



Dual Enrollment for Students from Special Populations:

Improving College Transitions for English Learners, Students with Disabilities, Foster Youth, and Young People Experiencing Homelessness

Executive Summary

In California and across the nation, education leaders share a hunger for innovations that will help to close longstanding equity gaps and improve the outcomes of historically underserved groups. It is not surprising, given this context, that interest in dual enrollment appears to be at an all-time high. Dual enrollment is widely touted as an effective strategy for raising high school graduation, college enrollment, and degree completion rates, including for students from traditionally underserved groups.

Little is known about how to promote access and success in dual enrollment for students with special educational needs—often referred to as “special populations:”

- **English learners,**
- **Students with disabilities,**
- **Foster youth, and**
- **Young people experiencing homelessness.**

These groups, which collectively comprise nearly one-third of students in grades K-12 in California, have the lowest rates of college readiness and enrollment, and the most to gain.

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With support from the Stuart Foundation, JFF has been exploring what it takes to design dual enrollment with a focus on special populations. To answer this question, JFF reviewed relevant literature, consulted with advocates and researchers, and interviewed representatives of California high schools, districts, and community colleges known for their high dual enrollment rates or other promising approaches to supporting college transitions for English learners, students with disabilities, foster youth, and/or young people experiencing homelessness.

Across our analyses, we found strong evidence that all of these groups are capable of success in dual enrollment, given appropriate support, and that it can be a powerful tool for promoting college access for young people who are too often overlooked and underserved.

The full report includes sections dedicated to each special population group, as well as a discussion of common barriers and promising practices. In the following summary, we focus on common findings and recommendations while also providing brief, population-specific snapshots.

Uneven Dual Enrollment Participation Rates

Research released in December 2020 from University of California, Davis, provides the first statewide analysis comparing dual

enrollment participation rates for English learners, students with disabilities, foster youth, and young people experiencing homelessness versus the general population (*see Figure 1*). Their analysis shows that dual enrollment participation for all of these groups lags behind state averages. The gap has widened for students with disabilities and English learners, in particular, who have consistently had the lowest participation rates of all groups.

Common Barriers and Promising Practices for Special Populations

Systemic Barriers

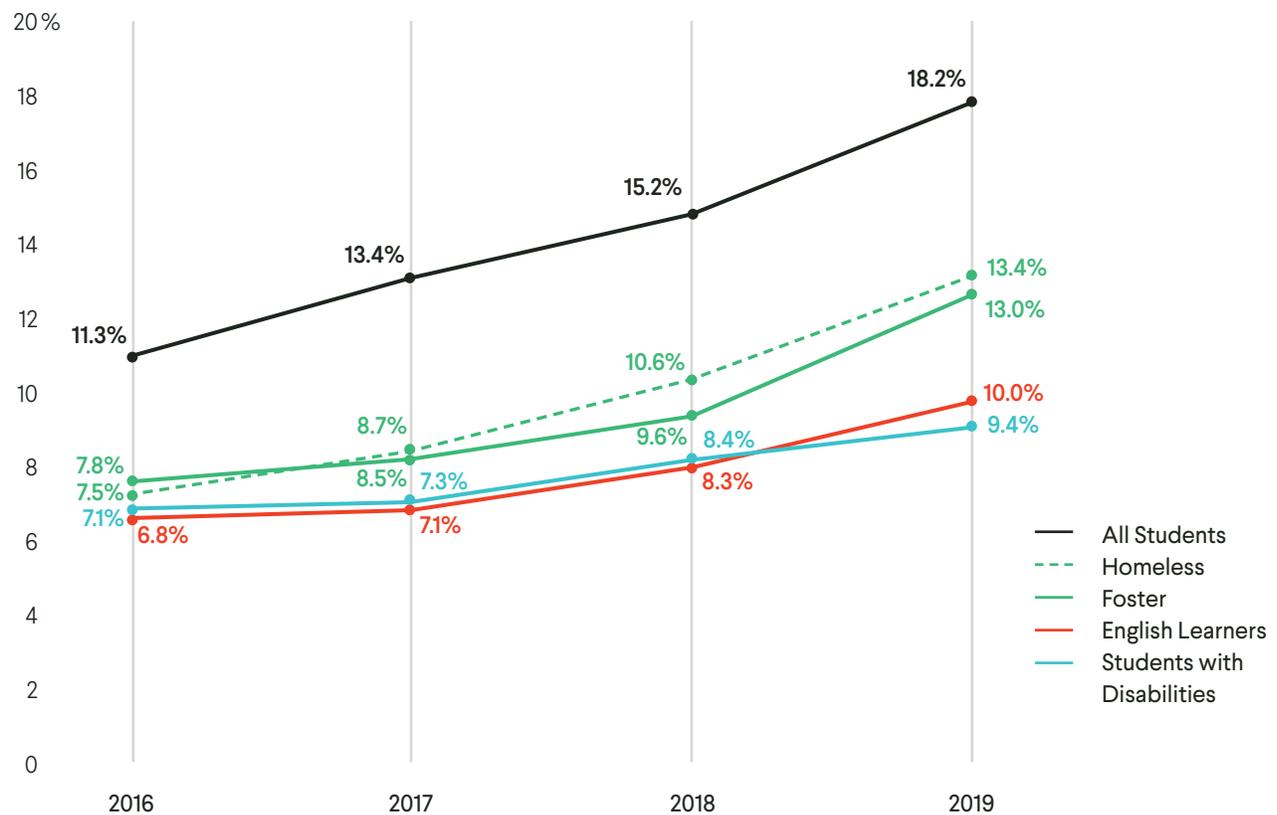
One of the most common themes repeated across stakeholder interviews was a culture of low expectations that too often permeates the educational experiences of students from special populations. These students are also disproportionately affected by the chronic underfunding of counseling and other student services, and they are more likely to attend high schools without robust postsecondary partnerships. When dual enrollment is an option, there may be insufficient guidance or support to facilitate their success and mitigate the risk of poor performance in college courses. Finally, for each population group, there remains a need for better alignment and coordination between the policies and programs that are intended to support their success in K-12 schools and at the college level.

