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# Scaling Dual Enrollment in Rural Communities

A Case Study of Three Rural Texas High Schools

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## AT A GLANCE

Dual enrollment is a powerful mechanism to support college readiness and success for high school students across the country. Rural schools provide unique advantages but face distinct challenges in creating effective dual enrollment opportunities for students. This case study examines how three rural schools in Texas addressed three challenges rural schools face: overcoming distance to higher education partners, supporting students in navigating the college environment, and building staff capacity to support dual enrollment.

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# Acknowledgements

## Acknowledgments

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## About Jobs for the Future

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## About Lone Star STEM

The Lone Star STEM grant supports the implementation of computer science and cybersecurity pathways in partnership with high schools and colleges in Texas. JFF launched Lone Star STEM in 2019 to increase the number of Texas teachers qualified to teach in these fields and expand opportunities for dual enrollment, saving students time and money in earning postsecondary credentials. We provided grant funds to high schools across the state and partnered with the Texas Education Agency, the Texas Advanced Computing Center, and the American Institutes for Research to offer technical assistance and evaluation support. *The contents of this resource were developed under a grant from the U.S.*

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# Introduction: Dual Enrollment in Rural Settings

Today, almost 53% of U.S. school districts serve rural communities and students.<sup>1</sup> While there is no universally agreed-upon definition of rural, such communities tend to have smaller, less dense populations of residents. As the following case study will demonstrate, many rural communities benefit from tight-knit relationships and from educators who are driving innovation within their local contexts.

## Descriptors of Rural

Limited Community Partners Vast Spaces Small Population Size  
Limited Industries Remote Poverty Minimal Resources  
Strong Collaboration Broadband Access Issues Long Commutes  
Community Support Pride Creative Self-Reliant Diverse  
Social Capital One Flashing Light Isolated Tight-Knit Community  
Low Capacity Inadequate Infrastructure Limited Career Options

These words and phrases were responses rural Lone Star STEM grantees provided when asked “What are the characteristics of rural communities?”

While many of these school districts have made strides in improving student success outcomes related to dual enrollment, these efforts have not been without challenges. The logistical barriers that many dual enrollment programs face—including finding qualified instructors and addressing transportation issues—are especially acute for rural high schools due to geographical distances and teachers being recruited to work in less rural, higher-paying districts. According to the Aspen Institute, 41 million Americans, 82% of whom are in rural areas, live in “higher education deserts,” meaning they are at least

a 30-minute drive from the nearest college or university.<sup>2</sup> Such travel requirements are a huge time investment for rural students and can make dual credit opportunities financially burdensome. Implementing dual enrollment programs can be particularly challenging for rural schools as they navigate a national teacher shortage. However, despite these barriers, rural districts have been able to capitalize on their unique advantages, such as their small size, interconnectedness, and deeply dedicated staff members, to successfully implement dual enrollment programs.

## The Benefits of Dual Enrollment

Dual enrollment is an evidence-based strategy to support college and career readiness (CCR). Research has shown that participation in such programs has a positive impact on both college enrollment and degree completion.<sup>3</sup>

The data for rural students are nuanced. Although 23% of rural students are earning college credits in high school compared with 16% of students nationwide, urban students outperform rural students in terms of educational attainment, with 42% earning an associate's degree or higher, compared with 29% of rural students.<sup>4</sup> If a greater percentage of rural students are participating in dual enrollment, why is their rate of educational attainment lower than for urban areas? There are a few contributing factors, but the primary reasons appear to be access to and distance from such programs.

Surveys also show that rural residents are more skeptical about whether higher education is worth the investment. This attitude can be traced to misalignments between the educational programs available and the needs of rural communities—a mismatch that often results in highly educated residents leaving their rural communities to pursue professional opportunities in metropolitan areas.<sup>5</sup> As rural communities embed dual enrollment as a CCR strategy, they will want to make sure that dual enrollment opportunities are aligned to a strategic sequence of courses that meets community needs and leads to living wages in industries like health care, manufacturing, local government, and IT. Dual enrollment as a college-going strategy can be particularly effective because it gives students who are less likely to attend college the opportunity to not only “try on” the experience but also to obtain college credit. This enables them to save time and money while making progress toward a credential.



