College and Career Readiness School Models: Barriers to and Facilitators of Implementation

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About This Project

In 2023, the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) launched a study to evaluate the implementation of College and Career Readiness School Models (CCRSM) in Texas. The study uses a multimethod approach to understand the fidelity of implementation of the CCRSM blueprints for Early College High School (ECHS) and Pathways in Technology Early College High School (P-TECH) campuses. Through the analysis of extant data as well as the collection and analysis of interview and focus group data, researchers at AIR learned how campus leaders implemented CCRSM blueprints.

Key Findings

- Changing mindsets at the high school is challenging, but district support, targeted coaching, and conversations with staff help them understand program goals and expectations.
- Relationship management with higher education partners requires alignment initially, but strategic use of implementation coaches helps facilitate problem solving with high school leaders.
- Student motivation sometimes falters after repeated failures and high standards for college entrance examinations, but direct instruction in specific test areas improves pass rates.

About This Brief

This research brief, part of a series of four briefs, presents the perspectives of high school administrators of ECHS and P-TECH programs as well as those of administrators at institutions of higher education (IHEs) that have partnered with various CCRSM programs across Texas. Other briefs in the series present the perspectives of students who graduated from CCRSM programs and quantitative analyses exploring equitable access to CCRSM programs and variation across ECHS programs in meeting thresholds for student attainment outcomes (e.g., high school graduation, college credit accumulation). This brief highlights the voices of high school and IHE leaders and details the factors that they reported as either helping or hindering their implementation of CCRSM blueprints. This brief is intended to provide school administrators and coaches with an overview of barriers to implementation and potential facilitators to overcome these barriers as perceived by school and IHE leaders.

Methods

Between February and June 2023, we spoke with 67 participants from more than 50 different high schools across Texas. In February 2023, our researchers attended CCRSM convenings across Texas and conducted nine in-person focus groups with a total of 33 convening participants.

Between March and June 2023, we conducted virtual interviews with 34 school leaders from 32 of the sampled campuses. Of these 32 schools, 13 were P-TECH campuses and 19 were ECHS campuses. For each campus, we interviewed a designated school principal, assistant principal, or other senior school administrator knowledgeable about CCRSM implementation. We asked respondents about their roles, their experiences in implementing program blueprints, and their perceptions of the supports provided to them by Educate Texas, a Texas nonprofit specializing in education strategy, practice, and policy, contracted by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to facilitate statewide implementation of CCRSM through comprehensive support, including coaching, resource development, professional development, and networking opportunities. Finally, in July 2023, we also conducted focus groups with 24 unique respondents who were administrators or leaders of IHEs currently partnered with school districts to offer CCRSM programming. These respondents participated in in-person focus groups at the 2023 CCRSM Partners Connect, an IHE network conference held in Austin.

We present the dominant themes that emerged from our conversations with K–12 leaders (whom we refer to as "school leaders") and, where relevant, perspectives from IHE administrators or leaders on those same themes.

Findings

In our conversations with school leaders, we found that many of the experiences they encountered with implementation were common to both ECHS and P-TECH program models. Specifically, school leaders spoke most commonly about their experiences with changing mindsets at the high school, collaboration between high school and IHE leaders, and improving the academic preparedness of the target student population, which focuses exclusively on students who are historically underserved.[1] At both ECHS and P-TECH campuses, efforts toward these three tasks yielded both challenges and successes, which we detail.

[1] According to the Texas Education Agency, this includes students who are "at-risk of dropping out." These students are targeted for recruitment by ensuring that their enrollment decisions are "not based on state assessment scores, discipline history, teacher recommendations, parent or student essays, minimum grade point average (GPA), or other criteria that create barriers for student enrollment."

Changing Mindsets: Persuading Teachers and Faculty

The school leaders we interviewed shared that one of the greatest challenges they faced in implementing either an ECHS or P-TECH model was securing cooperation from the high school campus staff, IHE partners, and the larger school community. Specifically, leaders told us that they were often met with skepticism and, at times, resistance from staff when they first learned that their campus would be implementing an ECHS or P-TECH model.

High school teachers often objected to the idea that postsecondary coursework was the best path for high school students, and some doubted the ability of their high school students to succeed in college coursework. Due to staff turnover, high school leaders emphasized that reeducating staff and earning their buy-in was an ongoing task. Similarly, at IHEs, instructors expressed doubts about the ability of high school students to succeed in their courses and were often opposed to teaching them. We heard from IHE leaders that their faculty noted that they had chosen careers that allowed them to teach college students, but they felt like their job was being changed as they were now being asked to teach students in high school.

