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Democratizing Dual Enrollment: Beyond Economic Rationales[1]

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Abstract: Dual enrollment (DE) is a popular reform in the United States that allows high school students to take college courses through partnerships between school districts and institutions of higher education. DE programs have been scaling rapidly, but participation is stratified by race and class, and research reveals little about the quality and content of DE courses. These limitations stem, in part, from a lack of theorizing around what purpose DE reform can and should serve, both in the lives of youth and for communities writ large. Situated in literature on the purpose of education in capitalist democracies, this study employs qualitative content analysis to examine the rationales for DE coursework, as depicted in state-level policy documents. Findings indicate that DE policy rationales are

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depicted almost entirely in neoliberal economic terms. We argue that, while economic benefits are important, the almost exclusive emphasis on economic outcomes has led to rapid scaling of a curricular reform with insufficient attention to teaching, learning, and equity. To maximize the potential benefits of DE reform, we call for imagining its democratic possibilities.
Keywords: dual enrollment; purpose of education; neoliberalism; democracy; state policy; curriculum

Democratizar la matrícula dual: Más allá de las razones económicas
Resumen: La inscripción dual (DE en inglés) es una reforma popular en los Estados Unidos que permite a los estudiantes de secundaria tomar cursos universitarios a través de asociaciones entre distritos escolares e instituciones de educación superior. Los programas de DE han aumentado rápidamente, pero la participación está estratificada por raza y clase, y las investigaciones revelan poco sobre la calidad y el contenido de los cursos de DE. Estas limitaciones se deben, en parte, a la falta de teorización sobre el propósito que puede y debe tener la reforma de la DE, tanto en la vida de los jóvenes como en las comunidades en general. Situado en la literatura sobre el propósito de la educación en las democracias capitalistas, este estudio emplea un análisis de contenido cualitativo para examinar los fundamentos de los cursos de DE, tal como se describen en los documentos de políticas a nivel estatal. Los hallazgos indican que los fundamentos de las políticas de DE se describen casi en su totalidad en términos económicos neoliberales. Argumentamos que, si bien los beneficios económicos son importantes, el énfasis casi exclusivo en los resultados económicos ha llevado a una rápida ampliación de una reforma curricular sin prestar suficiente atención a la enseñanza, el aprendizaje y la equidad. Para maximizar los beneficios potenciales de la reforma de la DE, llamamos a imaginar sus posibilidades democráticas.
Palabras-clave: doble matrícula; propósito de la educación; neoliberalismo; democracia; política estatal; plan de estudios

Democratizando a matrícula dupla: Além das razões económicas
Resumo: A matrícula dupla (DE em inglês) é uma reforma popular nos Estados Unidos que permite que estudantes do ensino médio façam cursos universitários por meio de parcerias entre distritos escolares e instituições de ensino superior. Os programas de DE têm aumentado rapidamente, mas a participação é estratificada por raça e classe, e a investigação revela pouco sobre a qualidade e o conteúdo dos cursos de DE. Estas limitações resultam, em parte, da falta de teorização sobre o propósito que a reforma da DE pode e deve servir, tanto na vida dos jovens como nas comunidades em geral. Situado na literatura sobre o propósito da educação nas democracias capitalistas, este estudo emprega análise de conteúdo qualitativa para examinar as justificativas para cursos de DE, conforme retratado em documentos políticos em nível estadual. Os resultados indicam que os fundamentos políticos da DE são retratados quase inteiramente em termos económicos neoliberais. Argumentamos que, embora os benefícios económicos sejam importantes, a ênfase quase exclusiva nos resultados económicos levou à rápida expansão de uma reforma curricular com atenção insuficiente ao ensino, à aprendizagem e à equidade. Para maximizar os benefícios potenciais da reforma da DE, apelamos à imaginação das suas possibilidades democráticas.
Palavras-chave: dupla matrícula; propósito da educação; neoliberalismo; democracia; política estadual; currículo

Democratizing Dual Enrollment: Beyond Economic Rationales

Dual enrollment (DE), also referred to as dual credit or concurrent enrollment, is an increasingly popular reform in the United States that allows high school students to take college-level coursework through partnerships between K-12 districts and institutions of higher education (IHEs; Taylor et al., 2022). DE courses are taught by college instructors or high school teachers with the proper credential, and are delivered at the student's high school, on a college campus, or online (Shivji & Wilson, 2019). To enroll, students must meet the college readiness standard of the sponsoring IHE, typically by demonstrating proficiency on a reading, writing, and/or math placement exam. Most DE programs confer college credit to students who successfully pass the course, which differentiates DE from standardized test-based programs like Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate (Tobolowsky & Allen, 2016). In theory, DE students will experience college-level rigor (Arnold et al., 2017), and—because many states, colleges, and school districts subsidize tuition—accumulate free or low-cost credit toward a college degree (Hanson et al., 2015).

Policymakers at the state and national levels have promoted DE as a critical mechanism to enhance postsecondary opportunity and success (USDOE, 2022), and participation rates have steadily increased (Kelley & Woods, 2019). As of 2011, 98% of community colleges and 84% of public universities were involved in DE partnerships, and around 80% of high schools administered DE (Thomas et al., 2013). In 2019, 36 state legislatures adopted laws to expand DE (Pompelia, 2020). Today, 90% of high schools offer DE coursework in some form, and about one in three high school students earns college credits through DE (Shivji & Wilson, 2019). A growing body of research suggests DE participation has positive impacts on postsecondary enrollment and completion, on average, but questions remain as to how DE reform can close equity gaps in access and success (Taylor et al., 2022). Students from underrepresented and minoritized backgrounds are less likely than their privileged counterparts to participate (Fink et al., 2017; Xu et al., 2021), and the research is mixed or limited regarding what experience students have in the program and what they gain from it (Allen et al., 2019; Tobolowsky, 2022).

We suggest that one reason for these knowledge gaps is a lack of theorizing around what purpose DE reform can and should serve, both in the lives of youth and for communities writ large. Scholars have long debated the purpose of education in a democratic society, citing the multiple and at times conflicting priorities of education reformers (Chan, 2016; Labaree, 1997; Spring, 2004). For instance, schools can provide workforce preparation by training students for careers, and opportunity for social mobility through credentialing. Schooling can also prepare students for democratic citizenship by imparting knowledge of democratic processes (e.g., voting) and a sense of civic duty and responsibility (Abowitz & Harnish, 2006). These purposes, or rationales, that drive education policy matter because they position institutions—and by extension, their students—to address particular societal problems, be they economic, political, or social (Schneider & Ingram, 1997). Policy rationales also provide framing for policy design, implementation, and evaluation, with implications for students' experiences and outcomes (Spillane et al., 2002). In the context of DE, for instance, economic priorities might emphasize how many credits and degrees students earn, whereas democratic concerns might foreground who is included in the classroom and what is learned.

Over the past few decades, scholars have documented the growing influence of neoliberal ideology, which promotes free markets, competition, and privatization to solve public problems (Harvey, 2007; Miller et al., 2022; Saltman, 2015). In turn, many school reforms have elevated economic rationales such as workforce development and social mobility, often at the expense of democratic citizenship (Kolluri & Tierney, 2018; Labaree, 1997). This trend has potential consequences for the ability of young people to navigate emergent threats to democracy worldwide (Neumann, 2017), from the rise of fascist and white supremacist movements, to worsening climate

change, to growing wealth inequality (Stasavage, 2020; Williams & Toldson, 2020; Zemblyas, 2020). In fact, on the most recent administration of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2022), eighth grade students' scores on the Civics and U.S. History assessments declined for the first time since the test was initially administered in 1969. Within this context, it is critical for education scholars to interrogate the role schools play—or should play—in preparing younger generations for democratic life, by considering how emergent education reforms frame these commitments. Yet while prior scholarship has called for increased attention to citizenship in K-12 (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) and higher education (Lagemann & Lewis, 2015), the literature on DE has been inattentive to broader questions of purpose, especially as related to democracy (Taylor et al., 2022). As DE enrolls more and more high school students in college coursework, we suggest the need to ask: To what end? What do we want young people to gain from early exposure to college?

