

A note from ...

Shane Pruitt, Ed.D., Senior Consultant, Enrollment & Retention

Building Early Pipelines: The 4 Ps Framework for Engaging and Enrolling Students Still Completing High School

As U.S. colleges confront shrinking secondary school graduate populations and mounting public skepticism about the value of higher education, dual enrollment (DE) and Early College High School (ECHS) programs are rapidly becoming essential tools in college access and recruitment strategies. According to the Community College Research Center, nearly [2.5 million high school students](#) participated in dual enrollment programs during the 2022–23 academic year, a figure projected to grow further based on institutional uptake and early indicators of participation increases.

These programs offer high school students the opportunity to complete college-level coursework -- and earn transcribed credit -- while still in high school. Dual Enrollment (DE) generally refers to individual college courses taken by high school students, either on a college campus, online, or taught by credentialed instructors at their high school. Students may take one or more courses to accelerate their academic progress but typically remain on a traditional high school diploma track. Early College High School (ECHS), by contrast, is a more structured model in which students enroll in a cohesive program that integrates high school and college coursework, often with the goal of earning an associate degree or substantial college credit by the time they graduate high school. However, not every state has a codified ECHS approach.

For post-secondary institutions, both DE and ECHS groups represent a highly engaged, college-ready audience. These are not just temporary registrants -- they should be treated as future degree seekers, potential alumni, and institutional ambassadors. Developing a scalable and sustainable infrastructure to support this population is no longer a value-add. It is a strategic imperative.

Iron Bridge Resources recommends a strategic model built around the 4 Ps: People, Process, Platforms (Technology), and Policy. Below we outline best

practices for institutions seeking to expand or refine their dual enrollment or early college offerings.

People: Building Robust Support Systems

Institutions must begin with a commitment to staffing models that account for the unique needs of high school students entering collegiate environments. These students often require additional guidance to navigate academic rigor, institutional expectations, and future planning. Best practice institutions designate specialized academic advisors or student success coaches who are trained to work specifically with dual enrollment populations. These advisors provide tailored support from course selection through credit articulation and help students develop academic identity early.

Faculty also play a central role in shaping the student experience. In many successful models, colleges invest in the professional development of high school instructors delivering college content, including formal onboarding, ongoing pedagogical training, and assessment calibration. This not only ensures academic quality but creates a consistent experience across delivery settings. Moreover, campuses that include dual enrollment students in faculty office hour policies or create peer mentorship programs find higher levels of student satisfaction and academic persistence.

Finally, institutions benefit from designating internal DE/ECHS coordinators who liaise with high school partners, monitor compliance, and ensure student support systems are functioning. In highly scaled programs, this role becomes essential to managing enrollment logistics, coordinating communication, and maintaining fidelity to both institutional goals and student outcomes.

People: Streamlining Pathways to Enrollment and Success

Administrative clarity is critical when managing the intersection of K-12 and higher education systems. One of the most significant barriers to scaling DE and ECHS programs is procedural complexity. Best-in-class institutions conduct internal process audits to identify and remove unnecessary friction points across application, registration, billing, and grading processes. Some institutions even co-locate admissions or registrar staff within K-12 schools to provide hands-on, real-time support.

Another key practice is the implementation of structured academic pathways. Rather than offering à la carte courses, institutions can bundle credits into pre-designed tracks aligned to associate degrees, general education cores, or certificate pathways. These structured approaches offer greater clarity for students and parents, simplify scheduling, and ensure intentional credit accumulation aligned to a credential or transfer objective.

A final process best practice is coordinated onboarding and orientation. High school students are often first-time college learners, and successful institutions recognize the importance of an early and developmental orientation process. This may include pre-enrollment webinars, family engagement events, student expectation contracts, and embedded skill-building modules. Institutions that take a proactive approach to setting expectations and normalizing help-seeking behaviors are more likely to see these students persist through their postsecondary transition.

Platforms: Leveraging Technology for Visibility, Engagement, and Success

Technology must be a core part of the DE/ECHS infrastructure with a focus on engagement, monitoring, and long-term relationship cultivation. Institutions with effective platforms use integrated CRM systems to track DE student behaviors, measure engagement, and maintain personalized communication flows from the first inquiry through to matriculation. For instance, CRM flags for milestones like application completion, FAFSA filing, or virtual event attendance can help recruitment teams triage support and personalize follow-up.

Learning management systems (LMS) play an equally critical role. For DE students, particularly those in remote or hybrid environments, the LMS is the primary academic interface. Institutions should ensure that these platforms are mobile-friendly, accessible, and intuitive. They should also be configured to allow for nudges, progress alerts, and access to academic supports such as tutoring or writing centers. In some leading programs, data from the LMS is piped directly into predictive analytics tools to help advisors intervene before small problems become big ones.

Beyond course tools, institutions should invest in dual enrollment portals or microsites that serve as a digital hub for students, families, and school partners. These sites should provide program information, application timelines, course catalogs, advising contact details, and FAQs in a clear and digestible format. By making expectations and resources transparent, institutions can reduce confusion and improve the student experience.

Policy: Structuring Equity and Sustainability

A strong policy framework is essential to the sustainability and effectiveness of dual enrollment (DE) and Early College High School (ECHS) programs. Yet national program structures remain inconsistent. Some states have well-established, formal ECHS networks supported by state funding and statewide articulation agreements. Others lack formal frameworks, requiring colleges and districts to build these programs independently, often on a case-by-case basis. This patchwork landscape means that institutions cannot wait for policy alignment -- they must lead by building durable internal structures that support early-college learners now.

At the institutional level, clear governance and documentation are critical. Best-practice colleges and universities establish formal policies that define partner roles, credit awarding standards, instructor credentialing, and compliance procedures. Many also create dedicated DE/ECHS steering committees or cross-functional working groups to manage program oversight, assess performance metrics, and ensure continuity across academic years and leadership transitions.

Regardless of state policy maturity, institutions that succeed in this space are proactive in identifying pathways for student participation. This includes formalizing Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) with school districts, offering tuition waivers or tiered pricing models where feasible, and ensuring that earned credits apply toward degree requirements at the college. When institutions treat DE and ECHS students as future members of the degree-seeking student body, they create long-term enrollment pipelines that align with institutional capacity, mission, and student success goals.

Refine Your High School Student Enrollment Strategy Today

Iron Bridge Resources partners with colleges and universities to design, optimize, and scale dual enrollment and early college strategies that align with institutional goals and operational realities. From refining enrollment processes to developing scalable program infrastructure and actionable policy frameworks, our consultants bring deep expertise in student pipeline development, CRM utilization, and academic partnership design. Whether your institution operates in a state with a formal ECHS framework or is navigating these pathways independently, Iron Bridge Resources can help you build a sustainable early college model that strengthens recruitment, retention, and long-term enrollment outcomes.

About the Author

Dr. Shane Pruitt is a Senior Consultant at Iron Bridge Resources and a nationally recognized enrollment strategist. He brings nearly two decades of campus and consulting experience to help institutions reimagine the way they recruit, admit, and support students.
