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DUAL ENROLLMENT AND THE 2024 ELECTIONS

How Federal Policy and This Year's Elections May Impact Dual Enrollment

Alex Perry

As polls show one of the tightest presidential elections in recent American history (Goldmacher & Igielnik, 2024), education policymakers and advocates in Washington, D.C. are spending the fall considering what education policy might look like under the eventuality that either former President Donald Trump or current Vice President Kamala Harris win on November 5. And it is in this context that dual enrollment policy advocates are doing the same; scenario planning for what policy asks and attitudes will look like towards dual enrollment under either Democratic or Republican control of the White House. Congress is also up for grabs this year; razor-thin majorities for Democrats in the Senate and Republicans in the House are at risk (Boyce et al., 2024).

The possible permutations for governing next year – who controls the White House, House, and Senate – will have a big impact on the plans of whichever parties find themselves in power or sharing power. But there is cause for optimism that continued advocacy for new federal dual enrollment policies has a path under any combination of governing control in the White House and Congress.

The recent release of data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), which collects data from higher education institutions, shows that 2.5 million students took a dual enrollment course in 2022-2023 (Fink, 2022). This

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confirms a reality that dual enrollment practitioners know well: dual enrollment is big and continues to grow. Significant participation in dual enrollment is also nationally distributed and not limited to states that typically affiliate with either Democrats or Republicans. Indeed, some of the biggest dual enrollment states are very conservative; the IPEDS data, for example, shows that Indiana and Idaho have the largest dual enrollment student populations as a percentage of the state's undergraduate enrollments.

Support for dual enrollment, therefore, is not a partisan issue. During President Trump's first term in office, his Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, a longtime Republican fundraiser and advocate for school choice policies, made her first public address after her confirmation by the US Senate to the American Association of Community Colleges, where she lauded community colleges for their partnerships with high schools to offer dual enrollment and create early college high school programs (Dembicki, 2017). In addition to proposing funding for dual enrollment in the President's annual budget request (United States Department of Education, 2024a), dual enrollment is one of four key pillars of the US Department of Education's Unlocking Career Success initiative under the Biden Administration (U.S. Department of Education Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education).

There is the potential for new policies to support dual enrollment under either a Trump or Harris Administration, but there are a number of underlying structural challenges facing dual enrollment policy advocates in either scenario. Those challenges are the same challenges that have contributed toward the lack of progress under the first Trump Administration and then the Biden Administration, though momentum does continue to grow.

THE CURRENT FEDERAL LANDSCAPE FOR DUAL ENROLLMENT

To date, there is no federal program dedicated explicitly to providing funding to support dual enrollment; however, many flexible federal funding streams provided to school districts and institutions of higher education can be used to support dual enrollment as one of their allowable uses (College in High School Alliance, 2023). Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (otherwise known as Perkins V), and the Higher Education Act (HEA), school districts or colleges can use some of their funding to support dual enrollment. But many do not, having already earmarked that funding for other necessary purposes at their institution.

Out of the current legislative framework permitting federal funds to be used for

dual enrollment, career technical education (CTE) is the space where it is used most prominently, as funding provided through CTE funding streams has been allowed to be used to support dual enrollment since at least 2006 and the passage of Perkins IV. Allowable use language under ESSA is much more recent, having only been passed in 2015 (College in High School Alliance, 2024), and many school districts have not chosen to use their ESSA flexibilities to support dual enrollment. Under HEA, colleges can only access funding for dual enrollment through the GEAR UP grant program; none of the other HEA funding streams make dual enrollment allowable.

With scant existing policy to support dual enrollment, new legislation would be necessary to create dedicated policy support or a funding stream at a time when Congress is the least productive it has been in a generation (Solender, 2023). The lack of bills actually passing Congress and reaching the president's desk is but one of the underlying challenges facing dual enrollment, despite whoever wins the 2024 presidential election.

FEDERAL EDUCATION GOVERNANCE IS PARTITIONED BETWEEN K-12 AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Compared to federal education laws originally passed in the 1960s, dual enrollment as a modern and widespread access tool for promoting college access and success is a relatively recent phenomenon (Hoffman, 2024). And because dual enrollment programs involve partnerships between high schools and institutions of higher education, these programs are both a part of K-12 and higher education but do not have their home in either.

Federal education governance is set up to reflect the current legislative architecture for education effectively. There is an Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE) that oversees the implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act, an Office of Postsecondary Education (OPE) that oversees the implementation of the Higher Education Act, and an Office of Career Technical and Adult Education (OCTAE) that oversees the implementation of Perkins V (United States Department of Education, 2024b). Under the Biden Administration, OCTAE has taken the lead in thinking about and supporting federal policy for dual enrollment through the Unlocking Career Success initiative. But while dual enrollment plays a major role in CTE, the confinement of policy leadership in dual enrollment to OCTAE leaves opportunities on the table to support dual enrollment as an onramp to four-year degrees and the wider universe of dual enrollment programs and opportunities for students outside of CTE.