To initiate this line of inquiry, this study draws on theories of competing educational goals in capitalist democracies (Delbanco, 2012; Labaree, 1997; Lagemann & Lewis, 2012) and qualitative content analysis (QCA) to examine how state-level policy documents frame the purpose of DE. We ask: What are the policy rationales for offering DE coursework? Our analysis reveals that policy aims are depicted almost entirely in neoliberal economic terms. We argue that, while economic rationales are important, the almost exclusive emphasis on DE's economic benefits has led to rapid scaling of a curricular reform with insufficient attention to teaching, learning, and equity. To maximize the potential benefits of DE, we call for imagining its democratic possibilities.

Theory and Literature

DE enables high school students to experience college coursework and obtain low-cost credit through an IHE to better position them for postsecondary success (Tobolowsky & Allen, 2016). DE reflects a larger movement, often referred to as the College Completion Agenda, that emerged in the 21st century to promote higher education (Kolluri & Tierney, 2018). Policies designed to increase the quality and rigor of secondary schooling and facilitate pathways to postsecondary graduation reflect the underlying assumption that more education is beneficial (Malin et al., 2017; Vargas, 2019). However, the potential benefits of increasing educational attainment are myriad, complex, and often conflicting, with implications for policy design, implementation, and outcomes (Labaree, 1997, 2018). In this section, we first outline theoretical perspectives on the purpose of education and situate these viewpoints in today's neoliberal context. We then offer a brief synthesis of empirical findings on DE and assert the value of examining DE policy rationales.

Perspectives on the Purpose of Education in a Neoliberal Era

We situate the study in literature that theorizes how tensions between democracy and capitalism play out in education reform (Cohen & Neufeld, 1981; Labaree, 2018; Kantor & Lowe, 2013). Integrating historian David Labaree's (1997) framework of educational goals with more recent scholarship, we present three aims of schooling: democracy, workforce development, and social mobility. We then discuss how the rise of neoliberalism has elevated the economic value of education, with implications for democratic sustainability. Throughout, we highlight empirical findings relevant to each aim in education broadly and higher education specifically.

Education for Democracy

Since their emergence in early U.S. history, schools and colleges have been expected to support a democratic way of life (Kezar et al., 2015; Mayhew et al., 2016; Sant, 2019). Termed *democratic equality* by Labaree (1997), this purpose is political and oriented toward the common good. A primary focus of education for democracy is citizenship training, which early American

leaders believed was the best defense against tyranny. Abowitz and Harnish (2006) conceptualized civic education as encompassing three elements: civic literacy, or understanding how a democratic republic works, such as governance processes and structures; civic agency, or learning the rights and responsibilities of citizens, such as voting; and civic identity, or internalizing a sense of civic duty and social responsibility. K-12 schools impart these skills and knowledge through common curricula about U.S. government and history. IHEs were designed to impart intellectual, moral, and civic virtues and advance the common good (Checkoway, 2001; Lagemann & Lewis, 2015), with some original mission statements explicitly renouncing private benefits (Dorn, 2017). Civics-oriented educational experiences across the P-20 system equip students with critical thinking skills to understand, critique, and improve the society in which they live (Kidd et al., 2020). By placing them "elbow-to-elbow and nose-to-nose with diverse others" (Abowitz & Stitzlein, 2018, p. 36), schools and colleges facilitate students' sense of obligation to one another, multicultural understanding, interpersonal skills, and desire to safeguard civil liberties. In recent decades, the notion of citizenship has expanded to include global citizenship, whereby students learn about and assume responsibility for human rights issues worldwide (Beltramo & Duncheon, 2013; Nussbaum, 2010; Veugelers et al., 2017).

Numerous studies have found a positive association between tertiary education and civic participation (Evans et al., 2019; Flanagan & Levine, 2010). College degree holders are more likely than high school graduates to be civically engaged as measured by registering to vote, voting, volunteering, and donating to charities (Ma et al., 2016; McNaughtan & Brown, 2020; Skinner et al., 2021). Some studies suggest college completion has even greater effects on civic engagement for African Americans and women (Hillygus, 2005; Perrin & Gillis, 2019). Specific college experiences that are positively associated with civic participation include: taking coursework in the humanities and social sciences (Fernandez, 2021; Hillygus, 2005; Perrin & Gillis, 2019), doing community-based projects (Perrin & Gillis, 2019), and volunteering (Sax, 2004). Fernandez (2021) found that completing even one community college course in political science can have positive effects on voting and knowledge of U.S. political institutions.

In addition to civic participation, schooling for democracy promotes equal access, or ensuring all students can participate in and experience high-quality learning opportunities at all levels (Labaree, 1997). Historically, many groups have been denied educational access, such as girls, students of color, immigrants, students with disabilities, and low-income students, and disparities in access and equity persist (Gándara & Rutherford, 2020). Especially pertinent in an early-21st century context is the belief that all students should be prepared for and have access to postsecondary education (Quartz et al., 2019). From this standpoint, education for democracy "seek[s] to provide full collective participation in the search for the common good and the creation of critical citizens" (Apple, 2018). It is important to acknowledge, however, that a collectivist vision of democratic education has been critiqued for privileging dominant populations (Gorski, 2011). Civics curriculum that promotes democratic decision-making without acknowledging how diverse demographic groups have differential access to institutional power can implicitly perpetuate existing hierarchies (Banks, 2008). These critiques speak to the importance of approaches to democratic education that are attentive to issues of structure, power, and oppression, both in and out of the classroom. Under the right conditions, such as culturally representative and responsive curricula and critically conscious educators (Cole, 2017), schools and colleges can serve as sites of empowerment for marginalized students and their communities (Harbour & Smith, 2016).

Education for Workforce Development

A second perspective on the purpose of education, which Labaree (1997) called social efficiency, recognizes the needs of the workforce. This view broadly understands education as critical "for the economic health of the nation" and "the economic competitiveness of society" (Delbanco, 2012, p. 25). Thus, the goal is to prepare students for jobs (Taylor, 2010). Like education for democracy, this purpose frames education as a public good insofar as it benefits employers and taxpayers, and thus society at large. Labaree (1997) identified two aspects of social efficiency. First is vocationalism, which depends on an alliance between education and business; schools prepare students for careers, and the business world works with reformers and educators to promote required job skills and offer job training. Second is educational stratification. From a workforce development standpoint, stratification within the education system is valued as a mechanism for sorting students by ability and personal interest. Curricular and vocational tracks at the secondary level and different institutional types at the postsecondary level help direct students into their appropriate roles in the workforce (Rosenbaum & Person, 2003). Community colleges, for example, have historically had a more vocationally oriented mission, but also serve as an open access point for students interested in transferring to a four-year degree program (Barringer & Jaquette, 2018). Education for the workforce aligns with a human capital perspective, which assumes education imparts skills and knowledge that are transferrable to future employment (Goldin & Katz, 2009).

Several current trends in the modern workforce suggest the growing importance of higher educational attainment for the country's economic well-being. After World War II, two out of three jobs required a high school diploma, while today, two out of three require a postsecondary certificate or degree (Carnevale et al., 2018). As of 2015, workers with a bachelor's degree were creating more than half of the country's economic value annually (Carnevale & Rose, 2015). The Association of American Colleges and Universities recently reported that roughly 9 out of 10 employers believe completing a college degree is worth the time and money (Finley, 2021). However, only 6 in 10 employers reported that recent graduates possess the skills and knowledge for success in entry-level positions, suggesting room for growth for IHEs.

