



Early and Middle Colleges Offer High School Alternative

BY MARILYN VILLALOBOS

Middle colleges and early colleges are alternative high schools located on college campuses. They expose students to the college culture while allowing them to earn a high school diploma and college credits. They were designed to help underserved students thrive in a nontraditional setting by providing more support, such as counseling, small classes and flexible schedules, than they would receive in a traditional high school setting.

Although the terms are often used interchangeably and both offer high school diplomas, early college high schools offer an established pathway for students to earn an associate degree, while middle colleges allow students to earn up to 60 college credits. Both programs provide rigorous coursework along with counseling, academic support, tutoring and other help for students from underserved populations, such as students from

low-income families and those who are the first generation to attend college.

According to the [Early College High School Initiative Impact study](#) by the American Institutes for Research, “Early college students were significantly more likely to graduate from high school than comparison students, significantly more likely to enroll in college than comparison students and significantly more likely to earn a college degree than comparison students.”

The first middle college high school was established in 1974 at LaGuardia Community College in New York City. This model combined the last two years of high school with the first two years of college. Designed for students who would not otherwise succeed in a traditional high school setting, it provided students with intensive counseling, small classes, interdisciplinary curriculum and career guidance.

Did You Know?

- Early and middle college students graduate high school at a rate of 93%, compared to the national rate of 78%.
- Students of color make up 77% and students from low-income families make up 57% of early and middle colleges.
- Nearly a quarter of middle and early college graduates earn a postsecondary credential along with their high school diploma.

The [Middle College National Consortium \(MCNC\)](#) was created in 1993 as a professional development organization for secondary and postsecondary public-sector educators. MCNC provides technical assistance and support for both new and established middle college high schools as they implement education reforms and engage in professional activities designed to help underperforming students meet high academic standards. There are approximately 40 schools on college campuses across 16 states, including California, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Nevada, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Washington.

State Action

Some states have established policies to create early and middle colleges. [California](#) declared middle college high schools to be a highly effective collaborative effort between local school districts and community colleges. Its middle college initiative includes a curriculum that focuses on college and career preparation, a reduced adult-to-student ratio, flexible scheduling, and opportunities for experimental internships, work apprenticeships and community service.

[Michigan](#) defines early and middle colleges as structured programs that use the flexibility of several laws to provide a specific course of study resulting in earning 60 transferable college credits. They include section [388.1661b from the State School Aid Act of 1979](#), the [Postsecondary Enrollment Options Act of 1996](#) and the [Career and Technical Preparation Act of 2000](#). These credits can be used toward a four-year degree from a Michigan public university, advance certificate, associate degree from a community college or a professional certification. In addition, the [Michigan Early Middle College Association \(MEMCA\)](#) helps early middle colleges throughout the state by providing professional development and research, contributing to the literature on early middle colleges, and approving Michigan's early college technical certificate. Michigan allocates \$8 million each fiscal year for career and technical education, early and middle colleges, and dual enrollment programs.

Texas has also taken steps to create middle and early colleges. Texas enacted the [Middle College Education Pilot Program](#) in 2003 for students at risk of dropping out of school or wishing to accelerate high school completion. Two years later,



the Legislature enacted the [Early College Education Program](#), which enables students to combine high school and college-level courses that allow them to earn up to 60 credit hours toward a bachelor's degree. [SB 1146](#) also included articulation agreements with colleges, universities and technical schools to provide students with access to postsecondary educational training opportunities.

Other states have approached these policies in a different way. In 2018, Connecticut [HB 5478](#) directed the Connecticut Employment and Training Commission to develop a statewide plan in collaboration with state colleges and universities, the Department of Education, and regional workforce development board. The goal is to implement, expand and improve middle and early college programs and [Connecticut Early College Opportunities](#) programs in order to provide education, training and job placement within industries and emerging sectors of the state's economy.

Federal Action

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, mentions [early college high schools](#) several times and acknowledges them as a key strategy for preparing students for college and careers. The law allows states and school districts to use federal funds to support the development and implementation of early college high schools.

Additional Resources

- [Middle College National Consortium](#)
- [Michigan Early Middle College High School Opportunities](#)
- [Early College, Jobs for the Future](#)
- [Early College High School Initiative Impact Study, American Institutes for Research](#)
- ["How Federal Funding Helps High School Students Get a Jump on College," Alliance for Excellent Education](#)

NCSL Contact

[Marilyn Villalobos](#)
303-856-1548