

CREDIT WHERE CREDIT IS DUE

As the 2015 legislative session gets underway, big changes are on the drawing board for Oregon's dual-credit and accelerated learning programs. With an eye toward the state's aggressive 40-40-20 goal, the Oregon Education Investment Board has proposed an expansion of college credit classes for high school students.

Dual-credit or accelerated learning programs offer both high school and college credit opportunities for high school students. Options are varied depending upon the district and school, geographic location, students' academic ability and even their financial resources. Some schools offer Early College programs, in which high school students take courses on college campuses. Others have college-level courses taught at the student's high school.

Questions remain about which approach will best serve students and accurately replicate the college coursework. OEA member educators are engaged not only in teaching dual credit programs, but

OEA LEADERS PUSH FOR EFFECTIVE DUAL CREDIT POLICIES FOR STUDENTS

BY JON BELL & JARED MASON-GERE

PHOTOS BY THOMAS PATTERSON

in analyzing policy and advocating for programs that will best meet students' needs.

In the rural town of Hermiston, Ore., English and communications teacher Erica Keefauver teaches college credit courses through Eastern Promise, a proficiency-based college credit program for high school students. Students take a proficiency exam or submit a portfolio of work at the end of the course, which is graded by both high school and college instructors. If they score high enough, they earn the college credit.

"It's a push from the state, so we have to offer some opportunities," Keefauver said, referring to her students who live in a rural community with no access to a nearby community college where they'd be able to take advanced coursework.

This legislative session, Oregon lawmakers will consider Senate Bill 84, a wide-ranging proposal that would establish standards and funding mechanisms for accelerated college credit programs. As it was submitted, the bill would require all school districts to have these programs at every high school, transferable to accredited post-secondary institutions. Students would not be required to pay for the courses or credits.

As the state pursues dual-credit expansion, eyebrows have begun to raise over just how state officials are going about it. OEA members are actively engaged, pushing to ensure any new mandates provide an accurate experience and represent true college-level work.

"It's important that accelerated learning programs create a realistic experience for students, provide them accurate exposure



to college coursework, and set them up for success,” said Traci Hodgson, a history and women’s studies instructor at Chemeketa Community College. “At the end of the day, that’s what we’re fighting for: making sure these programs best serve our students.”

Kevin Furey, a professor of economics at Chemeketa Community College, first started to catch wind of potential changes to dual-credit programs as the community college faculty adviser to the Oregon State Board of Education, a post he held from 2012 through 2014. He said education officials changed an Oregon Administrative Rule to make it easier for high schools to offer these programs, and when they were asked how that was going to work, their answers were vague.

“You got the feeling that people weren’t being forthright with you, that something was afoot,” he said. “We weren’t sure what it was, but it was something.”

It turned out that the state was aiming to expand Eastern Promise through a replication grant program. Furey said the expansion was designed, however, to increase the

Traci Hodgson is passionate about retaining the college experience for accelerated learning students.

"AT THE END OF THE DAY, THAT'S WHAT WE'RE FIGHTING FOR: MAKING SURE THESE PROGRAMS BEST SERVE OUR STUDENTS."

TRACI HODGSON

A HISTORY AND WOMEN'S STUDIES
INSTRUCTOR AT CHEMEKETA COMMUNITY
COLLEGE

pool of qualified instructors by loosening the requirements for teachers. For one of the expanded programs, Willamette Promise, high school principals were given the authority to determine who was qualified to teach a college-level course.

Furey and Hodgson are among those advocating for other models of accelerated learning. The College Credit Now program

is one in which Chemeketa Community College participates and is broadly supported by Chemeketa faculty. Other programs offered in Oregon school districts include the Two-Plus-Two program for students pursuing career-technical courses and the Expanded Options program, targeting at-risk students. Altogether, tens of thousands of public school students avail themselves of classroom-based and online programs.

Susan Huffman, an English teacher at North Marion High School, asked her principal and superintendent to opt out of Willamette Promise, saying there was no real curriculum that accompanied the Willamette Promise program. Students were merely required to do two writing assignments in conjunction with their regular high school English class, one of which was to be a personal reflection.

“I just really felt that this was not the best way for my kids,” Huffman said. “My kids need instruction, they need practice to be well-prepared for writing. This was not offering any of that. To me, two essays isn’t preparing kids for college.”