Education for Social Mobility

While education for democracy and the workforce both focus on the societal benefits of education, schooling also facilitates economic advancement for individuals, or what Labaree (1997) called social mobility. This perspective casts education as a private good that individuals use to gain status and compete for limited spots at the top of the economic hierarchy. As Cohen and Neufeld (1981) wrote, in a market economy, education is a primary means through which students to "seek to maintain or improve their economic and social position" (p. 32). Schooling makes this possible through credentialism. By "provid[ing] students with the educational credentials they need in order to get ahead in this structure (or to maintain their current position)" (Labaree, 1997, p. 50), the system enables students to demonstrate their merit and qualifications to IHEs and future employers, thereby potentially increasing their earnings as adults.

Current research suggests the relatively greater importance of college degree completion for maximizing individual earnings compared to prior generations. Bachelor's degree holders earn a median of 2.8 million dollars more than their counterparts with a high school education, though pay gaps persist by race, gender, age, occupation, geography, and field of study (Carnevale et al., 2021). Higher educational attainment also tends to enhance job stability; in the most recent recession and during the COVID-19 pandemic, workers with more education were less likely to lose their jobs

(Carnevale et al., 2016, 2020). International studies, too, have shown that people who acquire postsecondary degrees tend to experience economic benefits (OECD, 2021).

Overall, this literature asserts that while all three educational aims—democracy, workforce development, and social mobility—are important (Colby et al., 2010), they are often in tension within education rhetoric and reform (Waisanen & Kafka, 2020). For instance, the market-oriented goal to help individuals get ahead is at odds with the democratic ideal of social equality. While Labaree (1997) advocated for balancing the public and private goals of education, the ascendency of neoliberal ideology in recent decades has narrowed reform priorities (Klees, 2020).

Neoliberalism and Shifting Educational Priorities

Since the 1980s, neoliberalism has emerged as the dominant political and economic ideology driving reform nationally (Lipman, 2011) as well as globally (Spring, 2004). Neoliberal philosophy promotes market-based competition and privatization—as opposed to government spending and social programs—as mechanisms to improve society (Harvey, 2007). This logic has motivated proportionally less federal and state investment in public P-20 education while privately run educational options such as charter schools and for-profit colleges have proliferated (Anyon, 2014). Mirroring the corporate sector, policymakers rely on measures of educational outputs (e.g., test scores, degrees conferred) as opposed to inputs (e.g., funding) to assess organizational quality and effectiveness. Students and families are positioned as consumers who should choose schools and IHEs that best fit their best interest, which is often equated with individual earning potential alone (McMillan Cottom, 2017). Thus, education becomes commodified and transactional; students should invest in higher levels of schooling to propel economic growth and achieve social mobility (Harbour & Smith, 2016). In turn, a lack of upward mobility is implicitly reframed as a personal failure of students who do not acquire postsecondary credentials (Apple, 1995).

This neoliberal vision of education as primarily an economic enterprise and private good has sparked scholarly critique for sidelining democratic objectives such as citizenship and equal access (Abowitz & Stitzlein, 2018; Brown, 2015; Giroux, 2003; Honig, 2017). For example, education policies hyper-focused on quantifiable outcomes have incentivized teachers to focus on test preparation (Au, 2020), and schools to allocate more time to tested subjects like reading and math at the expense of history and civics (Berliner, 2011; Shapiro & Brown, 2018). Beyond limiting the time allocated to social science and humanities, neoliberal education reforms encourage the homogenizing of knowledge into a commodified, standardized system, with implications for the content of instruction (Apple, 2005). For example, tested history curriculum often elevates a linear, White-Eurocentric narrative that limits space for critical analysis and omits the cultures, experiences, and histories of non-dominant groups (Vasquez Heilig et al., 2012). Civics courses, meanwhile, tend to cover the function of political institutions, shying away from deeper questions about participating in democratic life, such as who holds power within those institutions and who does not, and whether and how citizens might use democratic means such as voting and protest to produce social change (Knowles & Castro, 2019). In classrooms shaped by neoliberal reform priorities, students have less opportunity to develop civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions, a deep understanding of the country's history, the ability to critically analyze information, and a commitment to values like diversity and equality (Parker, 2003).

Similar trends have surfaced in the postsecondary context. Many institutions have reduced or eliminated coursework in the liberal arts (Jones & Hearn, 2018) to invest more heavily in STEM fields, which are perceived to be better aligned with workforce needs and economic competitiveness (e.g., performance funding policies; Li, 2020). Based on a study of two- and four-year public IHEs in the US, Pippins et al. (2019) described humanities and liberal arts course requirements as "patchwork," providing students with significant flexibility in terms of what and how much

coursework they take. As a result, many college students graduate with limited exposure to liberal arts subject matter. College students with less exposure to liberal arts have fewer opportunities to develop skills that are important for democratic participation, such as critical thinking, cultural understanding, and ethical reasoning. Scholars have also noted that the public purpose of higher education to prepare citizens has been sidelined in favor of preparing competitive workers (Lagemann & Lewis, 2015). One study of institutional websites found that both public and private IHEs underscored their contribution to individuals' social mobility, without sharing much insight into the "process of education" or the distinct college experience they offer (Saichaie & Morphew, 2014). Many IHEs include citizenship and service as part of their mission, but these objectives are translated to practice in superficial ways or not at all (Lagemann & Lewis, 2015; Nussbaum, 2010).

Efforts to achieve equal access and opportunity are also in tension with neoliberal values, particularly the emphasis on quantifiable outcomes. For example, completion initiatives which rely on metrics like graduation rates and "time to degree" are often detached from any measure of student learning (Humphreys, 2012) and lack attention to diversity, unequal opportunity structures, and classroom experience (Lester, 2014). Gándara and Rutherford (2020) found that performance funding policies, which aim to increase completion rates, can incentivize universities to raise admission standards and/or exclude underrepresented students. Posselt et al.'s (2012) study showed that as college admissions became more selective and competitive since the 1970s, higher education became more stratified, with Black and Latinx students in particular losing access to elite institutions.

A final trend has been the redefining of democratic values through a neoliberal paradigm. For example, citizenship is increasingly associated with individual liberty (i.e., free choice), labor, and consumption, such that a "good citizen" is defined as being a good worker and consumer, rather than a reliable voter, activist, or volunteer (Abowitz & Harnish, 2006; McDonough & Feinberg, 2003). Consistent with the neoliberal framing of education as a private good, civics programs tend to depict citizenship as behaving in personally responsible ways (e.g., recycling one's waste), rather than participating actively in democratic processes (e.g., running a recycling campaign) or advocating for the collective good (e.g., protesting policies that hurt the environment; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). The concept of equity, too, has acquired new meaning. Rezai-Rashti et al. (2017) asserted that equity is characterized as minimizing achievement gaps, without attention to the resource disparities that produce those gaps in the first place. Orphan et al. (2020) found that, in their speeches, governors frequently invoke inequity as an economic problem as opposed to a democratic one—that is, the justification provided for equalizing postsecondary access is to strengthen the state's economy.

In summary, the rise of neoliberalism has significantly shaped the educational landscape, with implications for whether and how democratic goals are addressed in P-20 policy relative to economic aims. Yet while scholars have documented these trends in education broadly and college completion specifically (Harbour & Smith, 2016), how they surface in DE reform is under-explored. We believe this line of inquiry is worthwhile, as we elaborate below.

