



FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO COLLEGE AND A CAREER

IMPROVING OPPORTUNITIES FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS TO MAXIMIZE THEIR SENIOR YEAR AND EARN A HIGH-QUALITY CREDENTIAL OR MEANINGFUL COLLEGE CREDIT

The national Lumina Foundation has set a goal for the United States, which Louisiana has embraced, of increasing the percentage of adults with a degree or high-quality postsecondary credential to 60-percent by 2025. According to the foundation, Louisiana is actually very close to the national average at 45.7-percent and sits in the middle-of-the-pack among states.

That's generally good news, but there's one problem. It's not good enough to meet our workforce needs now or for the future. A widely-recognized study by the Georgetown University Center on Education & the Workforce estimates that by 2020, 56-percent of the jobs in Louisiana will require some sort of postsecondary credential. Like most states, Louisiana has a workforce skills gap – a gap we must work diligently to close.

CHALLENGES

For decades Louisiana high schools have faced major challenges. We were losing too many students, the percentage of students who needed remedial help when they got to college

Today, we still face many of those same challenges, but there has been some good news on that front that is worth noting.

- Over the last several years our high school graduation rates have seen steady increases.
- Record numbers of students have received credit-qualifying scores on Advanced Placement exams.
- And despite a dip in 2018, ACT scores and the number of students deemed college-ready have generally been on the rise.

Yet, Louisiana still suffers from overall low education attainment rates. In 2008, Lumina began tracking the percentage of people in Louisiana who had attained an associate degree or higher. At the time it was 27-percent. It has since risen to about 30-percent, though that's still among the lowest rates in the country.

But recognizing that that information didn't tell the complete story, Lumina updated the data it was collecting and in 2018 began to include the percentage of adults with a *high-quality postsecondary credential* to its tracking. That meant for the first time it was also counting adults that didn't have a college diploma, but had earned some type of certificate that would give them entry to a high-quality, well-paying job. That change in the calculus boosted the state's education attainment rate to 45.7-

was hovering close to 40-percent, and we had large numbers of students enrolled in college who never graduated or took more than the normal 4-6 years to earn their degree.

percent, very close to the national average, but still somewhat far from where we need to be.

In recent years, state policy makers have been looking at the high school-to college-to career transition in much the same way and have focused a great deal of attention on accelerating the growth in high school graduation rates and increasing the number of students with a college degree or a credential that will lead to a high-quality job.

Among the key strategies they have enlisted for accomplishing those goals have been things like:

1. Aligning the state's core high school graduation requirements with TOPS eligibility
2. Improving the state's career diploma and tying it to a highly-regarded program called Jump Start
3. Placing an overall higher focus on motivating students to begin the process of earning college credit or some kind of quality postsecondary credential while still in high school.

All of these things have begun to pay real dividends for students who now find themselves with more college and career options in high school than ever before.

CURRENT DIPLOMA OPTIONS FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

High school in Louisiana is not like what it used to be less than a generation ago when students went to school to earn a diploma that was generally low on rigor and might or might not prepare them for either college or a high-quality job.

Today, students in 9th and 10th grade take a series of common foundational courses which prepare them for the type of diploma they wish to pursue in their junior and senior years. In Louisiana, there are two broad pathways available to students.

TOPS University Pathway: This is the most popular pathway, currently chosen by about 75-percent of students. It is geared toward students who plan to attend a four-year university and meets the course requirements for TOPS eligibility.

Jump Start Pathway: Only about a quarter of students access this pathway which was designed for students preparing to attend a community or technical college or move directly into a career. It requires them to earn an industry credential suitable for an entry-level position before graduation and they receive a career diploma.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR COLLEGE CREDIT

Within both of these pathways are opportunities for students to gain college credits and learn marketable skills while they are still in high school. In recent years the state has placed a greater focus on these types of approaches and it has shown results.

Jump Start: Jump Start is a pathway to a career diploma, but it is also a structured program. It is similar to dual enrollment, but focused on technical and career education. It requires students to take classes and earn an Industry-Based Credential (IBC) while still in high school as a requirement for graduation.

