Washington Dual Credit as Democratic Education Infrastructure

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Dual credit programs enable high school students to earn college credit before graduation. Washington's dual credit participation is among the highest in the nation, with 80%–100% enrollment rates reported across numerous districts (ERDC, 2025). Washington therefore offers an instructive case for political scientists examining how states redistribute public funding, curriculum authority, and academic risk across educational sectors.

Washington's course-based system has three models. Running Start is college-based: students take courses at community and technical colleges, earning both high school and transferable college credit. College in the High School (CiHS) delivers college-approved courses in K–12 classrooms, with faculty credentialing requirements set by the college partner. CTE Dual Credit links technical and workforce courses to community and technical college pathways.

Recent data show substantial growth. Fall 2024 Running Start enrollment reached 34,570 — a 12% increase from fall 2023 and 8% above the fall 2022 peak (OSPI, 2026). The 2023 Legislature drove a parallel CiHS expansion: after 2SSB 5048 removed tuition fees, the 2024 cohort showed a 15-percentage-point increase in students opting into postsecondary credit — the largest single-cohort increase across ten years of data (ERDC, 2025). ERDC longitudinal data indicate dual credit participants earn postsecondary credentials within six years at nearly three times the rate of nonparticipants, 43% compared with 15% (ERDC, 2024).

Yet these gains are unevenly distributed. While all student groups increased CiHS enrollment after fee removal, the gap between low-income and higher-income students grew from 8.8 to 9.7 percentage points, indicating cost removal alone does not close participation gaps (ERDC, 2025). Running Start's reimbursement model deepens the strain: colleges receive less than full tuition support, leaving capacity shortfalls in advising and student services. In 2023, 2SHB 1316 expanded the funded FTE limit from 1.20 to 1.40, enabling summer enrollment. ESSB 6260 (2026) then reduced it to 1.30 for 2026–27 — a $7 million biennial cut — while the concurrent 2025 elimination of the after-exit summer proviso, which had allowed seniors near associate degree completion to continue enrolling, removed a critical graduation pathway for students who depend on continuous funded enrollment to complete on time (Washington State Legislature, 2026). Guided Pathways — which map dual credits to completion sequences rather than disconnected accumulation — offer a partial structural response (SBCTC, 2026).

Washington's dual credit system demonstrates that well-structured early college access produces measurable gains: record enrollment, expanded CiHS participation, and credential completion rates nearly three times those of nonparticipants. Guided Pathways, developed over eight years across Washington's community and technical colleges, has strengthened this infrastructure by aligning dual credits with completion-oriented sequences regardless of funding fluctuations. The pressing challenge is institutional, not programmatic. Reduced FTE reimbursement, compounded by structural underfunding, constrains college budgets and limits capacity to hire the advisors, student services staff, and faculty on whom student success depends. For political scientists, Washington illustrates a recurring governance problem: how to sustain the institutional conditions that make access meaningful when funding structures lag behind demonstrated program value.

References

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