

Six Years and Counting: The ECHSI Matures

A Summary of the Early College High School Initiative Evaluation Report (AIR & SRI, August 2009)

The Early College High School Initiative (ECHSI) launched in 2002 with the support of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The ECHSI provides funds for the development of Early College Schools (ECSs) that serve students who traditionally are underrepresented in postsecondary education. ECSs partner with institutions of higher education (IHEs) to offer all enrolled students an opportunity to earn an Associate's degree or up to 2 years of college credits toward the baccalaureate while in high school, as well as a high school diploma. This initiative is based on the assumption that engaging underrepresented students in a rigorous high school curriculum that is tied to the incentive of earning college credits will motivate them and increase their access to and success in additional postsecondary education after high school. See the box below for the ECHSI Core Principles.

“[The instructors at the ECS] taught me everything a school should teach you, and they went above and beyond what they were supposed to do. The [ECS] is so small that you can really have one-on-one relationships with your teachers, the principal, students, everybody.”

—ECS alum

ECS Student Outcomes

Student outcomes were assessed through multiple data sources, including school and student surveys and publically available data.

High School Outcomes

- The mean proficiency rate on state assessments in 2007–08 was 74 percent in English language arts and 67 percent in mathematics. Overall, ECSs scored 7 percentage points higher in both subject areas relative to high schools in their local districts (see figure on page 2).
- Students reported an average high school grade point average (GPA) of 3.0 in 2007–08.
- The average daily attendance in ECSs was 94 percent in 2006–07.*
- The average progression rate from 9th grade to 10th grade was 85 percent between 2006–07 and 2007–08.
- An estimated 66 percent of students who start at an ECS in 9th grade will progress to graduation on time. This estimate is 14 percentage points higher than the estimated rate of the high schools in the ECSs' local districts. Many of the 34 percent of ECS students who will not graduate from ECSs on time transferred to other schools rather than dropping out: the cumulative estimated transfer rate was 25 percent.

* Most recent data available.

ECHSI Core Principles

All ECSs are united by their commitment to the ECHSI's Core Principles. The revised Core Principles, completed in 2008, reflect lessons learned about how ECSs can be established and sustained. The five Core Principles are:

- Early college schools are committed to serving students underrepresented in higher education.
- Early college schools are created and sustained by a local education agency, a higher education institution, and the community, all of whom are jointly accountable for student success.
- Early college schools and their higher education partners and community

jointly develop an integrated academic program so all students earn 1 to 2 years of transferable college credit leading to college completion.

- Early college schools engage all students in a comprehensive support system that develops academic and social skills as well as the behaviors and conditions necessary for college completion.
- Early college schools and their higher education and community partners work with intermediaries to create conditions and advocate for supportive policies that advance the early college movement.

The Initiative: The ECHSI is sponsored primarily by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. There were 157 ECSs in operation by fall 2007. Plans call for approximately 250 ECSs to be open by 2012.

Participants: The ECHSI is operated by 13 grantee organizations, or intermediaries. The intermediaries play a key role in the ECHSI. Intermediaries must identify promising local partnerships among IHEs, school districts, community and charter management organizations, and other entities; assist in fostering and solidifying those partnerships; distribute and monitor the use of the ECHSI funding for startup and early implementation of the ECSs; and support networking activities for the schools. Jobs for the Future (JFF) coordinates advocacy and professional development activities, as well as the Student Information System (SIS), a secure, confidential collection of data about students attending ECSs throughout the United States.

Location: In 2007–08, the ECHSI was active in 21 states and Washington, DC. Many ECSs are clustered in several geographic areas: California; New York, NY; North Carolina; Ohio; Texas; and Washington.

Evaluated by:



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Who Do ECSs Serve?

ECSs are committed to enrolling students who have at least one of the following characteristics:

- Are racial and ethnic minorities
- Lack financial resources for college
- Are English language learners
- Would be the first in their family to attend college

The evaluation reports the degree to which ECSs are serving students with the above characteristics. ECSs' student population was 67 percent minority, on average, which was 6 percentage points higher than the average population of the districts from which ECSs drew students. The average percentage of students' families classified as low-income was 59 percent, 5 percentage points higher than the population of the districts from which they drew students. Twenty-four percent of ECSs were classified as high minority/high poverty schools — they had at least 75 percent minority students *and* 75 percent or more students who were from low-income families.

Based on student survey data, on average, 46 percent of students reported that neither of their parents attended college. Thirty-one percent of ECS students had mothers who were college graduates and 28 percent had fathers who were college graduates (of the students who knew this information about their parents). District data were not available for comparison.

College Outcomes

- Students reported an average college GPA of 3.1 in courses they took while at the ECS.
- Students earned an average of 23 college credits by the time they graduated from an ECS in 2006–07.
- More than three-fourths of ECS students aspired to complete a 4-year degree after high school graduation. An additional 7 percent expected to complete a 2-year degree.
- Of the 2006–07 graduates, ECSs reported that 88 percent enrolled in college the fall after graduation (see figure).