Perspectives on the Purpose of Education in a Neoliberal Era

The literature on DE coursework has been steadily growing (Taylor et al., 2022). Quantitative studies have shown that DE participation positively influences students' secondary and postsecondary outcomes (Blankenberger et al., 2017; Grubb et al., 2014; Henneberger et al., 2018). Compared to their peers who do not participate, DE completers are more likely to graduate high school (Haskell, 2016), matriculate to college (Lichtenberger et al., 2014), earn high GPAs (Allen & Dadgar, 2012; An, 2013), and complete postsecondary degrees (Crouse & Allen, 2014; Giani et al., 2014; Henneberger et al., 2020; Phelps & Chan, 2016). When DE takers are compared to similarly performing students, these effects are more moderate (Miller et al., 2018). One unintended consequence of DE is that students who participate may be more likely

to undermatch—that is, enroll in an IHE for which they are overqualified (Jagesic et al., 2021)—because many matriculate to the community college that conferred their DE credits rather than going directly to a university.

Access to DE coursework is stratified by race, class, and parent education (An & Taylor, 2019; Xu et al., 2021). Nationally, 39% of white and Asian students enroll in DE programming, compared to only 30% of Hispanic and 27% of Black students (Shivji & Wilson, 2019). Low-income students also have comparatively less access to coursework (Rivera et al., 2019). With respect to parent education, 42% of students whose parents have a bachelor's degree participate in DE compared to only 26% of students whose parents did not complete high school (Shivji & Wilson, 2019). These gaps in access reflect variability in course offerings and access to information about DE across high schools. High school students from underrepresented are less likely than their privileged counterparts to attend schools where DE coursework is readily offered, receive information about DE course opportunities and enrollment requirements, and have access to college readiness test preparation to qualify for coursework (Hooker et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2021).

The positive effects of DE participation also vary by student characteristics. Underrepresented students who enroll in DE are more likely than their non-participating counterparts to earn college credits and attend college (Allen, 2019; Cowan & Goldhaber, 2015; Henneberger et al., 2020), but may reap smaller benefits than their more privileged peers (An, 2013; Miller et al., 2018; Taylor, 2015). For example, among a national sample of DE completers, 71% of high-income students went on to complete a bachelor's compared to only 58% of low-income students (Fink et al., 2017). Scholars have suggested these disparities may be attributed to differential levels of preparation for DE coursework, with students who are low-income or non-White having relatively less access to rigorous academic preparation prior to course enrollment (Miller et al., 2018). Collectively, these data indicate the urgent need for improving equitable opportunity in DE.

The growing body of qualitative work on DE finds that instructors, administrators, and counselors have mixed perceptions as to whether DE course rigor is comparable to traditional college courses (Ferguson et al., 2015; Hanson et al, 2015; Howley et al., 2013). Stakeholders have cited the need for better student mentoring, faculty professional development, and communication between the high school and IHE partners (Hooker, 2018; Ison & Nguyen, 2021). Students generally report positive experiences in their courses, such as developing confidence and learning about college expectations (Allen et al., 2019; Duncheon, 2020). However, what happens in DE classrooms with respect to teaching and learning, and how students' experiences vary across programs and courses, is less clear (Tobolowsky & Allen, 2016). How to maximize equitable DE participation and success is another persistent challenge. To address ongoing questions around course quality and equity, Taylor et al. (2022) called for new theoretical and conceptual approaches to DE research, with greater attention to critical and democratic perspectives.

Consistent with this call, the present study offers a critical analysis of the rationales for and benefits of DE, as described by DE policymakers. Policy aims matter because they reflect societal values around the importance and purpose of education (Labaree, 1997), and influence how reform is translated to practice (Taylor, 2016). For instance, a focus on the value of credentialing highlights the importance of DE course completion and credit accumulation, whereas a focus on the democratic purpose of college coursework might motivate more attention to the substance of DE students' classroom experience. By considering how democracy, workforce development, and social mobility surface in the content of state DE

policy documents, we can critically analyze how DE is currently being positioned to benefit students and society writ large.

Methodology

We used qualitative content analysis (QCA) to examine how DE is conceptualized in state policy (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Schreier, 2012). QCA is a methodical process of coding and categorizing that is used to analyze large volumes of textual information. This process helps identify trends and patterns in the usage of words, their frequency, their relationships, and the structures found within the text. Through QCA, we can interpret the deeper meanings embedded within the text, thereby understanding not only what is said but also how it is said, revealing structural patterns within text (Mayring, 2014). The focus of our study is on the written words of state educational authorities who develop DE policy and provide policy guidance, specifically their choice of words and the ideologies these choices may reflect.

Data Sources and Data Collection

We conducted a 50-state analysis, plus the District of Columbia, which began with visiting the web pages for each state's DE policies. We prioritized websites because research has shown that leaders use websites to frame issues of importance for various audiences (Holland & Ford, 2020; Saichaie & Morphew, 2014), and DE research has identified websites as an important marketing tool for DE (Edwards & Hughes, 2011; Zinth, 2014). Because web pages are forward-facing to families and students, they promote messages around education that policymakers think are most important. We focused first on state department of education websites because these organizations are charged with executing state educational policy. We also reviewed websites for higher education chancellors and state legislatures and looked at the text in state statute. When the organization provided links to PDF pamphlets, PowerPoint presentations, external articles, and/or legislative text on DE policies, we included those documents in our review. During this phase, we searched for state-authored and state-sponsored text related to DE using three terms that are often used interchangeably and refer to variations of the same reform: "dual enrollment," "concurrent enrollment," and "dual credit." As we read through the documents, we specifically flagged any sections or statements that explained the value, purpose, justification, and/or rationale for DE programs. When websites provided limited or no information, we went directly to the legislation. In rare cases, states defined DE using neutral language, did not indicate any aim, or provided no information on a formal DE policy.

Data Analysis

After we compiled these policy texts, our broad analytical goal was to identify patterns and words related to purpose and mission in the rationales for DE. Our approach to coding was informed by the broader literature on the multiple purposes of education and Labaree's (1997) framework specifically, which differentiates the purposes of education along two axes—whether benefits are (a) public or private and (b) democratic or economic. We used our three categories, as derived from Labaree—education for democracy, workforce development, and social mobility—to code and categorize the data, identifying key words and phrases in the policy texts that aligned with each goal. For example, references to "opportunity" for "underserved student populations" were coded as democracy as they reflected concern for equal access. Phrases such as "increase the number of students attending college," "the courses will align… with work," and "prepare students for college and career" were coded as workforce, because they reflect the assumption that higher educational attainment offers economic benefits for society (e.g., higher

college attainment rates, better workforce preparation; Delbanco, 2012). Phrases such as "get ahead" or "lower the cost of college" were coded as social mobility because they underscored the personal economic benefits for students (Labaree, 1997). See Figures 1 through 4 for examples of state department of education DE webpages included in our analysis.

After our initial round of deductive coding using Labaree's (1997) framework, we categorized states based on the goal(s) embedded in their DE policy rationales (See Table 1). Some states fit into more than one category. In the second phase of analysis, we applied open codes to the data within each goal category. This process allowed us to identify sub-categories—that is, the specific ways in which states were invoking each goal to promote DE (e.g., "saving money" as a sub-category of social mobility). We then looked for patterns in the sub-categories to create themes. For instance, "saving money" combined with phrases such as "earn college credit at a low cost" for the theme of "Financial Benefits to Students." These QCA strategies allowed us to make explicit the motivations driving DE state policy development, which we present in the next section.