Dual Enrollment: Dual enrollment allows high school students to take college-level courses in which they receive credit on both their high school and college transcripts for the same course. They can enroll in these courses at either a technical or community college, or at a four-year institution, however, students must

meet the admissions standards of the college that is awarding them the credit. Dual enrollment has seen a marked increase in recent years from just over 9,000 students participating in 2009 to more than 30,000 students today.

Advanced Placement Courses (AP®): These courses offer students the opportunity to take rigorous courses while still in high school and earn college credit at the same time. Students who receive a score of at least 3 out of a possible 5 on a nationally standardized AP® test are eligible for credit. Research shows that these students are better prepared for college-level work, and are more likely to remain in college after their freshman year and graduate earlier than other students. During the 2011-12 school year, just over 6,600 students enrolled in AP® classes. Today that number is close to 20,000 with almost 40-percent passing the courses and earning the credit.

Course Choice: This is an innovative approach that is designed to give high school students more options in the courses they take. While some of the courses relate directly to high school such as classes they might need to be eligible for TOPS or intensive remediation to ensure they are on course to graduate, the program also includes access to AP® courses, dual enrollment, and career and technical preparation.

The focus on these additional options has paid off. Out of the high school graduating class of 2017, 48-percent earned either college credit or

a statewide Industry-Based Credential (IBC). That represents an 11-percent increase since 2013.

These are meaningful improvements for a variety of reasons. For one, they can often save students money because they are taking college-level courses at less cost while still in high school and also shortening their time to earning a degree. But they also smooth the transition between high school and postsecondary education or a job and increase the likelihood students will remain engaged and continue their education beyond high school.

UPDATING JUMP START

Jump Start is the state's newest program focusing on the transition from high school to college and a career. It was launched in 2014 as a way to strengthen Louisiana's original career diploma. Among its goals was to help erase the acknowledged stigma around career education and to create public-private partnerships to foster workplace-based learning experiences leading to meaningful credentials, identify career opportunities within various regions, and help lower costs for high schools that were short on resources.

The huge increase in IBCs awarded over the last decade is a clear indication the program has seen significant success. But the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) has also recognized that after five years there are opportunities to improve the program, particularly in the areas of industry alignment, rigor, and equitable access to IBCs in school districts across the state.

To that end, the department is currently undertaking a thorough review of the Jump Start program to make it more meaningful to

both students and employers and in doing so improve the quality of the state's workforce.

As part of that review, the LDOE commissioned an independent study looking into the quality of IBCs students earned, their alignment with regional and state workforce needs, and their availability to students in different parts of the state. The findings of that study revealed areas where there are clear opportunities for improvement.

One that stood out is that despite a large number of high-quality IBC options for students to pursue, many school districts did not offer the courses for earning those certifications and many of the ones they did offer were not of the most value. In fact, in the year in which the study was focused, only about 24-percent of the IBCs awarded to Jump Start participants were in fields that were classified as high-employability.

To examine that a bit more closely, the Louisiana Workforce Investment Council maintains a State Focus List of IBCs. To be on the list they must relate to high-demand

occupations, reflect high-wage jobs or occupations that lead to a career ladder, and must be widely supported and recognized by Louisiana's industries. There are currently 89 options on this list.

In 2016-17, 10,397 career diploma students earned IBCs, but only 1,805 of these certifications were aligned to occupations on the State Focus List and only about 42-percent of the 89 options on the list saw students earning one of those certificates. Stated another way, the vast majority of students earning IBCs are not getting them in high-wage, high-demand fields, and many of the highly-

employable options available to them are not being utilized.

In addition, it appears that school districts in the various regions across the state are offering students only a limited number of IBC offerings aligned with their local workforce needs. This was evident in the results of that independent [study](#) by the LDOE which looked at career and technical education alignment to labor market needs in each region. The researchers identified 15 high-demand, high-wage fields for each of 10 regions across the state. What they found was the vast majority of IBC offerings in every region had little or no alignment with the local labor market demand.

