

The Arc of Dual Enrollment: Access, Struggle, and What Makes Success Possible

Introduction

Dual enrollment programs, which allow high school students to take college courses and earn college credit before graduating, have for decades functioned largely as an acceleration tool for students already on a college track. Researchers and practitioners have described these as “programs of privilege” and “random acts of dual enrollment”: available in theory to all students, but in practice accessed primarily by students who were already likely to enroll and succeed in college (Bailey & Karp, 2003; Fink, 2021).

California’s College and Career Access Pathways Act of 2016 (AB288) was designed to shift that paradigm by bringing college coursework to high school campuses and removing prerequisite barriers. The goal in California was to extend dual enrollment to students from low-income and first-generation backgrounds, students for whom dual enrollment would function not as an accelerator but as an on-ramp to college opportunity that might not otherwise exist. As dual enrollment has reached more students, students with more varied

academic backgrounds and fewer navigational resources compared to historically advantaged dual enrollment participants, a legitimate concern has emerged: ***What happens when students struggle in dual enrollment and/or do not succeed in their courses?***

This brief draws on a statewide study of approximately 1.74 million California high school students across four graduation cohorts to examine this issue. The findings do not resolve every tension in dual enrollment policy, and they should not be read as the final word on a complex and evolving program, but they do offer a more complete picture of what happens across the full arc of dual enrollment, from who struggles and why to what happens when students do not pass. Importantly, they point toward what the most consequential investments might be as more states and districts expand access to dual enrollment as a strategy for increasing college enrollment among students who have not had the same opportunities as their peers.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

As dual enrollment expands to reach students for whom it is an on-ramp rather than a fast track, what does the evidence say about who struggles, what that struggle costs, and whether open access is still the right policy?

What This Study Found

There is an academic readiness illusion: Academic achievement predicts success in dual enrollment, but not equally. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds¹ fail at disproportionately higher rates even at the highest levels of preparation, pointing to structural barriers that eligibility criteria cannot measure or fix.

Struggling in dual enrollment is better than never trying: Students who enrolled in dual enrollment and did not pass are still about 6 percentage points more likely to enroll in college than comparable students who never took any advanced coursework, and this tendency holds regardless of socioeconomic background.

Nonetheless, not passing carries a real cost: Students who do not pass a dual enrollment course are less likely to enroll in college than students who pass. This penalty is not unique to dual enrollment, and it is not larger for students from low-income and first-generation backgrounds than for other students.

The bottom line is that the evidence does not support restricting access as a protective strategy: Instead, the evidence suggests that building an intentional support infrastructure may be a more consequential investment.

About This Research

This brief draws on a mixed-methods study funded by the Dual Enrollment Research Fund (DERF). The study examines dual enrollment course outcomes by student subgroup, the consequences of not passing for college enrollment, and the comparative outcomes for students who do not pass dual enrollment versus those who never enroll in advanced coursework at all.

The quantitative analyses use California Department of Education administrative data covering approximately 1.74 million students in cohorts 2015–16 through 2018–19. A companion case study (Terrell et al., 2026b) of Oakland Unified School District’s dual enrollment support model is available separately.

¹ California’s socioeconomically disadvantaged (SED) designation includes students who qualify for free or reduced-price meals or whose parents did not complete high school, capturing both low-income status and first-generation college background. This brief also uses “students from low-income and first-generation backgrounds” as plain-language shorthand for this designation.

What Is Already Known: Dual Enrollment Works

Before examining questions about who struggles and what happens when they do, it is worth grounding the questions in what the research consistently shows about dual enrollment participation. A substantial body of research documents that students who take college courses during high school are more likely to enroll in postsecondary education, persist through their first year, and earn credentials than comparable students who do not take any college courses in high school. This is a pattern that holds across varied institutional contexts and student populations (Fink et al., 2017; Karp et al., 2007; Liu et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2017; Morales et al., 2023; Speroni, 2011).

Critically, these benefits are not uniform. Studies consistently find that the positive effects of dual enrollment on college enrollment and persistence are largest for students from low-income and first-generation backgrounds, suggesting that dual enrollment functions not merely as a fast track for students already on a college trajectory but as an on-ramp to college for students who might not otherwise make that transition (Estacion et al., 2011; Kurlaender et al., 2021; Liu & Xu, 2019; Miller et al., 2017; Morales et al., 2023; Rivera et al., 2019; Shivji & Wilson, 2019). Our own analysis from this study confirms this pattern. We find that dual enrollment participation is associated with an approximately 8.5 percentage point increase in the probability of enrolling in college compared to students who do not participate in dual enrollment. For students from low-income and first-generation backgrounds, the estimated gain is approximately 9.1 percentage points, compared to 7.4 percentage points for their peers.