## Background on Featured Schools

This case study highlights three rural high schools that have grown successful dual enrollment programs despite facing obstacles. The schools featured were awarded federal Education Innovation and Research Program grant funds through an initiative called Lone Star STEM. Through Lone Star STEM, high schools and their college partners across the state of Texas developed and implemented computer science and cybersecurity pathways with support from Jobs for the Future, the Texas Education Agency, and the Texas Advanced Computing Center.

**This case study highlights actions that Lone Star STEM grantees took to address three common rural challenges to dual enrollment programs:**



**Overcome distance to partners.** Form multiple partnerships and employ a variety of course delivery methods to overcome distance challenges.



**Support students in navigating the college environment,** including rigorous coursework. Provide shared wraparound services to support students as they navigate the transition between high school and higher education.



**Build staff capacity to implement dual enrollment.** Create a team centered around dual enrollment to ensure that the school district has the capacity needed to fully support a robust dual enrollment program.



### Van Horn Technology Early College High School

Town Population: **1,940**  
Student Population: **90**  
Higher Education Partner: **Odessa College**  
Distance to Partner: **165 mi**

### Snyder High School

Town Population: **11,438**  
Student Population: **750**  
Higher Education Partners: **Western Texas College & South Plains College**  
Distance to Partners: **3 mi / 120 mi**

### Throckmorton Collegiate High School

Town Population: **761**  
Student Population: **40**  
Higher Education Partners: **Cisco College & Trinity Valley Community College**  
Distance to Partners: **65 mi / 235 mi**



# Overcome Distance to Partners

Geographical distance and limited transportation options are heightened barriers that rural communities face when creating dual enrollment programs. To overcome this challenge, our three high school partners implemented creative strategies, such as forming multiple partnerships; creating asynchronous, online learning opportunities; and improving the busing infrastructure.

## Solutions From the Field

### Create Multiple Partnerships

In some cases, there is no higher education partner within a reasonable distance from a high school that is looking to implement dual enrollment. Even when there is a local higher education partner, if it does not offer programs connected to in-demand pathways the high school offers, recruiting and retaining students will be impossible. One way to overcome this barrier is to partner with more than one institution. Working with multiple higher education institutions gives high schools more flexibility to better ensure that the partnerships meet the local labor market needs. Throckmorton

took this approach, maintaining its longstanding partnership with Cisco College while establishing a new one with Trinity Valley Community College, a partner that could offer cybersecurity and computer science options—fields that are in demand and pay good wages.

One interesting discovery in our research was that several grantees developed these partnerships through professional network connections. For example, one grantee had a connection to its current higher education partner via its superintendent, who had worked with that institution in a previous role.



## **Employ Multiple Delivery Methods**

Rural schools may also succeed in overcoming distance challenges by enabling students to take college courses asynchronously online, on the high school campus. All three high schools in this case study had a partnership with a college that was more than 100 miles away, making in-person classes on the college campuses logistically impossible. While asynchronous, online courses have some challenges, two benefits are that they have minimal impact on students' regular class schedules and that rural high schools don't need to find a qualified high school course instructor. In the section below about supporting students, we highlight ways that grantees were able to support student success through online coursework.

## **Offer Students Transportation to Local Higher Education Partners**

Some higher-level college classes can't feasibly be offered on a high school campus, and there might not be an asynchronous option. To move into advanced college courses in the welding and health science pathways, for instance, students need direct access to equipment and professors for hands-on learning experiences. Rural communities often lack robust public transportation systems, and students may not have a private transportation option, which creates a barrier to access. Snyder High School recognized this need and, in collaboration with the Snyder Independent School District Transportation Department, added a bus route to transport students between the college and high school campuses. The students who use the service experience in-person college courses and are integrated into the Western Texas College student body for this coursework.