Jump Start Regional IBC Alignment Summary with Top 15 Target Occupations (2016-17)

Jump Start Region	Closely Related to one or more occupations	Possible alignment with key occupations	No visible occupational alignment
1. Bayou	2	1	12
2. Capital	0	4	11
3. Central Louisiana	1	0	14
4. Delta Super Region	0	2	13
5. Greater Acadiana	1	2	12
6. Gulf River/GNO Region	3	1	11
7. North Capital Region	3	1	11
8. Northshore	3	2	10
9. Northwest Louisiana	1	1	13
10. Southwest Louisiana	1	1	13

Source: R.C. Froeschle Consulting

There could be a number of reasons for this and it is not necessarily an indication that school districts are simply doing a bad job. For Jump Start to reach its full potential and for Louisiana

to continue to grow the number of students who are receiving college credit or a credential while still in high school, we must be clear on the obstacles and seek to remove them.

EQUITY AND ACCESS

While only about 23-percent of Louisiana high school students participated in dual enrollment last year, the numbers are clearly on the rise. In the 2008-09 just under 20,000 students were enrolled in one of these programs. Ten years later that number has jumped to more 31,000.

When it comes to race, however, that distribution is far from equitable. The growth has been driven largely by white students. While the number of African-American students is higher than it was 10 years ago, the trend is basically flat. Only 21-percent of participants in dual-enrollment programs are African-American, though they make up 44-percent of high school students.

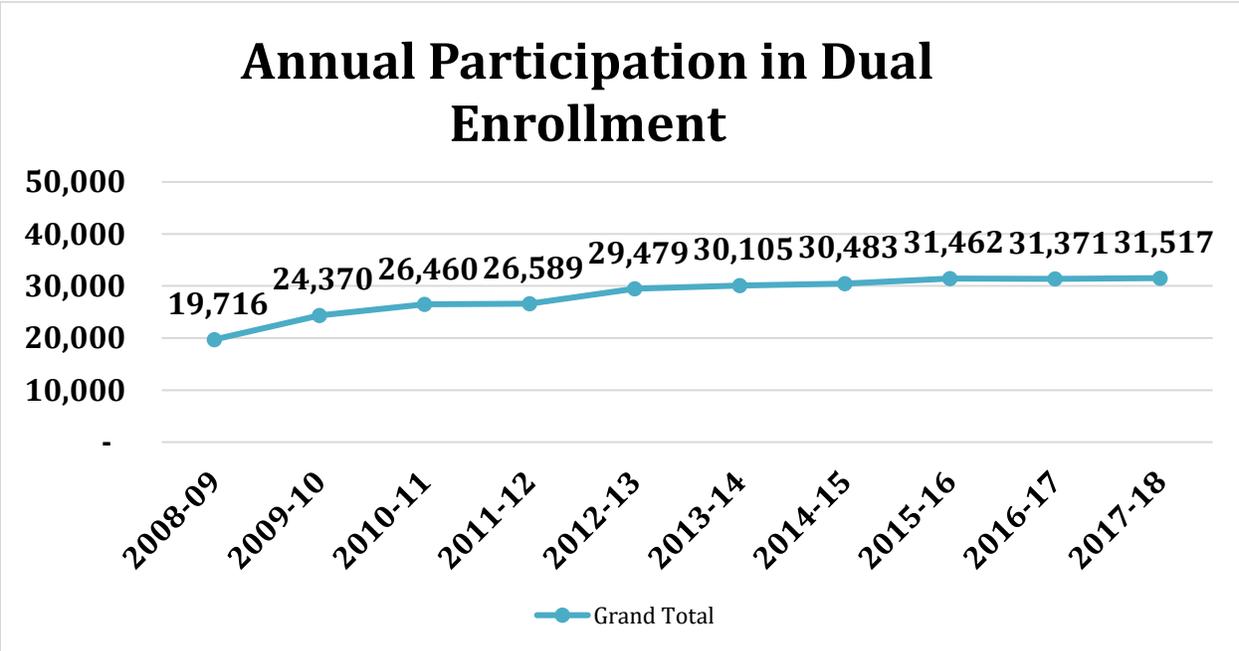
To a large degree, this could be a function of cost. The price tag for various courses can vary. The state allocates some funding through its Supplemental Course Allocation program. But districts administer those limited funds in different ways and the demand for the

programs exceeds the dollars available through that program. That results in instances where students often have to pay hundreds of dollars to take a course.