Dual enrollment's benefits are largest for the students who need them most. That is the promise at stake in how dual enrollment programs are designed and how students are supported in these programs.

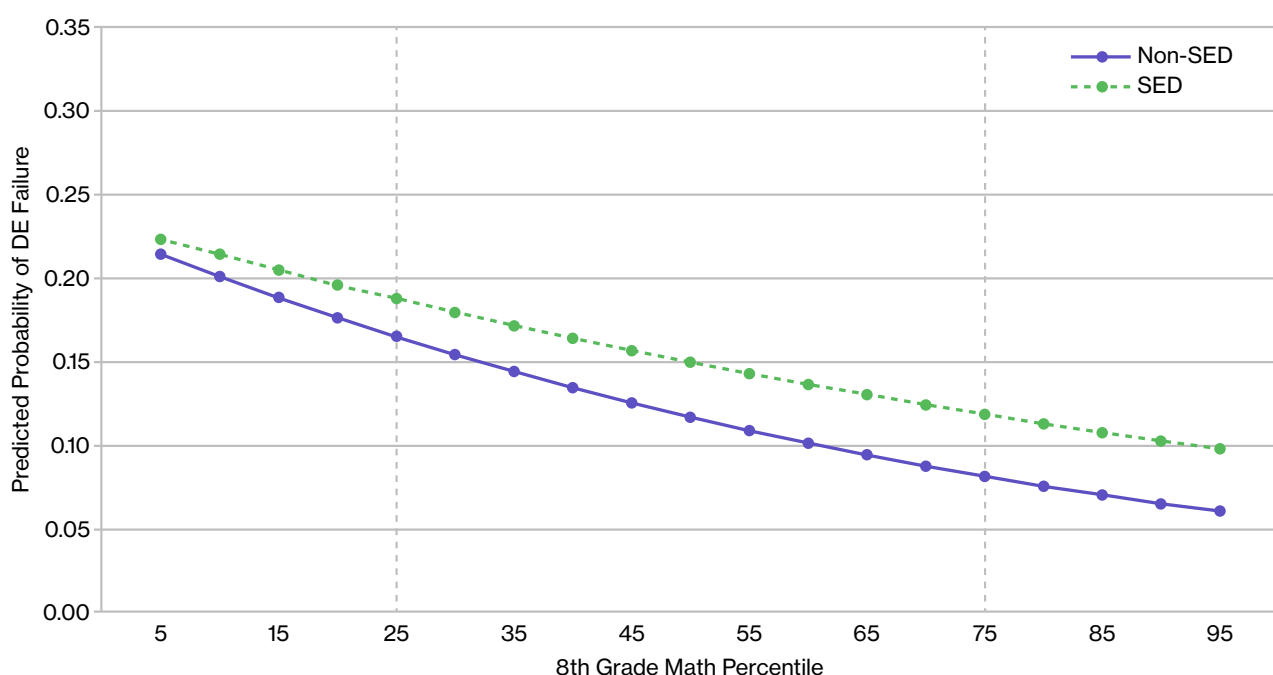
Finding 1: There Is an Academic Readiness Illusion

In many states and districts, access to dual enrollment is conditional. Before they can enroll, students are typically required to meet some measure of academic readiness, such as a minimum grade point average (GPA), a qualifying score on a placement test, a teacher or counselor recommendation, or some combination. This approach is intuitive and widespread across the nation. If college-level coursework is demanding, directing it toward students who appear most ready for it seems reasonable. The central assumption is that academic readiness, as measured by prior academic achievement, is a reliable predictor of who will succeed.

Our study's data complicate this assumption in a fundamental way. For students who are not from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, higher academic achievement is strongly associated with lower rates of dual enrollment course failure, and the relationship is steep. As achievement rises, the proportion of students who do not pass falls substantially. That is the readiness logic working as expected.

However, for students from low-income and first-generation backgrounds, the same general pattern holds, but the slope is shallower. Higher achievement reduces the rate at which these students fail, but not at the same pace as their peers. The result is that the gap between the two groups does not close as achievement increases. Instead, it widens (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Students From Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Backgrounds Have Higher Rates of Dual Enrollment Failure Than Other Students With the Same Academic Achievement



Note. Authors' analysis of California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS) data.