# Support Students in Navigating the College Environment

Taking college-level courses through dual enrollment can be a big adjustment for students, regardless of the format in which the courses are offered. Students face barriers in all aspects of the dual enrollment process, including choosing the right courses, registering for classes, submitting assignments, and taking college-level final exams for the first time. To ensure that all students have the chance to flourish, schools must work closely with their college partners to identify proactive student supports that create an environment where every student has the resources they need.

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## Solutions From the Field

### **Align Coursework and Schedules**

Historically, higher education institutions and secondary schools have not been interconnected, which means that the success of a college transition has largely depended on the individual student. As data indicate lower college completion rates among rural students, there is a greater need to create an environment that promotes student achievement through systems-level support services rather than ad hoc programs. Rural high schools can blur the boundary between high school and higher education by ensuring that their programs of study align and by offering flexible scheduling options to accommodate both high school and college needs.

Snyder High School checks in consistently with both of its college partners about the sequencing of dual enrollment coursework to ensure that it aligns with both the completion requirements for

its pathway at the high school level and enables any interested student to also graduate with their associate's degree. Confirming alignment also ensures that students are avoiding random acts of dual enrollment, in which they take dual enrollment courses that aren't applicable to their chosen degree program.

When dual enrollment is recognized as an opportunity that benefits both the high school and college partner, they are both more motivated to be nimble to ensure student success. Van Horn recognized the need to move from a more traditional, eight-period day to a block schedule that more closely mirrors the schedule of its college partner. This flexibility has supported a more seamless integration of dual enrollment courses into students' daily schedules and has facilitated a more collaborative partnership.

## Provide Support for Online Dual Enrollment Courses

When distance cannot be overcome, online courses are often an option, but one that typically requires additional student support. Our case study research found that creating a block in the high school schedule during which dual enrollment students can complete their coursework together—even if they are not enrolled in the same course—is a helpful best practice. This approach offers students the benefit of having an adult in the room who can support them as they do their coursework. For example, at Snyder High School, students who are taking a variety of asynchronous classes come together during a specific block to work on their coursework under the helpful eye of a “success coach.” This school staff member acts as an academic advisor to dual enrollment students, answering their questions and helping them to access their coursework and connect with professors in real time as needed.

## Leverage Existing Higher Education Services

To create long-lasting, successful dual enrollment programs, high school counselors and administrators should familiarize themselves with the supports their higher education partners offer and either encourage students to take advantage of them or find a way to bring them to their students directly. Leveraging higher education services is especially helpful for rural schools, which may not have the funds and capacity to offer robust in-house services. For example, many colleges have access to [TRIO programs](#), which are “federal outreach and student services programs designed to identify and provide services for individuals from disadvantaged

backgrounds.”<sup>6</sup> Though the program was designed to support first-generation college students, high school students participating in dual enrollment programs can use it as well, accessing services like book loans and mentorship, as well as other resources explicitly aimed at their target population.

One of Snyder High School’s higher education partners, Western Texas College, gives all of its students, including dual-enrolled students, access to the resources provided via TRIO. According to a Snyder staff member, that support has increased the number of students involved in dual enrollment and affects not just the student but their whole family. When a student’s perception of their ability to attend college changes, they said, “seeing that change and that mindset change in families is huge, and that’s not just a one-student story.”

Additionally, many colleges are implementing early-alert systems to identify students who are struggling academically. For example, Van Horn and Odessa College have created a process in which professors will reach out to Odessa’s college connection coach if a student is struggling in class, including if they are missing assignments or have repeated absences. When a professor identifies a student who is struggling in their course, they send a notification to the college connection coach, who serves as the liaison to Van Horn. The coach then forwards the notice to Van Horn’s college and career readiness (CCR) director, who can quickly follow up with the student to check in and develop an individualized solution. Such communication processes are particularly useful for rural schools, which are better able to prioritize additional student support due to the college partner’s early intervention strategy.