Trustworthiness and Researcher Positionality

To enhance trustworthiness, we adhered to three primary strategies: consideration of researcher positionality, coding transparency, and reflexive journaling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). With respect to positionality, both authors are former teachers, which influenced our interest in this research and understanding of the interplay among teaching, education reform, and societal expectations. As social studies teachers, specifically, we appreciate the democratic potential of the classroom to foster students' critical thinking, civic engagement, and social awareness. The second author also has experience teaching DE, and thus firsthand insight into course delivery. Early in the coding process, we coded the same documents and compared notes to ensure we were applying codes to text in the same ways. As we transitioned from coding to categorization and thematic development, we met frequently to discuss patterns we were seeing in the data. Through the analysis process, we engaged in reflexive journaling and conversation to identify how our experiences shaped our interpretation of DE documents and to isolate our biases from our read of the policy text.

Table 1

Examples of Dual Enrollment Policy Aims in State Policy Documents

DE Policy Aim	States	Themes and Examples
Workforce Development	*CA*, **CO, CT, DE, GA, IL, LA,** *MD*, **MA,** *MI, MS,* **MT, MO,** ***NE*, NH, NM, NC, ND**[1]**,** ***OH*, OK**[1]**, PA, RI, SC, TN, TX,** ***UT*, VT**[1]**, VA, WA,** *WV*, **WI**[1]**, WY, D.C.** (33 total)	*College and Career Readiness* • "increase the population of high school graduates who are college ready," "increase college and career readiness" • "courses … will align closely with the level of work that will be expected of them after finishing high school" • "opportunities to … engage in meaningful work-based learning experiences" • "have higher postsecondary grade point averages, higher retention rates, and decreased need for remediation."

		Completion • "increase the number of students graduating from high school and attending college" • "opportunities to earn an industry-recognized credential" • "must lead towards postsecondary credit, accreditation, certification and/or licensing"
Social Mobility	**AK, FL, GA, HI, ID, IL, IA, KY, LA, ME, MN, MT, MO, NV, NH, NC, ND, OK, OR, RI, SC, SD, TN, TX, VT, WA**, *WV*, **WI, WY, D.C.** (30 total)	*Distinguishing from others* • "Running Start" "Jump Start" "head start" "step ahead" • "Dual enrollment is an acceleration mechanism that allows students to pursue an advanced curriculum" • "speed time to degree completion," "shortened time to degree" • "awarded honors weighting," "opportunities for higher class rank" • "individual goals" *Financial Benefit* • "earn college credits at a low cost," "earn college credits at a discount," "lowering the cost of college" • "gain college credits prior to graduating from high school," "opportunity to earn college credits faster" • "shorter time to complete a college degree" • "You can have a career that you not only enjoy more but are also getting better compensated for as well!"
Democracy	*CA,* **CO, CT, IL, KY, MA, NC, NE, OR, SC, WA**. (11 total)	*Expanding Access* • "increased access to higher education" • "expanding DE opportunities for students who may not already be college bound or who are underrepresented in higher education" • "offer opportunities for improving degree attainment for underserved student populations" • "support dual credit students with a focus on eliminating equity gaps"
No Aim	*AL, AZ*, **AR, HI**, *KS*, NJ (6 total)	*Neutral Language Defining DE* • "allows students to obtain credit toward a high school diploma at the same time they earn college credit" (Arkansas)
No Policy	NY	

Note: In second column, bold font indicates that information came from the state department of education or higher education website. Italic font indicates that the information came from state law or statute.

Figure 1

Excerpt from Texas Department of Education website reflecting the workforce development and social mobility goals of dual credit

TEA Texas Education Agency

Search Search tea.texas.gov

A - Z Index Contact Employment Sign Up for Updates TEA Correspondence

About TEA | Texas Schools | Academics | Finance & Grants | Reports & Data | Student Assessment | Texas Educators

Home / Academics / College, Career, & Military Prep

Dual Credit

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) defines dual credit as a system in which an eligible high school student enrolls in college course(s) and receives credit for the course(s) from both the college and high school. Dual credit courses may be taught on the high school campus by an approved instructor or on the college campus. Dual credit courses include both academic and technical courses.

Benefits of taking Dual Credit Courses

- Gain first-hand experience with college-level work while attending high school
- Transition more smoothly between high school and college
- Transfer credits earned in high school to Texas public colleges and universities
- Complete a postsecondary degree faster
- Save money on college tuition

Frequently Asked Questions

TEA's Dual Credit Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) includes answers to many common questions received from students, parents, teachers, and administrators. The FAQ document has been revised to include new rules established as a result of the most recent legislative session. If you are unable to find the answer you're looking for, please submit your question(s) to advancedacademics@tea.texas.gov.

Texas Statewide Goals for Dual Credit

- House Bill 1638: Statewide Dual Credit Goals
- 60x30TX
- Statewide Dual Credit Goals and Measures of Implementation

Related Content

Dual Credit FAQs

Student Data Reports

Sign Up for TEA Communications:

Newsletters

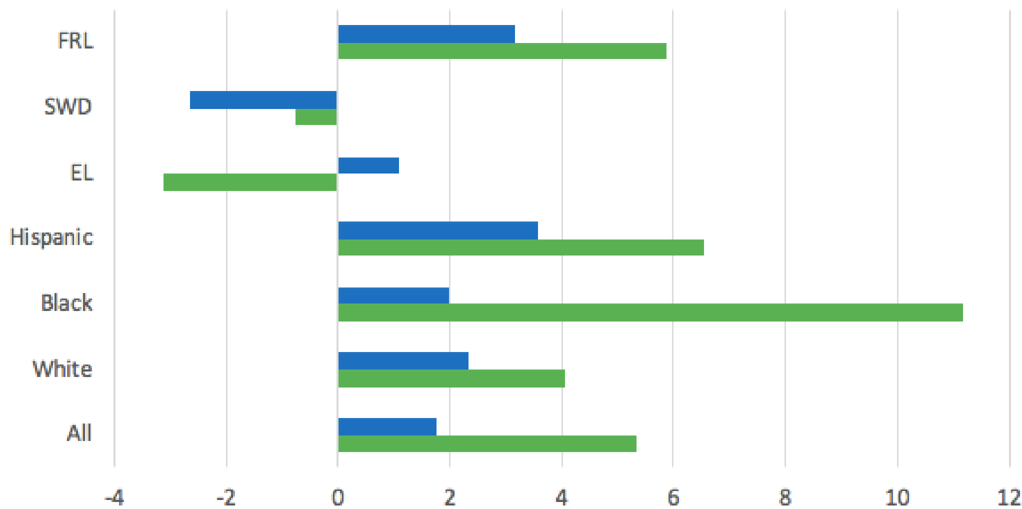
Letters to The Administrator Addressed

Contact Information

Advanced Academics

Phone: (512) 463-8823

Email: advancedacademics@tea.texas.gov



Source: https://tea.texas.gov/academics/college-career-and-military-prep/dual-credit

Figure 2

Excerpt from South Dakota Department of Education website reflecting the workforce development and social mobility goals of dual enrollment

What is dual credit?

Dual credit is an opportunity for high school students to enroll in postsecondary institutions in South Dakota while earning credits for both their high school diploma and postsecondary degree or certificate at the same time.

What are the benefits of dual credit?