High school staff also voiced concerns that the ambitious goals of the CCRSM blueprints were unattainable with existing staff resources at the school. Specifically, teachers felt that staff turnover and limited human resources at the high school to support existing programming were already straining high schools, and adding new programs that required intensive coordination and collaboration with an IHE would be challenging.

School leaders also identified resistance in middle schools, where coaches, school counselors, and other staff who led various extracurricular activities were discouraging students from joining ECHS programs because they believed it would prevent them from continuing in extracurricular activities in high school. This form of resistance, or lack of buy-in from the broader community, resulted in unanticipated recruitment challenges. Other recruitment challenges, however, were more predictable, such as those that arose in small rural schools, which led to fewer curricular options.[2]

Faced with staffing issues and concerns from multiple key partners, school leaders often felt they lacked the approval, willingness, and solidarity of their existing staff to fully implement and expand ECHS and P-TECH models. They believed they needed significant support to change the existing work plans or processes at their schools to implement the blueprints and to gain “buy-in” from their multiple stakeholders. School leaders saw these efforts as an ongoing task that required continuous attention and work to sustain through all blueprint implementation years and amid staff turnover. For example, one school leader said:

[2] Offering a potential solution to the challenge of fewer curricular options at small rural schools, one respondent mentioned that staff developed “Rural School Innovation Zones” that create a network of rural schools whose CCRSM courses are pooled and made available to all CCRSM students in the network. However, not all rural CCRSM programs have access to these networks.

> The … administrator in charge of the school within a school needs to be advocating and fighting in the good way, and educating the rest of the staff in the high school because every year a big high school has 20, 25 new teachers or administrators that come with no idea what early college is…and this is constant work. Every year we have to… reeducate and…teach…the new people arriving.

What worked to change mindsets?

In addressing these challenges, high school and IHE leaders found strategies to shift the beliefs and attitudes of their instructors and staff. At the high schools, one of these strategies included obtaining district support and backing. This appeared in the form of guidance from school district officials on how to navigate conversations with resistant faculty as well as collective events, such as when district officials would visit schools during CCRSM planning meetings. With district support in place, school leaders elevated campus expectations by finding the right teachers to begin teaching the CCRSM courses at the high school. They defined these teachers as those who had the motivation to teach college coursework to high school students and could serve as allies to leadership by modeling the effort for their colleagues. Proper messaging to the campus community was another strategy that respondents felt helped them overcome staff resistance. To this end, respondents said they reminded all teachers that the work they were embarking on with CCRSM implementation was aimed at raising educational expectations of postsecondary attainment in their community and that it would take time and everyone's effort to realize the changes they sought.

To realize these changes, high school leaders took an individualized approach to working with staff and shifted to a "high-touch" management style where they interacted directly with students and teachers in "student success meetings." To support teachers, leaders initially worked with one teacher at a time to address their concerns and adjusted teachers' other tasks where necessary. To address teacher resistance stemming from concerns that students would not be academically successful in CCRSM programming, one school leader made wraparound supports for students a part of the ECHS curriculum. To achieve this, they added a course period to ECHS students' schedules during which time students would receive one-on-one attention from an instructor who could evaluate their academic and nonacademic progress and escalate cases as needed.

School leaders learned that once they developed buy-in from their staff, it required continuous effort to maintain. They therefore came to regard the development of buy-in as not a discrete event or milestone but an ongoing part of their work, and they began to set realistic expectations for the time and effort to maintain buy-in. In their ongoing efforts to develop and maintain buy-in from staff, school leaders also found that engaging the Educate Texas leadership coach was helpful to address issues with consensus on implementing CCRSM blueprints.

At IHEs, leaders said that finding instructors who were good role models and listened to student voice were both important. In IHE leaders' efforts to address faculty resistance to teaching high school

students, the voices of students became central in persuading faculty that students were motivated to take part in the program and valued the opportunity. Although there were no systematic efforts to include student voice in conversations between IHE leaders and faculty, one IHE leader shared that steering such conversations to include students' voices, when possible, made a substantial difference in motivating IHE instructors to teach them. In this notable case, faculty were meeting with an IHE leader to voice their frustrations about all the challenges they encountered with scheduling CCRSM courses as well as the initial difficulties with CCRSM students' expectations and readiness, when a student spoke up:

Differences Across P-TECH and ECHS

Scheduling issues were heard more often in P-TECH programs than in ECHS programs. P-TECH campuses noted the difficulty in working with higher education partners to schedule course times and transportation of students. In these cases, IHEs came across as inflexible and not accustomed to collaborating with high schools and their constraints.