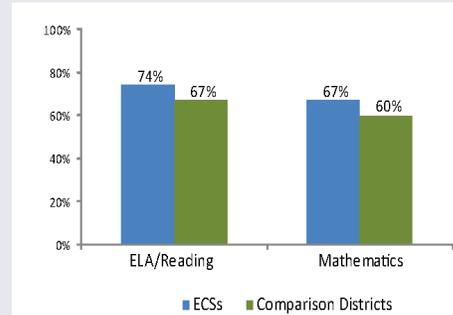
ECS Structural Characteristics

In fall 2007, the ECHSI had 157 affiliated ECSs. These ECSs have developed with many different structural characteristics. Key variations include:

- **ECS location.** For evaluation purposes, the ECSs are considered to be “located” where they offer the majority of their high school courses. More than half of ECSs (53 percent) were located on a 2-year or 4-year IHE campus. The rest were located off-campus, either in their own school building (42 percent) or in a building with another school or other occupants (5 percent).
- **IHE partnerships.** Sixty-five percent of ECSs were partnered with a 2-year IHE, and 35 percent were partnered with a 4-year IHE. Ten percent had both types of partners.
- **Origin.** Most ECSs (68 percent) were startup schools — new schools originated as part of this initiative. The remaining ECSs evolved out of existing schools where either the entire school became an ECS or part of the school became an ECS or an ECS program.
- **School type.** Most ECSs (64 percent) were public schools, while some were public charter schools (28 percent). The remaining 8 percent had other forms of institutional control (e.g., alternative programs).

In 2007–08, ECSs outperformed comparison district proficiency rates by an average of 7 percent.

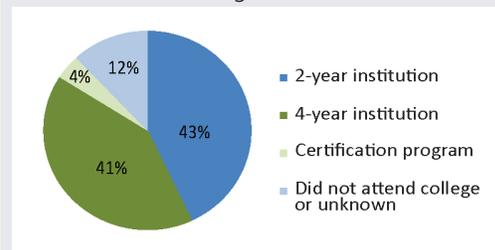
ECSs' and Districts' Average Assessment Proficiency Rates, 2007–08



Note: Assessment proficiency rates do not control for student achievement prior to enrolling in ECSs or other schools.

88 percent of ECS graduates enrolled in college the fall after high school graduation. Many enrolled in 2-year colleges.

2006–07 ECS Graduates' Type of College Enrollment



Outcome Differences by Location

The ECSs located on a college campus had stronger student performance on several measures, a finding that has occurred for several years. ECSs on a college campus had higher proficiency rates on state assessments relative to their districts; proficiency rates at ECSs not on a college campus did not differ from district rates. This finding remains even after controlling for the percentage of minority and low-income students enrolled. Attendance was higher at ECSs located on a college campus. Finally, ECSs located on a college campus had higher 9th to 10th grade progression rates than other ECSs. Although these differences are consistent, the relationship may not be causal: The location may be leading to strong outcomes, or other factors may be at play.

A Glimpse of the Post-ECS Experience

For the first time, the evaluation team interviewed ECS alumni who have continued on to college. Sixteen alumni from five ECSs reflected on their ECS experiences and shared information about their current situation as full-fledged college students.

- Alumni generally felt their ECSs had effectively prepared them to manage their time and to be successful in rigorous classes. They felt capable of navigating the college system and comfortable becoming involved in campus life.
- Not all college credits that students had earned while at the ECS transferred to their new college or university, but students were generally satisfied with the number of credits that did transfer.
- Many of the interviewed graduates applied to the colleges as first-year students rather than as transfer students, due to either wanting the full college experience or the number of credits that transferred. Some students reasoned that as freshmen, they would receive additional financial and support benefits. Furthermore, they did not want to rush through their college experience.

“*I feel the experience was worth it because it just prepared me more for the academic life as well as the social life in college.*”
—ECS alum

ECS and College Coursework

Most ECS students must move between the secondary and postsecondary coursework environments and learn to be successful in both. Below is a summary of what students encountered in both of these environments.

- Half of the students who took college courses reported that their first college class of the week was in a core subject area (mathematics, science, English language arts, history/social science).
- Students typically began taking classes in a sheltered environment — with a cohort of their ECS peers. By 12th grade, the majority of students took classes that were integrated with the traditional college population.
- Most students reported that both their high school and college courses were rigorous and the curricula were relevant to them. They also reported positive relationships with their instructors, which grew stronger as students progressed through the grade levels.

Supporting Students in ECSs

ECSs experienced challenges in preparing students for success in college. They met these challenges, in part, by providing supports at various levels. They tried to achieve

a balance between requiring formal supports and teaching students to be self-advocates. Overall, students felt supported by their ECS.