Dual credit courses provide students with a number of benefits, including:

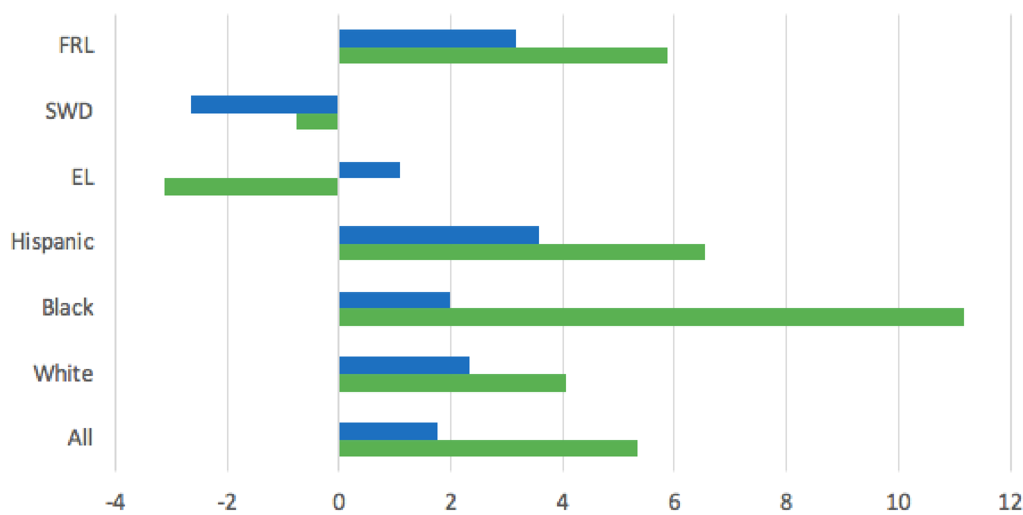
- A jump start to students' postsecondary careers
- Significant cost savings for students and parents through reduced tuition costs.
- Increased confidence for college success.

Will these courses transfer?

Students are encouraged to check with their institution of choice regarding the transferability of credits earned.

Courses available through the South Dakota Board of Regents (SDBOR) institutions and centers will transfer between each of the six SDBOR institutions, including:

- Black Hills State University
- Dakota State University
- Northern State University
- South Dakota School of Mines & Technology
- South Dakota State University
- University of South Dakota



Source: https://sdmylife.com/images/DualCreditFlyer_v2.pdf

Figure 3

Excerpt from Ohio Department of Higher Education website reflecting the social mobility aim of College Credit Plus

Source: https://www.ohiohighered.org/collegecreditplus

Figure 4

Excerpt from Colorado Department of Education website reflecting the social efficiency and social mobility aims

Source: https://www.cde.state.co.us/postsecondary/concurrentenrollment

Findings

Data analysis revealed that states articulate the benefits of DE policy almost exclusively in economic terms. Every state that provided a justification for DE—44 states and the District of Columbia—used workforce development, social mobility, or both (Labaree, 1997). These two goals had roughly equal emphasis across the dataset, though workforce development appeared the most, in the policy documents of 33 states compared to 30 for social mobility. Eighteen states alluded to both. Democratic aims were least pervasive, often absent altogether. Only 11 states alluded to this goal in addition to one or both economic aims. Six states' policy language did not express a particular rationale for their DE programs, and one (New York) did not have a DE policy. Table 1 provides a breakdown of where each goal appeared with examples from state

policy text. Below, we illustrate how state-level DE policy language embodied each aim, beginning with the most pervasive.

An Emphasis on Workforce Development

Workforce development featured most heavily in policy texts, linking DE to achievement, completion, and educational efficiency. Specific justifications within this aim surfaced across two themes: (a) preparation for college and career, and (b) completion of a certificate or a degree.

College and Career Readiness

One way in which state DE policy text promoted workforce development was by linking DE courses to building students' college and career readiness (CCR). CCR has been defined as the skills and knowledge students need to graduate high school prepared for higher education and the workforce (Conley, 2014; Duncheon, 2015). Generally speaking, DE was depicted as a means to "increase the population of high school graduates who are college ready" (Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, n.d.). Missouri and Texas policy documents both reference CCR explicitly (Texas Education Agency, n.d.; Missouri Dept. of Ed, n.d.). In Maryland, the law that outlines DE is titled, The College and Career Readiness and College Completion Act of 2013, and South Carolina's DE coursework is part of a larger program called, "Career and College Promise" (Maryland State Department of Education, n.d.; South Carolina Dept. of Ed, n.d.). In several states, college readiness emerged in DE policy language through references to reducing rates of postsecondary remediation, coursework for entering college students who do not demonstrate college-level skills. As stated by Louisiana's Department of Education (n.d.), by increasing students' academic readiness for college, DE offers students a "smoother transition to college after high school graduation." In these instances, DE was aligned with the college preparation aspect of CCR, indicating that DE is perceived as a key strategy to ensure students are prepared to succeed academically at a postsecondary institution and, by extension, persist to degree attainment.

Vocational training or preparation was another purported benefit of DE. In Ohio, for example, the Department of Education (n.d.) states, "The purpose of this [DE] program is to enhance students' career readiness and postsecondary success." Several state policies emphasize how the skills students gain from DE will be directly transferrable to the workplace. Texas writes that DE students will gain "identifiable, marketable skills" (Texas Education Agency, n.d.). The Delaware Department of Education (n.d.) highlights the value of DE participation to provide "meaningful work-based learning experiences" (p. 5). These data suggest that state policymakers view DE as a vehicle to prepare students for education and/or work beyond high school.

Completion and Retention

Workforce development content also framed DE as a strategy to increase completion rates of degrees and certificates. In this theme, policy language framed degree attainment as an economic benefit for the state, particularly the workforce, as opposed to individual students. Some states link DE to secondary and postsecondary attainment. For example, the Washington Department of Education writes, "Taking dual credit is connected to higher high school graduation rates, college enrollment, and degree completion" (Washington Superintendent of Public Instruction, n.d.), all of which increase education levels for the state. Connecticut describes how DE will "increase the number of high school students who successfully complete courses within a Program of Study that award postsecondary credits" (Connecticut Department

of Education, n.d.). In Texas, DE is presented as one of several reforms that will help the state meet its educational attainment goals, with one being "60% of students will have earned a degree or credential" by the year 2030 (60x30tx.com). Illinois, Maryland, Missouri, North Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, Vermont, and West Virginia, among others—19 total—used the word "completion" of high school, college, or credential in their goals for DE. Communication from state-sponsored websites and from DE statute also drew attention to language about the importance of the workforce; Connecticut, Delaware, and Georgia, for instance, mention that DE will accelerate more students toward earning a credential, certificate, or license that is "industry-recognized." Collectively, these data indicate that strengthening the state's economic well-being through higher education and workforce development is a leading motivator for DE policy.

An Emphasis on Social Mobility

Social mobility surfaced in DE rationales nearly as often as workforce development. Here, states situated DE courses as a mechanism for students to improve their economic position. This aim manifested in two ways: allowing students to (a) compete with peers, and (b) benefit financially.

Getting Ahead of Peers

First, states marketed DE as a means through which students could distinguish themselves from their peers. Many state policy documents explained to students that DE was an opportunity to earn college credit early—ahead of schedule—that could be put toward a postsecondary degree. Four phrases in particular implied that DE allowed students to distinguish themselves, including "running start," "jump start," "head start," and "step ahead," (see Table 1). The state of Florida described their DE program as an "acceleration mechanism" (Florida Department of Education, n.d.). Nine states, including Washington, Vermont, North Dakota, New Mexico, Missouri, Minnesota, Iowa, Illinois, and Florida touted the potential benefit for shortened or on-time graduation from college. At the same time, some states cautioned that students could harm their chance at upward mobility by performing poorly in DE courses. Guidance from the Florida Department of Education, for example, warned students of the difficulty of DE courses and advised them to take courses with caution, writing: "Poor performance… can ultimately impact one's postsecondary career, including acceptance to a state university, academic standing and financial aid eligibility. It is important to do well in [DE] courses." In these ways, states characterized DE as a mechanism for accelerating their college pathways and ultimately obtaining social mobility—if students are prepared to take it seriously and perform well in their DE classes.