Promising Practices

- Conducting proactive, multilingual outreach to students and parents.
- Establishing expectations that every student will take college courses, often as part of career-themed pathways.
- Integrating dual enrollment into the school day as an equity strategy.
- Recognizing the critical role of counselors as dual enrollment experts and advocates for special populations.

FIGURE 1:

Comparative Dual Enrollment Participation Rates for California High School Graduates, 2016-2019



Sources: *A Rising Tide: Dual Enrollment is Growing Among California High School Students*, Wheelhouse: The Center for Community College Leadership and Research, UC Davis, 2020; California Education Lab, School of Education, UC Davis, 2020.

Population-Specific Snapshots

English Learners

English learners are often held back from accessing college-level courses due to educational models that treat English language learning as a prerequisite for accessing rigorous academic content. Schools and colleges focused on increasing dual enrollment participation for English learners incorporated several promising practices, including:

- Providing opportunities for English learners to dually enroll in advanced college language courses in their primary languages.
- Bringing college ESL courses into high schools—and making these courses count for both high school and college credit.

Students with Disabilities

Supporting students with disabilities in dual enrollment requires an understanding of the important differences between the disability laws and policies in K-12 versus postsecondary education. Unfortunately, high school students are often unaware of how to request accommodations that can support their success in college courses. Promising practices observed at innovative institutions in California and nationwide include:

- Providing a personalized point of contact in the college's office of Disabled Student Programs and Services for all dual enrollment students with disabilities.
- Integrating wraparound supports and engaging community partner organizations to help build students' college navigation and self-advocacy skills.

Foster Youth and Young People Experiencing Homelessness

While foster youth and young people experiencing homelessness are distinct groups with unique needs, they face many of the same barriers and there is significant overlap between the two populations. Both groups experience frequent disruptions to learning due to school mobility and housing instability, and both have high rates of trauma-related mental health needs. JFF found emerging examples of dual enrollment programs focused on these groups that are incorporating the following components:

- Providing a warm handoff between the staff and programs serving foster youth and young people experiencing homelessness in the K-12 and community colleges.
- Integrating credit-bearing dual enrollment courses into existing college access programs targeting these groups.

Compared with the other special population groups studied, young people experiencing homelessness are particularly underserved. There remains a critical need for high school-college partnership strategies and funding focused on this large and growing population.

Shared Recommendations

For Local Dual Enrollment Partnerships

- ▶ Establish local equity goals for dual enrollment that include special populations and disaggregate data to address course-taking gaps.
- ▶ Equip dual enrollment practitioners to support students from special populations.
- ▶ Ensure dual enrollment students are connected with college-level supports and programs targeting special populations.
- ▶ Create partnerships with dedicated staff and programs focused on serving special populations in the California Community Colleges.

For State Systems

- ▶ Elevate and disseminate promising examples of dual enrollment partnerships that focus on access and success for special populations.
- ▶ Provide field guidance on the range of programs, services, and funding streams that can be used for special populations in dual enrollment.

For Research

- ▶ Pilot dual enrollment courses designed for diverse populations and study their effectiveness.
- ▶ Analyze longitudinal student-level data to better understand the impact of dual enrollment on college and career readiness and success for special populations.

Together, these recommendations can potentially transform dual enrollment from a one-size-fits-all solution to one that is designed with students from special populations at the forefront.