> One time we were having a conversation with faculty, the door was open, and the faculty were sharing frustrations with the program. And the student comes and she says, "Excuse me, I couldn't help but hear." And she was red, she was shaking, you could tell she was so scared. But she said, "You have to hear this…Without this program, I wouldn't be here. I've never had these ideas, these opportunities." … the fact that she heard [us], and had the confidence, and understood the importance of [us] hearing her voice…I was just like, "Yes." I couldn't have planned it any better myself.

Although many faculty members initially hesitated to teach high school students, those who agreed early on were recruited by IHE leaders to model effective instructional practices and to help lead conversations with faculty who were more resistant and address these faculty members' concerns. When asked how they achieved this, leaders at IHEs shared that they relied on faculty who had embraced the approach to champion the work among other faculty who still had reservations or hesitations about it. By leveraging their peers, IHE leaders were able to eventually bring more college faculty on board with the charge of educating high school students.

Partnerships With IHEs

Partnerships with IHEs was another issue that we heard about from nearly all high school leaders. The specific challenges that they and their staff encountered included negotiating access to classrooms on the IHE campus for high school students, coordinating course schedules between high schools and IHE partners, converting course grades from IHEs to align with district standards, and monitoring attendance and performance data. Each of these issues was compounded by the fact that high schools and districts had entered into memoranda of understanding with the IHE and not with individual

departments or instructors. Although the expectation was that departments and instructors would honor IHE commitments, school leaders often found that this was not the case. Each academic department had its own standard operating procedures for tasks such as course scheduling and grading. Sometimes, individual instructors even had greater flexibility in these areas. As a result, high school leaders sometimes had to renegotiate terms at the department and instructor levels, often leading to multiple conversations and meetings with different departmental administrators even though similar conversations had already taken place with IHE central administration prior to implementation of the program. To this end, one school leader discussed how central the relationships with IHEs were to the CCRSM work:

> It is a big…important relationship…that you have to work every…day because a small portion of the [IHE] is aware of what's going on with the early college program and dual credit. And some deans and department chairs and other people, they make their decisions not thinking that they are going to affect the early colleges because they're not aware of this.

High school leaders also encountered unique challenges in communicating with IHE instructors. They often found that IHE instructors had not been thoroughly informed of the task of teaching high school students or, as mentioned earlier, did not have the desire or buy-in to do so. As a result, not only were these IHE instructors unprepared to satisfy the specific needs of high school students, such as grade conversions, but they did not understand it to be part of their job description. One school leader elaborated on this perception by saying:

> Another challenge that we've had is the communication with [IHE partner] and the professors. I know part of going to the [IHE] is for the kids to get that college experience, but we feel like the professors don't understand our students. And because of the tight turnover with their staff and just filling those classes, some of these professors are just not…. They're not as understanding of our students as they should be.

What worked to improve IHE partnerships?

In their attempts to make their partnership with IHEs more productive, school leaders turned to Educate Texas leadership coaches to help build connections. Educate Texas coaches were able to connect school leaders who were struggling with IHE partners to other school leaders who had successfully navigated similar partnership challenges. Educate Texas coaches also brought school leaders and IHE partners to meetings together to help bridge conversations between the two.

One high school leader described how this benefitted them:

> [Our coach] is connected to higher ed. So if we have a question or hit something with either our 4-year or community college partner, she not only coaches us, but coaches them as to what we face at…the high school as a whole.

In addition to these conversations, school leaders felt that opportunities for face-to-face interactions with IHE partners were important. These in-person meetings were seen as a valuable practice for making progress on difficult parts of their partnerships with IHEs, especially as everyone emerged from COVID-19 pandemic-era lockdowns when in-person interactions were suspended. Through these interactions, school leaders felt that participants were more mentally present than they were in virtual meetings and were thus more invested in solving the problems they had gathered to discuss. In addition, Educate Texas convenings and summits provided similar opportunities for in-person interaction and dialogue, which school leaders found meaningful and helpful. At these events, they were able to interact and have conversations with a broader range of other school leaders and IHEs, which allowed them to deepen their understanding of the work.

Finally, coaches were instrumental in helping school leaders navigate the complicated and time-consuming task of aligning course schedules between the IHE and the high school. In the words of one respondent, their coach helped them "reverse engineer" the master course schedule at the high school by aligning it around IHE's schedule of courses. Together, they first determined which of the IHE's courses the school district would recognize and use for credit. Through this planning process, school leaders learned when and where the courses would be offered and began to build the remainder of the high school's course schedule around the core dual-credit courses that served the CCRSM model.