Financial Benefits to Students

Financial benefits to students were also cited frequently in text related to DE policy . States suggested students could save money paying for college and, ultimately, make more money with a higher-paying job. States included language directly related to cost-savings on college credits. Sample phrases included: "earn college credit at a low cost," "earn college credits at a discounted rate," "valuable opportunity," "save money on college tuition" and "reduce college costs." In some cases, policy documents explicitly linked DE to a students' future earnings potential. One example came from a webpage linked by the South Dakota Department of Education about earning college credit. To motivate students to enroll in DE, the webpage juxtaposes college attendance with low-wage work: "Imagine working at a fast food joint 8 hours a day, flipping burgers and scrubbing greasy fry vats for minimum wage... it's a lot of work

and it doesn't pay well" (sdmylife.com). In contrast, the webpage suggests, students can "enjoy" their job and become "better compensated" if they work hard now to earn college credits through programs like DE. As with the prior sub-theme, policy documents warned students to take DE courses "seriously" or face consequences for failure, in this case monetary ones. As Alaska's Department of Education cautions, "don't start college with failing grades [from DE classes] on your transcript—that could negatively affect your financial aid eligibility when you get there" (Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education, n.d.). In these ways, states portrayed DE as a worthwhile investment for individual students to climb the social ladder.

Limited Attention to Democratic Priorities

Eleven states used language related to democracy in their rationales for DE. In California, Illinois, Kentucky, Nebraska, Oregon, and South Carolina, democratic aims surfaced in references to expanding access for underrepresented students. These six states made equal access an explicit goal of their DE program. For instance, the California Department of Education (n.d.) instructs school districts and colleges to partner for the purpose of expanding access "for students who may not already be college-bound or who are underrepresented in higher education." The Illinois Board of Higher Education (n.d.) is less direct, but indicates that DE can "offer opportunities for improving degree attainment for underserved student populations." Some states use the word "access" to emphasize that DE opportunities must be made available to all students. Finally, Nebraska offers a program that is exclusively for "qualified, low-income high school students" to receive financial assistance with DE (Nebraska Coordinating Commission for Higher Education, n.d.).

In addition to prioritizing equal access in their policy justifications, a few states underscored that DE's benefits are especially valuable for underserved student populations. For example, in the program description on its DE webpage, the Massachusetts Department of Education (n.d.) includes a statement that reads, "for low-income, underrepresented or first-to-college students, involvement with [DE] might be their first exposure to college or the first time they considered college as a possibility." Here the state notes the potential for DE to increase college access for historically underrepresented students specifically. Kentucky's DE webpage (n.d.) cites data from a report to show DE can increase college participation in underserved populations. Colorado similarly cites data collected on their individual DE programs that demonstrate growth in enrollment among students of color (Colorado Department of Higher Education, 2018). This policy language frames DE as a mechanism for increasing equity in college access and completion.

Discussion

Our content analysis demonstrates that economic priorities are the principal driver of state-level DE policy. Whether bolstering the future workforce or giving students the tools to compete, DE programs are framed as economically beneficial. Democratic aims, meanwhile, are either absent or narrowly defined in relation to program access. Below, we analyze the findings in two sections. We focus first on how DE reform reflects neoliberalism in education, and second on the implications for schooling for democracy. We suggest a link between the narrow economic framing of DE coursework and its rapid expansion, despite ongoing concerns over equitable access and teaching and learning. We offer suggestions for ways in which embracing a democratic vision of DE might broaden its potential benefits for students, higher education, and society writ large.

Neoliberal Dominance in DE Policy Rationales

The almost exclusive emphasis of state policy documents on workforce development and social mobility suggests that state legislatures and departments of education perceive the benefits of DE policy through a neoliberal framework (Brown, 2015). This trend is unsurprising given the assumptions of the college completion agenda in which DE has gained traction (Teranishi & Bezbatchenko, 2015). Nevertheless, our analysis shows the policy language surrounding DE is remarkably similar nationwide, coalescing around a limited set of economic priorities.
The most pervasive economic aim for DE expansion is utilitarian from the standpoint of the state: to build a stronger workforce (Harbour & Smith, 2016). Policy documents repeatedly invoke college and career readiness language to highlight DE's potential to cultivate students' skills and knowledge. DE facilitates differentiation of students into college or vocational pathways that fit their interests and abilities (Labaree, 1997). By accelerating students toward attaining degrees and certificates, DE programs increase the proportion of students in the state who are qualified to fulfill middle- and high-skills jobs. A better trained workforce, in turn, propels economic growth, a key tenet of neoliberal ideology (Lipman, 2011).

DE policy language that promotes social mobility also reflects neoliberal philosophy insofar as schooling is framed as a commodity and students are positioned as consumers (McMillan Cottom, 2017). Numerous states portray DE course participation as transactional: students should take these courses to cut the cost of college and/or increase their competitiveness for college admission and the labor market. By framing college attendance as a worthwhile investment to increase future earnings, DE policy language promotes the idea that the value of higher education can be measured in credits and cost-savings. DE policy documents also tend to infer students' sole accountability for their future financial success, consistent with scholarly critiques of neoliberalism (Apple, 2006). For instance, asking students to imagine "flipping burgers and scrubbing greasy fry vats for minimum wage," as does the South Dakota Department of Education, implies that whether students end up in low-wage work is a matter of individual choice (Rose et al., 2019); the underlying assumption is that students can climb the social ladder if they take initiative to participate in DE coursework.

To be sure, workforce development and student mobility are important outcomes of DE reform. However, our data lend credence to the concern that over-emphasis on these economic aims may overshadow other issues that influence students' opportunity and success (Lester, 2014). Consider that three out of four states with DE rationales tied the policy to degree completion, and close to three out of four highlighted social mobility, but only one out of four mentioned expanding or equalizing access. This stark imbalance between economic and democratic priorities echoes Teranishi and Bezbatchenko's (2015) contention that higher education policy-development focused on completion and competition has eclipsed attention to access and equity. Most policy documents portray DE as a "jump start" to college, as though that "jump start" is universally available for all student groups. With limited explicit attention to equitable access in DE policy, it is unsurprising that gaps persist by race/ethnicity, class, and parent education with respect to which students enroll in the first place (Rivera et al., 2019).

The policy framing of DE in predominantly economic terms also has implications for the messages students receive about DE opportunities. Research on student decision making around DE suggests many students internalize social mobility narratives—sometimes to their detriment. For instance, students often report enrolling in DE to save money (García, 2020) and "speed time to degree completion," a benefit touted in many states' policy documents. Yet, many students are surprised to learn—sometimes not until after high school graduation—that not all their DE credits count toward a postsecondary degree (Witkowsky & Clayton, 2020),

especially at more selective institutions. Challenges related to credit transfer can influence students' postsecondary enrollment decisions. Jagesic et al.'s (2021) finding that students who start their college careers in DE through a community college often choose to stay at that college rather than enroll in a four-year institution suggests DE may be exacerbating the phenomenon of undermatch, whereby low-income students and students of color enroll in institutions for which they are over-qualified and where they face lower likelihood of graduation (Belasco & Trivette, 2015). While schools could potentially address some of these issues with better academic advising, policy language that portrays DE simply as a monetary transaction that trades time for credits may tacitly discourage lower-income students from considering a broad range of postsecondary options, including elite institutions. Strict social mobility narratives also neglect other important advantages of participating in college coursework, such as engaging with complex ideas, encountering new perspectives and people, and learning more about oneself (Lagemann & Lewis, 2015).