While families of means might find that a small investment that actually saves on future college costs, it can be a significant obstacle for disadvantaged families that find themselves effectively excluded from these opportunities.

There is also a geographical barrier to access. For students living in urban areas or close to a university or community college there is usually a fairly broad menu of course offerings. That's not the case in most rural areas where students find the course choices available to them are often limited or they would have to travel greater distances to take a course if they can find it.

These are gaps Louisiana must work diligently to close.



IDEAS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the clear progress Louisiana has made in dual enrollment in these areas there is more the state can do to improve programs and strengthen incentives.

- 1.** The data from the researchers clearly show that the IBC course offerings in our schools are not aligned to the needs of employers in their regions or the high-demand, high quality jobs available. LDOE officials should partner with the Louisiana Workforce Commission to break out 4- and 5-star jobs from the State Focus List to show more clearly which of those are priority jobs in each region and provide additional incentives to encourage student access to those programs.
- 2.** To incentivize greater participation by districts we should consider changes in how points are awarded to schools in the accountability system to give more weights for students who receive higher-level or more advanced IBCs that would lead to a high-quality job on the State Focus List. This should take into account both the students and school effort required to earn these IBCs.
- 3.** The cost for students to enroll in some of these programs can be a barrier to access for many with costs sometimes in excess of \$100. Some school districts cover that cost. Others don't. Policy makers should explore avenues to direct resources to pay for these courses, at least for students from economically disadvantaged families, to ensure participation is equitable, and that no student is denied access because of cost.
- 4.** Employer participation in career-oriented programs is essential. There needs to be a greater effort to raise employer awareness of these programs and encourage them to partner with local school districts to ensure that course offerings provide real value to both students and businesses that are providing high-quality jobs.
- 5.** The LDOE should work in partnership with local school districts to develop incentives or policies that would maximize utilization of the full senior year of high school. Many students do not take a full course load during this year, even though districts receive full funding for it. The incentives should encourage students to utilize available time to earn a more advanced IBC or work-relevant job experience if they are in the Jump Start program, or college credit through dual enrollment.
- 6.** Because of the issues surrounding access and equity, state policy makers should consider a mechanism whereby funds for dual enrollment currently provided to districts through the Supplemental Course Allocation process feature a needs-based component to assist economically disadvantaged students who are under-utilizing various programs.
- 7.** Louisiana policy makers should make development of an overarching statewide plan for dual enrollment a priority that at the least provides a minimum level of access to course that are available uniformly to all students.

CONCLUSION

Maximizing the senior year of high school for all students and encouraging them to earn an IBC or college credit is an important area worthy of attention from state policy makers. But it is also a complicated one and unfortunately, there are not a lot of easy solutions to this issue.

Adequate funding is certainly a part of it, but so is the way districts choose to use the funding that they have and the ways they prioritize it. Because of the flexibility given to them, the picture of dual enrollment across Louisiana is a patchwork where access to college level courses or career training is to a large degree a function of where you live. Yet the benefits to students are universal.

Research shows that dual enrollment leads to higher college enrollment, retention, and graduation rates. Opportunities to earn meaningful IBCs enhance the high school

learning experience, and better prepare students for the workplace and careers. Given our historically low educational attainment rates in Louisiana, anything that increases opportunities for students to advance themselves with some kind of postsecondary education or training should be a state priority.

The fact that the opportunities we do have often come with roadblocks for economically disadvantaged students makes the need to address this issue all the more urgent.

As stated before, some of these issues are complicated. But that doesn't excuse us from the obligation to look at the obstacles that are presented, make it a focus of policy makers to remove as many barriers as we can, and approach the problems we face in a way that is centered on students and the goal of giving them the best possible chance to succeed.