Academic Preparedness and College Readiness

Helping students persist and succeed in the ECHS and P-TECH programs was considered a significant challenge by school leaders. They particularly saw academic preparedness as a persistent issue that surfaced after students were required to pass the Texas Success Initiative Assessment (TSIA) to meet requirements for designation. Because their test performance determined whether they would be placed in college-level or developmental math and English courses, school leaders struggled with coaching students for the exam. This was especially challenging for emergent bilingual students, and school leaders noted that students often became discouraged after repeated test attempts, leading them to opt out of the program altogether.

School leaders, such as the one quoted below, shared how this affected their work, especially because of their student population:

> …It's supporting the students once they're in to keep them in the program and to keep them going…a big challenge of course, is TSI [Texas Success Initiative]…and we are at a district that is 48% emergent bilingual. So challenges of…passing TSI at the same time… we have to make sure we maintain those supports for students.

Another persistent challenge that school leaders identified was getting students mentally prepared to see themselves as college students. Specifically, staff felt students were not yet socialized to the idea of going to college early on in their high school career, and thus found convincing them to participate in the ECHS or P-TECH program challenging because students had not yet begun to think about college preparation generally. School leaders' concerns that students were not prepared to see themselves as college students were further worsened by accounts from IHE leaders that, often, there were no clear transition plans for students after graduating from high school and entering college. Without such plans, students who were not developing the college-readiness mindset would likely find it extremely challenging to succeed in college even after graduating from an ECHS or P-TECH high school.

Finally, IHE leaders and administrators recognized that students did not have time to stay on campus after classes because of tight bus schedules. This left no time for students to go to tutoring or writing support centers on campus, so many of the academic supports were unused by them, even though they needed these services.

What supported student academic preparedness?

Strategies to improve TSIA performance and to keep students motivated included continuous, direct instruction in reading and writing. To sustain these efforts, leaders dedicated classroom periods to provide additional instruction for students enrolled in early college courses. This period ensured that students had access to regular academic support that could be used for either early college coursework or TSIA preparation. In addition, at campuses where enrollment numbers were smaller, school leaders lauded the efforts of particularly notable school counselors who monitored students individually.

Similarly, in their efforts to support student academic preparedness, IHE faculty found building structure into students' schedules helpful. Specifically, they changed tutoring and other academic supports from being optional to required for all CCRSM students at their campus. To address the lack of noninstructional time that students had on campus, IHE leaders renegotiated the arrival and departure times of their students to allow them to spend more time on the IHE campus and visit academic support centers. By building in this structure, IHE leaders felt they were effectively addressing the challenges that students faced in accessing resources that supported their academic preparedness at the IHE.

Conclusion: Improving CCRSM Implementation Based on High School and IHE Leaders' Experiences

CCRSM programs provide students valuable opportunities to earn associate degrees during high school, which can be especially lucrative for students who are historically underrepresented in higher education. However, realizing this outcome depends largely on the ability of school and IHE leaders to implement CCRSM program models with fidelity. In conversations with more than 67 leaders of high schools implementing CCRSM programs, as well as focus groups with 24 leaders of IHEs that have partnered with them, we learned important takeaways that could help change mindsets, improve partnerships with IHEs, and increase students' academic preparedness.

Although school leaders' efforts at implementing blueprints were initially met with resistance from high school staff, IHE partners, and the wider school community, a key takeaway from their experience was the importance of securing district support to help change mindsets. This helped overcome staff resistance, as did the careful selection of supportive teachers who modeled the cooperation that school leaders sought to grow in their schools as they implemented CCRSM programs. Important takeaways from IHE leaders included finding role model instructors and incorporating student feedback to persuade resistant faculty. A final takeaway for successful change management, shared by school leaders, is to begin having conversations prior to the planning year so that any concerns from teachers and faculty can be effectively addressed prior to the beginning of any formal implementation.

A key takeaway to improve partnerships between high schools and IHEs was to center the role of Educate Texas coaches in these partnerships, who not only helped schools coordinate course schedules with IHEs but brokered key relationships. Coaches connected school leaders with successful peers and arranged joint meetings with leaders of other schools who, based on their own past experiences, shared advice on how to navigate challenges with partnering IHEs.

Finally, helping students succeed academically in ECHS and P-TECH programs posed significant challenges for school leaders. However, both school and IHE leaders found that building intentional structures to guide students into academic supports proved to be a successful strategy. As the landscape of the CCRSM network evolves, these takeaways for existing programs provide practical steps that leaders at IHEs and high schools can use to respond and ensure that their work is implemented successfully.

Based on these insights, recommendations for future CCRSM programs include anticipating potential challenges with staff buy-in, visiting existing programs to learn from their experiences as early as possible, and ensuring that they build intentional student support structures into their implementation plans. By preparing for these expectations and tasks, future CCRSM programs can learn from past experience and prepare to advance CCRSM implementation for the next generation of students.

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