At the 90th percentile of math achievement—that is, among the most academically prepared students in California—students who are *not* from low-income or first-generation backgrounds had a failure rate of about 6.5 percent. However, students from low-income and first-generation backgrounds at the same achievement level had a failure rate of 10.2 percent, a rate 58 percent higher.

We call this the “readiness illusion”: Academic achievement looks like a reliable signal for who will succeed, but for students from low-income and first-generation backgrounds, it is an incomplete one. A highly prepared student from one of these backgrounds still faces a higher possibility of negative outcomes than a comparably prepared peer does. This means something other than individual academic readiness is shaping those outcomes, and raising the readiness bar does not adequately address the issue.

Importantly, this pattern is not unique to dual enrollment. The same divergence has been observed in terms of Advanced Placement (AP) coursework (Morales et al., 2023). The readiness illusion appears to be a feature of how students from low-income and first-generation backgrounds navigate advanced academic environments without the navigational and support resources their peers draw upon as a matter of course.

What Might Be Driving the Gap?

This study documents the readiness illusion but does not identify its causes. Prior research points to several candidate explanations: Students from low-income and first-generation backgrounds are less likely to have access to family or community networks with firsthand college experience, more likely to face competing demands outside the classroom, and less likely to receive proactive support before small difficulties become large ones.

These are not deficits in individual students. They are features of the environments in which students are learning, and they point toward providing support structures, not just considering eligibility criteria, as the appropriate focus for intervention.

Finding 2: Struggling in Dual Enrollment Is Better Than Never Trying

Finding 1 establishes that students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds have a higher likelihood of lower success rates in dual enrollment even when they are academically prepared. A separate but equally important consideration is what the impacts are of not passing and for whom.

Dual enrollment expansion is often designed to reach the student who might be called *marginal*: the student who would not otherwise have access to or participate in any advanced coursework, not the student already headed to college by way of taking AP courses or an International Baccalaureate (IB) program. For the marginal student, the relevant comparison is not between passing and not passing; it is between enrolling in dual enrollment and never having enrolled in advanced coursework at all. The relevant question: ***Does attempting dual enrollment, even unsuccessfully, increase the probability of college enrollment relative to having no exposure to advanced coursework?***

To examine this question, our study matched students who did not take AP or IB *and* did take but did not pass a dual enrollment course against observationally similar students who never enrolled in any advanced coursework (AP, IB, or dual enrollment). These are the students for whom dual enrollment was the only available or accessible pathway into college-level work. This approach allows a focus on marginal students and excludes students who, given their extensive rigorous course-taking, are likely to attend college whether or not they take dual enrollment. The study also controlled for prior academic preparation, demographics, and district context.



+6.4 percentage points higher college enrollment probability for students who enrolled in dual enrollment and did not pass, compared to similar students who never enrolled in any advanced coursework. This holds equally for students from low-income and first-generation backgrounds and their peers.

Students who enrolled in dual enrollment and did not pass are still about 6 percentage points more likely to enroll in college than comparable students who never enrolled in any advanced coursework.

What might explain this? One possibility is that students who engage with college-level coursework, even when they do not pass, are exposed to college environments, expectations, and systems. They interact with instructors teaching at the college level and they accumulate firsthand knowledge of what college demands. Expectations signal that they belong in and should be participating in college-level work. This suggests that just trying a dual enrollment course leaves students better positioned than not engaging in college-level work at all.

**The arc of dual enrollment moves students forward even at its most difficult point.
The floor of the dual enrollment experience, even for students who do not pass, is
higher than the ceiling of never having tried.**

This finding does not suggest it is acceptable to not pass or that a reduction of the failure rate is unimportant. Passing dual enrollment is associated with substantially larger college enrollment gains, and the consequences of not passing are real, but restricting access to dual enrollment should *not* be the neutral default. For students who would be excluded by common readiness criteria such as standardized test scores, the question is not whether they would have passed or not passed but whether they had the chance to engage with college-level expectations and dual enrollment coursework at all.

Finding 3: Nonetheless, Not Passing Carries a Real Cost

The previous finding establishes that even an unsuccessful dual enrollment experience can move students forward, but not passing a dual enrollment course still carries a cost to students who want to enroll in higher education. This issue has policy and practice consequences regarding how to ensure students can access dual enrollment and have the appropriate supports to succeed.