Students' first line of support was from their instructors. Most students (67 percent) reported asking their instructors for help, and students generally considered their instructors to be supportive.

Most ECSs (89 percent) reported that they provide academic or social support courses to assist students with skills such as literacy, research, and mathematics. Also, most ECSs (84 percent) had formal tutoring programs, but only one-third of students took advantage of them. Students felt adequately supported in ECSs but were more likely to access the supports at the high-school level.

Most ECSs offered students formal assistance to ensure a successful transition into college. Sixty-three percent of schools assisted with college entrance exam preparation, and about three-fourths of ECSs provided scholarship information sessions and college tours to aid students in their postgraduation plans.

“*I noticed the amount of kids that didn't know where the bursar's office was coming into college, so I just felt grateful that those were things [the staff at the ECS] drove into us. We had activities that forced us to go find different offices and things like that.*”

—ECS alum

IHE Partners

Because the ECHSI is part of the foundation's portfolio on improving high schools, it is only natural to focus attention on the high school perspective. However, the IHE partners play a very significant role in this initiative, and it would not exist without them. In 2007–08, college leaders shared that they engage in and support the IHE–ECS partnership because it:

- Creates a pipeline of future students
- Generates positive press for the college
- Fulfills the college's mission statement
- Provides resources to the college

Maintaining IHE commitment from the initial planning stage to the ongoing implementation is crucial to the sustainability of the ECS. This support is often demonstrated through the IHE's provision of a college liaison who has time dedicated solely to the ECS. Evidence indicates that a college liaison who has been involved in the ECS early in the planning stage, has pre-existing relationships with the college, and has an interest in the program and/or high school contributes to a successful partnership. A college's commitment to the IHE–ECS partnership also is exhibited through the level of faculty buy-in and collaboration with ECS instructors. A range of collaborations is taking place among the ECS and college faculties, although collaboration may not be a priority for some ECSs.

Resources

This brief was adapted from the complete 2009 evaluation report, *Six Years and Counting: The ECHSI Matures*, which can be found at www.gatesfoundation.org. This is the fifth annual report of an evaluation of the overall ECHSI. It focuses on the status of the ECHSI in 2007–08 but also provides a longitudinal view of the initiative.

Inquiries about the evaluation of the ECHSI may be sent to Andrea Berger at aberger@air.org.

Additional resources on this initiative can be found at www.earlycolleges.org.

ECHSI Intermediaries and Number of ECSs Open in 2007–08

ECHSI Intermediary	Number of ECSs Open in 2007–08
Center for Native Education (www.centerfornativeed.org)	9
City University of New York (www.earlycollege.cuny.edu)	6
Foundation for California Community Colleges (www.foundationccc.org)	20
Gateway to College (www.gatewaytocollege.org)	12
KnowledgeWorks Foundation (www.kwfdn.org)	8
Middle College National Consortium (www.mcnc.us)	15
National Council of La Raza (www.nclr.org)	10
North Carolina New Schools Project (www.ncllearnandearn.gov)	42
SECME, Inc. (www.secme.org)	2
Texas High School Project (www.thsp.org)	11
University System of Georgia (www.gaeearlycollege.org)	6
Utah Partnership for Education (www.utpartnership.org)	6
Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation (www.woodrow.org)	11
Total	157*

* One ECS is supported by both SECME and NCNSP.

Maintaining the Momentum of the ECHSI

It is important that the ECSs and the ECHSI maintain the momentum created from these initial promising outcomes that are at the heart of the initiative's goals. The foundation, JFF, and the intermediaries have worked together to identify strategies to ensure the schools' and the initiative's continued existence.

- The foundation cannot fund the ECHSI in perpetuity. Therefore, intermediaries have worked to take on leadership of the initiative so it can become a self-sustaining network. Intermediaries must balance these new responsibilities with overseeing their own networks of schools.
- Intermediaries must ensure that their ECSs are exhibiting the fundamental Core Principles of the ECHSI. It is those principles that will result in ECSs that are able to produce positive outcomes within a recognized and replicable network of schools. ECSs' ability to adhere to the Core Principles often relies on the fortitude and retention of invested leaders with the connections and drive to secure support and resources and on the creation of formal plans that outline how schools' needs will be met.

- State policies play a role in supporting ECSs, particularly those related to funding, student eligibility, teacher certification, course alignment, graduation requirements, and credit articulation. Some states have recognized ECSs as a strategy for improving high school graduation and college-going rates and have written line items into their budgets specifically for ECSs. Others are promoting models similar to ECSs as part of their high school reform efforts; ECSs may be able to benefit from policies that enable those reforms to be implemented.
- The ability of ECSs to produce positive results can help generate external support from states or other organizations for the intermediaries and schools.

“ [The partnership] has proven itself. It's been successful. ... Many of [the students] have been accepted to top universities as transfer students, so they're very pleased with the experiment and the results, so I see it continuing and improving. ”

—College leader