit hours per academic year. In North Dakota, the student is responsible for costs related to participating in dual/concurrent enrollment.

Several states have adopted policies that indicate that financial aid is not available to dual/concurrent enrollment students, but in most of these cases, the state assumes the burden of paying for dual enrollment courses. An exception is North Dakota where policy explicitly states that dual credit students are not eligible for federal financial aid and the student and his or her parent or legal guardian are responsible for all costs.

States acknowledge that adopting policy related to accelerated learning means little if the students and their parents are not informed about opportunities to participate. As a result, 12 states have adopted policy that requires information about dual/concurrent enrollment to be shared with all students; a few states require counseling for students who have enrolled or who intend to enroll in dual/concurrent enrollment.

The proliferation of dual/concurrent enrollment programs has raised some questions about whether the programs are meeting their stated objectives and whether they are of the desired quality. Ten states have built institutional accountability mechanisms into their state policies in an attempt to answer these questions.

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Not only does state policy differ in terms of dual/concurrent enrollment, but postsecondary institutional policies and practices vary widely as well. While 83 percent of the institutions surveyed for *Moving the Needle* indicated that they have written policies concerning the acceptance of dual/concurrent enrollment, 85 percent indicated that they consider dual/concurrent enrollment for purposes of admission and/or credit requirements. This slight gap may suggest a lack of transparency in terms of the utility of participating in these types of programs.

## **International Baccalaureate**

Of the four accelerated learning options studied in *Moving the Needle*, the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Program appears in the fewest states' policies. Of the 12 states that have state-level policy, all have legislation, and two have board policy. Policies related to IB are most commonly linked to policies on AP. For example, Arkansas had originally adopted the Advanced Placement Incentive Program; in 2005, state legislators changed the law to what is now known as the Arkansas Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate Diploma Program. Another example is Georgia, where both AP and IB coursework grades are both weighted by the Georgia Student Finance Commission in calculating students' overall grade point averages.

The financing of IB is similar to the financing of AP. Schools or districts primarily support IB programs, and students pay for exams. Federal funds that are available to support AP exams for low-income students may also be used to support the cost of IB exams for eligible students.

Although there are similarities between how AP and IB are treated in terms of state policy and financing, postsecondary institutions appear to distinguish between

the two programs. While 91 percent of both the public and private institutions surveyed consider AP for purposes of admission and/or credit requirements, only 51 percent consider IB. Further, 91 percent of all institutions surveyed indicated that they grant required credit for AP, but only 48 percent grant required credit for IB. These findings suggest that if students participate in the IB Diploma Program with the expectation that they will earn college credit, they must work closely with a college or university to determine what, if any, credit they will actually earn in the end.

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## Tech-Prep

Few states – only 13 – have adopted state policy related to Tech-Prep, and no state has board policy or rule.

Texas appears to have the most comprehensive state law, while in 2005, South Carolina repealed Tech-Prep language and replaced it with legislation intended to reform high school curricula around a career cluster model. This relative lack of state policy activity is most likely due to the nature of the Tech-Prep Program.

The Tech-Prep Demonstration Program resides in the Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) within the U.S. Department of Education. Funds for Tech-Prep flow from the federal government through states to local consortia that carry out the implementation of the Tech-Prep Program, so even in states where there is significant activity around this form of accelerated learning, it is not evident through an inventory of state policy. In FY 2004, OVAE awarded grants to 14

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consortia; the average grant award was approximately \$700,000 per consortia, and the total amount awarded nationally was just under \$5 million. With respect to postsecondary institutional policy, less than half of all institutions have written policies regarding Tech-Prep, and not surprisingly, they are found most often at associate's colleges rather than at research/doctoral or baccalaureate/master's institutions.

## Reaching Underserved Students with Accelerated Learning Options

In most states and postsecondary institutions, accelerated learning options were originally designed as a mechanism to serve the most academically talented students, who needed additional challenges before enrolling in postsecondary education. More recently, however, states and institutions have begun considering how to use these programs to serve economically disadvantaged and minority students and as a vehicle to increase enrollments among these populations.

■ With respect to AP, a few states – Arkansas, Georgia, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin – have adopted policies that focus on test fee reimbursement for low-income students. For example, Texas students who demonstrate financial need are entitled to receive a test fee reimbursement subsidy of up to \$25 for the AP examination.

■ Upon demonstration of financial need, high school students in Indiana who are accepted for admission

to an eligible postsecondary institution may receive financial assistance from that institution for participation in dual/concurrent enrollment.

■ New Jersey state law dictates that the dual/concurrent enrollment program must have procedures to ensure that no student who is academically eligible is excluded from participation in college courses offered on high school campuses because of inability to pay.