To further examine this issue, our study also compared students who enrolled in dual enrollment and did not pass at least one course against students who enrolled and passed, using statistical matching to account for the fact that students who do not pass differ from students who pass in ways that matter for college-going. Matching these groups was particularly difficult because students who fail are *fundamentally different* on the whole from those who do not. Statistical matching can help balance this but cannot fully overcome the selection and omitted variable bias in this case. Nonetheless, our findings show that failing dual enrollment is associated with a meaningful reduction in the probability of enrolling in college.



11–12 percentage point reduction in college enrollment probability for students who do not pass dual enrollment, compared to students who pass, after controlling for prior academic preparation and demographics

This is a real cost to failing dual enrollment courses, but understanding what produces this result matters as much as the number itself. Students from low-income and first-generation backgrounds may fail at higher rates not necessarily because they are less capable but perhaps because they are navigating circumstances that academic preparation cannot fully offset. They are dealing with competing personal demands outside the classroom, limited access to networks with college experience, and insufficient support infrastructure once they are enrolled. These are conditions they carry into dual enrollment, into AP, and into every other advanced academic environment. The failure rate thus might not be a product of dual enrollment but more a product of what surrounds these students while they are taking dual enrollment courses.

TWO ADDITIONAL PIECES OF CONTEXT

- First, the enrollment penalty for not passing is not unique to dual enrollment. Students who attempt AP and do not pass face comparable consequences, suggesting this is a feature of advanced coursework broadly, not a reason to avoid dual enrollment specifically (Terrell et al., 2026a).
- Second, the penalty is consistent in magnitude across student groups—the difference between students from low-income and first-generation backgrounds and their peers is not statistically significant (authors' analyses of California Department of Education CALPADS administrative data, cohorts 2015–16 through 2018–19). What differs is where that penalty lands them. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds enter dual enrollment with a college-going baseline already lower than their peers—around 55 percent, compared to 73 percent—so the same penalty leaves them in a harder place. That gap was not created by dual enrollment, and restricting access to dual enrollment will not close it.

Taken together, this study's three findings point toward a consistent and important conclusion. The students most likely to struggle in dual enrollment are not students who lack academic ability. The readiness illusion documents this directly: Even at the highest levels of achievement, these students fail at disproportionate rates. Since that gap is not produced by dual enrollment, it is more likely to reflect the conditions these students bring with them into dual enrollment.

The failure penalty is real, but it is not a dual enrollment-specific phenomenon. Students who attempt college-level work and do not succeed face enrollment consequences across course types (Hemelt & Swiderski, 2022; Ryu et al., 2024). What makes the dual enrollment context distinctive is not the penalty itself but the population it reaches. Dual enrollment, by design, serves students who would not otherwise access advanced coursework. For those students, the relevant policy question is whether failing dual enrollment is worse than not attempting dual enrollment at all. The evidence from this study says it is not worse. Students who enrolled in dual enrollment and did not pass still enrolled in college at higher rates than observationally similar students who never had the opportunity to try dual enrollment.

The challenge is not that dual enrollment is failing students from low-income and first-generation backgrounds. It is that too many of them are navigating it without the support structures that would make a different outcome possible.

This means that the structural disadvantages driving disproportionate failure rates among students from low-income and first-generation backgrounds are not an argument for restricting access. They are an argument for addressing the conditions that might produce those rates in the first place. Eligibility criteria based on academic readiness cannot do that. They can only determine who faces those conditions

inside a dual enrollment classroom versus who faces those conditions everywhere else. The question for policy and practice is not whether to extend access but what to put in place so that access produces the most promising outcomes.

What Intentional Support Looks Like

This study's findings point consistently toward the same intervention: not who gets access to dual enrollment but what is deliberately put in place to support students once they are enrolled. Research on high-performing dual enrollment programs identifies the deliberate design of student supports as a defining feature of programs that achieve both broad access and strong outcomes. The Dual Enrollment Equity Pathway (DEEP) framework, developed by the Community College Research Center, identifies four practice areas that distinguish equity-oriented dual enrollment programs from conventional ones: outreach to underserved students; alignment of dual enrollment coursework to postsecondary pathways; advising and exploration; and, most relevant here, high-quality instruction and academic support that responds quickly when students are struggling (Fink et al., 2023). The DEEP framework shifts the focus from who is eligible to what supports are in place, a reorientation consistent with this study's findings.

Some districts, such as Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) in California, have built a culture of open-access dual enrollment that enrolls students across a wide range of academic backgrounds, including many students from low-income and first-generation backgrounds who would not qualify under typical readiness frameworks. The centerpiece of OUSD's investment in support is the Point Person model: There is a designated K–12 staff member in each dual enrollment classroom whose explicit role is to stay in proactive contact with dual enrollment students throughout the semester, track progress in coordination with both high school and college instructors, and reach out before small difficulties become insurmountable ones. This support is paired with academic support integrated into the school day, navigation assistance to help students understand college systems and expectations, and professional development for instructors and staff from district-level dual enrollment coordinators.