The federal structure for education governance does not reflect the reality of the education ecosystem in the 21st century. K-12 and higher education are not siloed entities that require different teams of agency personnel to oversee, and the connection points between the two systems are growing beyond just the CTE realm. But in a world in which dual enrollment is both part of K-12 and higher education, but also of neither, there is no clear direction to senior Department of Education personnel to ensure that dual enrollment policymaking is a priority.

There are deeper questions at play here around the way policymaking reflects students' true education and career journeys, but it has a meaningful impact on the ability of dual enrollment policymaking to move forward.

STATES ALREADY HAVE POLICY AND FUNDING

An additional structural challenge for federal policymaking is that, in its absence, states have developed their own policy and funding regimes to support high school students in taking college courses. State policy regimes for dual enrollment exist in almost every state (Jamieson et al., 2022), but are highly variable in terms of what they require from programs, whether funding is provided to support their work, and how that funding is delivered (College in High School Alliance, 2024b).

These existing state policy regimes for dual enrollment complicate federal policymaking in the space because the question facing federal policymakers is how to accommodate vastly different dual enrollment state policies and funding structures. Should the federal government seek to pre-empt the way some states govern and fund their dual enrollment programs in favor of a more nationalized approach? Or should the federal government find ways to support all the existing state policy regimes for dual enrollment regardless of how sophisticated they are?

Existing proposals for new federal dual enrollment policy have focused on two main avenues for providing support for these programs: either through grants to states that let the states decide how to invest funding to expand dual enrollment or through student-level funding through financial aid (College in High School Alliance, 2024c). Either approach has its opportunities or its drawbacks, and an initial experimental site looking at the use of Pell Grants for dual enrollment did not yield significant results (Matheny et al., 2022). There are, therefore, important design questions that likely need to be explored in order to more fully realize a realistic proposal for federal support for dual enrollment.

SO WHAT WOULD REALLY HAPPEN IF TRUMP OR HARRIS WIN?

These structural challenges face dual enrollment policymaking at the federal level regardless of who is in control of the White House or Congress; however, despite there being support among both Democrats and Republicans for dual enrollment, that does not mean that the election will not have an impact on federal dual enrollment policy overall. While both a Trump or Harris Administration would be nominally supportive of dual enrollment, the extent and implementation of their support will vary.

Neither candidate has said anything specific about dual enrollment, and the education platforms for each candidate are not well fleshed out. While we do not have a specific set of proposals from the major presidential candidates that we can vet, we can make inferences about their respective approaches.

Under the Biden Administration, dual enrollment has received the most support it ever has at the federal level. The FY25 President's Budget Request included a significant new proposal to provide mandatory funding (which is exempt from the regular appropriations process, like Social Security or Medicare funding) to allow high school students to take up to 12 credits of college courses without cost (United States Department of Education, 2024a). The President's budget request did not specify how that funding would be directed or to whom, but it does send a strong signal about support for dual enrollment and the need to address equity gaps experienced by low income students. Vice President Harris is a different candidate from President Biden and has already diverged with him on a few issues in the campaign, but the core policy message of the Biden Administration is likely to carry over to a Harris Administration, and this proposal may also.

Former President Trump, on the other hand, has proposed eliminating the Department of Education entirely. He also proposes to block grant the Department's budget back to the states to completely devolve education policy away from the federal government. Given the complexity involved in shuttering a whole federal department, and the fact that legislation would be required to do so, this proposal is unlikely to become a reality. But it does signal that new funding proposals for dual enrollment are unlikely from the Trump Administration. Instead, depending on who staffs up the Department of Education, we are more likely to see a second Trump Administration express support for state efforts to expand dual enrollment, particularly with a career focus. But that is unlikely to be accompanied by new funding or policy provisions.

Having said that, though, if Congress passed legislation to support dual enrollment during a Trump presidency, there is no reason to believe that the White House would

necessarily oppose it or refuse to allow it to become law. Dual enrollment may not be a partisan issue, but given the partisanship of education as a whole, the issue is likely to be impacted by broader political debates about the future of federal education policy.

WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO MAKE FEDERAL DUAL ENROLLMENT FUNDING A REALITY?

More significant dual enrollment policy and funding will require the following:

- Continued advocacy to ensure members of Congress and the Executive Branch understand the important role that dual enrollment plays in the modern education ecosystem and in many students' journeys into college and career.
- Continued research to understand the outcomes for students who participate in dual enrollment and make the case for investments.
- Continued research to understand the return on investment of public funds at the state level in dual enrollment, to make the case for additional investments at the federal level.
- A thoughtfully designed policy proposal that is sensitive to whatever political context the November elections bring.

Despite structural challenges facing dual enrollment policymaking, and the uncertainty around how power will be distributed in Washington, DC in 2025 following the elections, there is a significant opportunity to continue to work to advance dual enrollment policy. Given the size and scope of dual enrollment nationwide and the clear positive outcomes, the federal government needs to be more thoughtful about how it shapes and supports the high schools, colleges, industry partners, and intermediaries who support this work and the ability of high school students to earn college courses.

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