■ According to the survey of postsecondary institutions conducted for *Moving the Needle*, half of all institutions provide some form of financial aid for high school students from low-income, disadvantaged backgrounds who enroll in accelerated learning. The most common form, however, offered by nearly one-fourth of the institutions, is through grants from external sources, such as GEAR UP and Project GRAD.

## Relevant State Policy Questions

When state policymakers are considering adopting new state policies or modifying existing state policies, there are several questions worth bearing in mind.

*Does the state policy promote or limit access to accelerated learning options?*

While schools and districts initially saw accelerated learning as a mechanism to reach the most academically prepared students, policy analysts, policy organizations, foundations, and other groups have more recently been pushing for increased access to these options for *all* students, especially those from economically disadvantaged and minority backgrounds. Much of the language in statute and board policy, however, still targets certain students. Examples include Colorado, where students are expected to show a *high degree of maturity and responsibility*; Connecticut, where community colleges are authorized to accept AP high school students who demonstrate *sufficient scholastic ability*; and Georgia, where the University System Board of Regents recognizes the need to provide *academically talented high school students* with opportunities for acceleration of their formal academic programs through dual/concurrent enrollment. While preparation is a legitimate criterion, this focus on certain students may create an unintentional barrier that erodes access to these programs. State decision makers should consider their policy language carefully.

*Are the state policies that regulate accelerated learning options transparent to the student?*

In order to be effective and equitable, state policy must be transparent to the student in terms of how he or she can earn college credit. Although students are likely to learn whether their accelerated learning work has been accepted before they actually enroll, they often have to wait until after enrollment to find out how their credit will be applied. Since postsecondary institutions apply

credit differently, students cannot take full advantage of the potential cost savings because information on credit application cannot be factored into their calculus when choosing a postsecondary institution. This information could be beneficial for students who are selecting between a variety of accelerated learning options.

*How are accelerated learning options funded? Is the financing policy consistent with state goals?*

The inevitable and often core question that emerges during the process of adopting state-level accelerated learning policy is how the program will be financed. States have chosen many different methods of financing these programs. AP and IB are most often funded through local and/or state dollars and sometimes through federal grants. Tech-Prep is a federally funded program, so few states, if any, provide funding to support this pathway. The financing of dual/concurrent enrollment, however, comes in a variety of forms. This is often a major sticking point for policymakers and implementers, so decision makers need to have a clear understanding of state goals with regard to accelerated learning. In addition, the K-12 and higher education sectors would be well advised to come together to discuss options for funding to avoid the turf battles and philosophical wars that can emerge around the funding issue.

*Does the state policy result in high-quality, efficient accelerated learning programs?*

Issues of quality are a consistent theme in policy discussions related to accelerated learning, particularly those focusing on dual/concurrent enrollment. Promoting access to accelerated learning is an admirable and important goal for states, yet decision makers must also be careful to construct policies that ensure high-quality programs that provide a rigorous, college-level curriculum to high school students. While AP and IB programs are externally validated through national examinations, questions surrounding the quality of many dual/concurrent enrollment programs linger. Is the curriculum being taught truly at the college level? Are the teachers who teach the courses qualified? Are these

programs a wise investment for states, districts, schools, and students? These questions are all important and should be considered when constructing sound state policy.

*How is the accelerated learning options policy evaluated for effectiveness?*

While many specific programs have performance data available suggesting that accelerated learning options are an effective strategy for reaching underserved students, there is a limited amount of comprehensive, statewide data that can be analyzed longitudinally to determine the effectiveness of programs. With the exception of Florida, whose K-20 Education Data Warehouse provided data for the transcript analysis in *Moving the Needle*, few states have sufficient data for analysis. Several states now require data collection regarding accelerated learning options, a significant first step. Unless states are willing to invest resources to create databases that can blend K-12 and higher education data, however, policymakers will need to develop other methods of evaluating the effectiveness of accelerated learning programs in their states. Evaluation will provide much-needed information about the performance of students who participate in these programs once they reach college and ultimately will help determine if targeting resources to these programs is a good use of limited state dollars.

Questions about access, quality, and financing have hovered around the discussions related to accelerated learning options in recent years. *Moving the Needle* is a significant step forward in providing many of the answers, yet more research about the long-term effects would enrich the policy discussion. Overall, findings from *Moving the Needle* suggest that accelerated learning options are a promising strategy for states that are working to increase rigor in high school curricula; improve college preparation; and provide cost-saving measures for states, students, and families, – which is good news for the 45 states that have already adopted state-level policies related to accelerated learning.

*To download Accelerated Learning Options: Moving the Needle on Access and Success, please visit:  
[www.wiche.edu/Policy/Accelerated\\_Learning/report/ALO.pdf](http://www.wiche.edu/Policy/Accelerated_Learning/report/ALO.pdf)*

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*The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the view of Lumina Foundation or its employees.*

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