OREGON'S DUAL CREDIT OPTIONS: ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Submitted by the OEA Community College Council

Our recommendations represent the professional assessment of the community college educators represented by the Oregon Education Association's Community College Council. In order for dual credit courses to work as a bridge from high school to a successful college experience, these courses must mirror actual college courses in both academic rigor, college educational culture, and instructor qualification. We believe that the best option would be for high school students to take college courses on college campuses, and therefore we strongly recommend that the State develop strategies to expand what we have called the:

A. Whole College Immersion Experience; and

B. Early or Middle College options.

We also recognize that many high schools are not physically close enough to have their students take classes directly on college campuses, so we recommend that the State also develop strategies to create and expand:

C. College Comes to the High School; and

D. Supported Online College Courses with a High School Mentor options.

In addition, the State should find a way to reimburse students who want to enroll in online college courses.

To expand the College Credit Now option, the State should make available summer online graduate courses and funding to allow teachers to gain the credentials they need to teach these courses.

Finally, we believe that the Eastern Promise model should be used sparingly if at all. There are a number of potential problems with the proficiency assessments. Quality concerns would multiply with the lowering of instructor qualification standards. There are better options for Oregon's students, both urban and rural, that more effectively introduce them to college.



Traci Hodgson took part in developing the Community College Council's dual credit recommendations.

157,731

Number of community college credits earned by Oregon high school students in dual credit programs in 2012-13.

51,517

Number of Career and Technical Education course credits earned by Oregon high school students in 2012-13.

\$21,000,000

Estimated community college cost savings to Oregon families and students as a result of all those credits combined.

Source: Division of Community Colleges and Workforce Development

And it's not just the Eastern Promise imitators that have failed to make the grade. The original prototype also has its detractors. In its initial years of operation, Eastern Promise's intent of reaching low-income and minority students who otherwise would see college as unattainable has missed the mark. Students taking advantage of the program are those who were clearly headed for college anyway. In effect, more affluent, college-bound students are taking advantage of the program with our low-income students' needs going unmet.

In the tiny eastern Oregon town of Echo where Mike Heriza teaches at Echo High School, this reality is especially true. "With the dual credit programs, you really get the top students," said Heriza, who teaches college-level classes through Eastern Promise in writing, drama and one on the novels of John Steinbeck. "The kids are really motivated, so it's fun to teach them. I think the parents and the community appreciates (the dual credit opportunities) because it saves them a lot of money, too."

Beyond this, Keefauver has concerns that the state's push for greater college credit opportunity may not help students get a true sense of what college courses are like.



“I don’t always think that high school students have the skills to do these types of assignments at this level,” she said. “It makes me nervous to think of some of them graduating with an associate’s degree and then taking 300-level classes.”

Another concern, according to Hodgson, is that both high school teachers and college instructors will have even more work — grading, administering tests, planning and more — piled onto their already-over-flowing plates. In addition, some worry that the lack of solid curriculum in programs like Willamette Promise won’t do much to get students ready for college-level work.

Striving Toward A Solution

Responding to these and other concerns, OEA’s Community College UniServ Council and high school teachers across the state have stepped forward. According to a white paper written by the Community College Council (see sidebar), the Eastern Promise model, particularly one that would lower requirements for teachers, should not be used. The council is asking

Ericka Keefauver, AP English teacher at Hermiston High School, is thankful she can provide her students the option of pursuing college credit.

"I DON'T ALWAYS THINK THAT HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS HAVE THE SKILLS TO DO THESE TYPES OF ASSIGNMENTS AT THIS LEVEL. IT MAKES ME NERVOUS TO THINK OF SOME OF THEM GRADUATING WITH AN ASSOCIATE'S DEGREE AND THEN TAKING 300-LEVEL CLASSES."

ERICKA KEEFAUVER
ENGLISH AND COMMUNICATIONS TEACHER
AT HERMISTON HIGH SCHOOL

the state to invest in programs that would bring college instructors to high schools to

teach courses or to support online courses paired with high school mentors. They are actively working to make sure that policymakers understand that the new, lesser programs threaten to displace existing programs with much higher success rates. Absent scrutiny, they argue, the state will miss the fact that program quality will take a back seat to program quantity.

“There are a variety of well-intentioned proposals being put forward in Salem that could lead to a less rigorous experience than a student would experience in an actual college setting,” Hodgson said. “We do a disservice if we tell someone they’re getting a college course when they’re not.”

In both the K-12 and community college arenas, OEA members are actively working to make existing state mandates work as well as possible.

“If we don’t stand up for students, educators, and common sense policies, who will?” asked Hodgson. “This work isn’t always easy, but I know my advocacy is making a difference for community colleges and education throughout Oregon.” ■