As a caveat, we do not mean to portray social mobility as an unworthy goal of higher education. For underrepresented students in particular, social mobility is an important outcome of postsecondary completion, not only for material security, but also for the uplifting of marginalized families and communities (Cuellar et al., 2021). When students of color, low-income students, and first-generation students become socially mobile, they also gain a larger voice and assume leadership roles in institutional spaces that have historically excluded them; these outcomes serve democracy and equity. Our concern is that when reforms such as DE are framed exclusively as transactional, students—especially historically marginalized students—may not be encouraged or empowered to take advantage of other benefits of college participation.

DE for Democracy: Current Limitations and Future Possibilities

As our analysis illustrates, the large majority of states do not frame DE programs in relation to democratic aims. When democracy was evident—in 11 states—it surfaced through the lens of equal access (Labaree, 1997). An access rationale is important to call attention to ongoing disparities in DE course participation by race/ethnicity, class, and parent education (Xu et al., 2021). Research has well documented the ways in which academic tracking is racialized and classed, with students of color and working-class students typically excluded from advanced coursework, such as DE, in high school (Giersch, 2018; Oakes, 1995; Werblow et al., 2013). These trends occur through explicit and implicit practices in schools, even when staff express commitment to equity (Lewis & Diamond, 2015), and in turn limit postsecondary opportunity for marginalized students. In a DE context, studies have shown that program participation positively affects postsecondary enrollment and persistence (Crouse & Allen, 2014; Miller et al., 2018), suggesting that disparate access to DE during high school may compound inequity in higher education.

An equal access rationale for DE not only highlights current disparities but also compels schools and colleges to prioritize equitable outreach and eliminate barriers to access. For example, college readiness testing can be a gatekeeper for many students who are low-income, first generation, and/or of color and do not have access to test preparation at their high schools (Perry et al., 2010). Cost is also a barrier for many low-income students, despite financial subsidizing in most states and districts (Garcia et al., 2019). Even when colleges and/or school districts waive tuition for DE courses, students are often still responsible for purchasing textbooks, which can be cost-prohibitive. Promoting equal access in DE policy language implies the need to provide supplemental test preparation and additional financial assistance in communities with high proportions of minoritized students. As a caveat, we are not suggesting that equal access is the silver bullet to advance democratic aims in DE. To the extent that the education system functions as a mechanism of reproduction, achieving equity requires dismantling status quo structures and practices that

privilege some students at the expense of others (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Nevertheless, increasing equity in DE access is critical to ensure that DE reform does not exacerbate existing opportunity gaps (Taylor et al., 2022). We also note that access is just a first step; improving course quality and student success in DE, especially for students from minoritized backgrounds, is imperative.

Beyond equal access, our analysis reveals that state policy documents fall short of linking DE to any other democratic aim. Goals such as developing engaged citizens and critical thinkers were absent. This gap is concerning in general, but especially in light of the current political and historical context. Amid intense partisan divide (Doherty, 2018) and racial injustice (Williams & Toldson, 2020), current political discourse among politicians and in the media not only lacks deliberation but exudes vitriol (Faris et al., 2020), all while young people bear witness. Educating students about how democracy works and what it demands of them as citizens must be a priority in schools and classrooms (Brighouse, 2018; Horsford, 2018). By introducing students to postsecondary academic contexts, DE may be well positioned to strengthen citizenship education. As noted in the literature review, social sciences and humanities coursework can positively affect civic engagement and critical thinking (Fernandez, 2021; Hillygus, 2005), and numerous DE courses are offered in these disciplines. Within the classroom, DE students may be exposed to learning opportunities such as community-based projects that can enhance democratic participation (Perrin & Gillis, 2019).

DE also creates space to expose students to skills and knowledge that might support democratic outcomes but are outside the scope of many standardized K-12 curricula. Due to the nature of K-12 governance, high school curriculum tends to prioritize breadth over depth and teachers face pressure to prepare students for standardized tests (Jennings & Bearak, 2014; Parker et al., 2011). State and local politics further shape high school curriculum, and—especially in recent years—have resulted in the censorship of books and curricular content that political and religious conservatives deem threatening (McClure, 2022), from evolution in biology class to slavery in history class (Berkman & Plutzer, 2012). High school history standards in particular tend to omit or downplay the ways in which our institutions and laws have reified white supremacy (Hornbeck, 2018; Vasquez Heilig et al., 2012). Numerous state legislatures have passed laws to minimize the teaching of racism in K-12 classrooms altogether (Ray & Gibbons, 2021). Others prohibit K-12 teachers from addressing LGBTQ content in their classes, such as assigning novels with gay characters or acknowledging LGBTQ identities (Barrett & Bound, 2015; Diaz, 2022). In DE, teachers are working from college syllabi, and thus have some distance from the constraints of K-12 accountability policy, standardized test preparation, and curricular censorship (Duncheon et al., 2023; Roegman et al., 2021). DE instructors can potentially expose students to topics that might be deemed controversial by school boards and state legislatures, but that develop students' critical thinking and awareness of social justice. In one study of DE in Texas, for example, a U.S. history teacher reported that her DE students had the opportunity to read the work of Malcolm X, whose beliefs were not accurately represented in the state's scripted curriculum and standardized exam (Duncheon & Relles, 2020). From this perspective, DE curriculum has the capacity to expose students from marginalized groups to academic content that recognizes and validates their histories, experiences, and identities. DE teachers may also have more flexibility to engage students of color and first-generation students in ways that draw upon their funds of knowledge (Mora & Rios-Aguilar, 2017; Rose et al., 2019).

In these ways, DE reform can be reimagined as contributing not only to economic objectives but also democratic ones. An equal access lens encourages policymakers and practitioners to minimize barriers to DE participation. From a citizenship standpoint, DE can equip students to become engaged in their communities and work toward sustaining democracy by deepening their ability to analyze and understand themselves and the world. A democratic vision of DE reform could usefully shift attention from an almost exclusive emphasis on quantifiable economic outputs

(e.g., enrollment rates, credits earned, dollars saved) to concerns about equity and the substance of teaching and learning. This shift is important because as DE continues to scale, states and districts are rapidly expanding college-level course-taking opportunities for high school students with inadequate attention to who benefits and what actually unfolds inside the classroom

Future Directions

We highlight several avenues for future research. While our study focused on how policymakers frame the rationales for DE reform, our findings did not offer insight into the views of administrators, counselors, and teachers who support and teach DE coursework. Studies of how educators perceive the value of DE are important to understand how DE programs are marketed at the ground level and what value they offer students in local contexts. Studies of student perspectives are also needed to understand the extent to which students are internalizing neoliberal narratives and/or perceiving other benefits of these programs. How policy messages intersect with district- and school-level practices around DE also warrant inquiry; for example, research that explores how and what courses are recommended to which students could shed light on the equal access goals of DE. Some state DE policies limit the number or type of courses that students can take, which could be explored in relation to educational aims and local practices. Finally, DE classrooms warrant examination to decipher whether and to what extent teachers are using DE curriculum to nurture students' democratic thinking and engagement.

In closing, we wish to make clear that we do not diminish the importance of DE's economic aims. Meeting workforce demand and credentialing students to support social mobility are valuable goals of DE reform. We contend, however, that these economic objectives alone are insufficient, and in fact diminish the potential value of DE expansion. DE, which is fundamentally a curricular reform, also holds promise for democratic schooling across secondary and postsecondary contexts. How we frame policy at the intersection of these systems projects a larger narrative about why higher education matters, which in turn shapes institutional practice and student learning. To prepare today's students for higher education and beyond, we offer Riddle and Apple's (2019) reminder that "a sustainable and collective commitment to civic virtue through education is perhaps more critically important than ever before" (p. 3).

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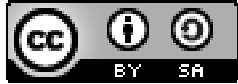

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