OUSD has achieved an average pass rate of 83 percent across the program, with recent semesters reaching 90 to 91 percent. High pass rates and open access are not in tension. They instead require investment in the support needed to address barriers that readiness criteria cannot measure and eligibility thresholds cannot remove.

A full account of the OUSD model is available in the companion case study (Terrell et al., 2026b).

Key Features of the OUSD Model

- Designated Point Person for each dual enrollment classroom, with proactive student outreach and support as an explicit role
- Real-time progress monitoring in coordination with both high school and college instructors
- Academic tutoring and study support integrated into the school day
- Student navigation support covering college systems, expectations, and norms
- Professional development

Conclusion and Implications

California's dual enrollment expansion was built on a premise—that college-level coursework, made accessible to students from low-income and first-generation backgrounds, could function as a genuine on-ramp to college rather than a program of privilege for students already headed there. The research in this brief neither confirms nor refutes that premise wholesale. It maps the arc more honestly.

Dual enrollment moves students forward, and even students who do not pass are better positioned for college than comparable students who never enrolled in advanced coursework. At the same time, the forward arc is not the same for all students. Students from low-income and first-generation backgrounds face a higher rate of not passing dual enrollment courses even when they are academically well prepared. This is the readiness illusion, and it reveals the limits of achievement-based eligibility criteria. When these students do not pass, the same penalty that applies across advanced coursework lands them in a harder place. These are real challenges that deserve honest acknowledgment.

What the data do not support is the conclusion that restricting access is the appropriate response to these challenges. The readiness illusion means that tightening eligibility thresholds will exclude capable students while leaving underlying barriers intact.

The enrollment advantage of dual enrollment is real. The question is not whether to open the door for more students; it is what to put in place once students walk through the door to make sure they are supported.

The implications of this research therefore depend in part on what a district or state has decided dual enrollment is for and what their goals are for students who enroll in dual enrollment courses. Where dual enrollment functions primarily as an acceleration tool for students already on a college track, the findings here may feel like edge cases. Where dual enrollment is designed as an on-ramp, a deliberate

strategy for extending college access to students from low-income and first-generation backgrounds who would not otherwise have such access, these findings are central.

For Districts and School Leaders

The first question this research raises for districts and school leaders is whether readiness criteria are functioning as intended. The readiness illusion means eligibility thresholds are not always protecting the students they are meant to protect. They are screening out students who might be able to succeed with adequate support while leaving the underlying barriers to their success intact. A more productive investment might begin with auditing dual enrollment pass rates by student subgroup and asking honestly whether observed patterns reflect *preparation gaps* or *support gaps*. Where support gaps are driving outcomes, the response may be to provide expanded and intentional supports for students who enroll in dual enrollment, not to tighten eligibility requirements. Research on high-performing dual enrollment programs is consistent on this point: Scaffolding coursework, responding quickly when students are struggling, and providing structured academic support—rather than imposing enrollment screens—are the practices that improve outcomes (Fink et al., 2023). Support infrastructure should be treated as a core program cost, not an optional enhancement added after enrollment decisions are made.

For State Policymakers

For state policymakers, the parallel question is whether dual enrollment access is being funded with the necessary support infrastructure to produce equitable outcomes. This study shows that failure carries a real cost to college enrollment and that the students most exposed to that cost are those whom dual enrollment expansion is designed to serve. Accountability frameworks that track only the enrollment rates miss part of the story. Frameworks that also look at pass rates and disaggregate by student subgroup and then hold programs accountable for the resulting patterns can create the right incentives. Also, investment in professional development infrastructure that prepares faculty and staff for college-concurrent environments is a documented precondition for program quality (Fink et al., 2023).

For Researchers

For researchers, this study maps the diagnostic landscape. It identifies where in the dual enrollment supply line inequity is concentrated—which is in the probability of failure rather than in its consequences—and the implications of that concentration for policy. The critical next step is to conduct causal research on the effects of specific support interventions, particularly for students from low-income and first-generation backgrounds, to move from diagnosis to prescription. This study's outcome focus is college enrollment; longitudinal work tracking students from dual enrollment through credential attainment would deepen the field's understanding of how the enrollment advantage documented here translates, or fails to translate, into lasting postsecondary success.

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