# Build Staff Capacity to Implement Dual Enrollment

Implementing effective dual enrollment programs requires schools to overcome challenges related to staff capacity and to invest time designing them. When staff members must split their focus over a wide range of areas, implementing dual enrollment can feel overwhelming and unsustainable. Small rural schools are particularly vulnerable to this tension. However, by thinking innovatively about creating a team centered around dual enrollment, rural schools can create the capacity needed to implement these programs.

## Solutions From the Field

### Create Positions Targeted at Supporting Dual Enrollment

Having staff members who are dedicated to supporting dual enrollment students and coordinating with the higher education partner strengthens dual enrollment programs. Van Horn has three such positions, including a CCR director, a dual credit facilitator, and the director of Van Horn, who oversees dual enrollment implementation. The CCR director works closely with partners at Odessa College to implement the program and to support and advise students along the sequence of courses. In this role, she handles all college course enrollments and grades, monitors all dual enrollment courses and communication with Odessa, oversees test administration, and communicates with parents.

The dual credit facilitator works daily with the CCR director to ensure that all students are supported in their classes. She serves as an academic advisor for the students by helping them navigate the virtual learning platform, submit coursework on time, and contact college professors as needed.

The dual credit facilitator's salary has been funded as part of Van Horn's regular budget for many years. The CCR director is currently funded through a [Gear Up](#) grant; once the grant ends, the superintendent will fund the position using general budget funds. The school district prioritizes this investment because it understands the importance of these positions in enabling the dual enrollment program to thrive.



## Leverage or Shift Current Staff Roles to Support Dual Enrollment

If bringing on new staff members dedicated to dual enrollment is not a viable option, schools can staff up the dual enrollment team by leveraging their existing staff's knowledge and expertise in a distributed manner. This could involve appointing one person from each academic department to serve on the dual enrollment team.

Van Horn has committed to designating one teacher from each department and dual enrollment pathway as a dean. The deans and other leadership team members (including the director of Van Horn, the CCR director, and the principal) meet every other month—or more frequently, if the need arises. Six of the 14 seniors who graduated from Van Horn in the spring of 2022 had earned their associate's degree from Odessa College along with their high school diploma, thanks to the team of passionate and committed Van Horn staff members standing behind each of the students.

## Credential High School Teachers as Dual Enrollment Instructors

While online and/or asynchronous courses can provide students with more access to dual enrollment classes, it is often not the preferred approach. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, about 80% of dual enrollment students in rural areas take classes located at their high school rather than on the college campus, online, or at a high school other than the student's school.<sup>2</sup> By credentialing qualified high school faculty members, dual enrollment courses can be offered in person on the high school campus. Since South Plains College is 120 miles away from Snyder High School, busing students to the campus is not an option. Therefore, Snyder works closely with South Plains to credential its high school teachers so they can teach dual enrollment courses. This approach eliminates many of the logistical and travel barriers and increases access to dual enrollment coursework. By the end of the 2022 school year, Snyder had 200 students take at least two dual enrollment courses before graduation. Twenty years ago, only five students did so.



# Conclusion

Throckmorton Collegiate High School, Snyder High School, and Van Horn Technology Early College High School are just three examples of how rural schools are creatively approaching challenges related to dual enrollment. The case study examples of how the schools have addressed challenges related to distance from high education partners, support for students in the college environment, and staff members' capacity to support dual enrollment programs can inspire action in other rural schools to support such programs. In addition to supporting rural students in accessing and completing college, dual enrollment programs can more broadly aid rural economic development when they are linked to the needs of the local labor market and support seamless transitions from high school to college to career.



# Endnotes

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