

Number of College Courses Taught in High Schools Increasing Statewide

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Freshman students at Harbor Teacher Preparation Academy in Los Angeles Unified review a lesson before final exams.

This spring, juniors and seniors at Redlands Unified School District in San Bernardino County will take community college courses at their high schools, including engineering, sociology, business administration and music appreciation.

The courses, offered at no cost to students at Redlands High, Citrus Valley High and East Valley High, will allow students to earn college credits while in high school that they can transfer to most colleges and universities, including all University of California, California State University and state community college campuses.

“These courses offer our high school students the opportunity to get a jump-start on their college education,” said Stephanie Lock, the district’s assistant principal on special projects – college and career pathways. “For some kids who might not be thinking of college right away, this will get them to the next level.”

Redlands Unified is among the rapidly growing number of school districts in California offering dual, or concurrent, enrollment programs, which allow high school students to take college courses during the school day.

High school students can take these college courses as part of their regular class load in place of some electives. Some college courses, including kinesiology and some vocational courses, could count for both college and high school credit.

The growth in dual enrollment statewide has been spurred by a law that went into effect in 2016, the College and Career Pathways Act, which promotes partnerships between community colleges and K-12 school districts.

Under the new law, created by the passage of Assembly Bill 288, college courses can be offered on high school campuses exclusively to high school students. Previously, high schools could offer college courses, but were required to open the courses to the public, so they were offered mostly in the evenings.

The law allows high school students to take up to 15 units per semester of college courses, up from a previous limit of 11 units. All courses are free to students, including no costs for textbooks and other materials. The law also streamlines sharing of student data among high schools and community colleges, and makes it easier for parents to consent to enrolling their children in college courses.

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Dual-enrollment programs are not new in California, with some programs starting more than a decade ago. Until now, most students in dual enrollment have belonged to “middle college” or “early college” programs, which are small high school campuses contained entirely inside a larger community college. These students take both their high school and college courses at the community college.

Other students who have attended traditional high schools have also enrolled in community college courses after school or during the summer semester with consent from a parent and school counselors.

For the 2015-16 school year, an estimated 50,000 high school students took at least one college course through Middle College programs or on their own.

At Redlands – which started a pilot program last spring with nearby Crafton Hills College, part of the state’s community college system – students this spring can choose from a dozen courses, including Appreciation of American Popular Music, Arabic, Introduction to Engineering and Fire Prevention Technology. The classes will either be taught by a community college faculty member or by a high school teacher who has been accredited to teach the college course.

Several studies have shown that high school students enrolled in college courses are more likely to earn high school degrees, enroll in college, enroll in a four-year college, enroll full time and remain in college. Supporters have also said increasing dual enrollment will reduce the number of incoming college freshmen in remedial math and English classes because many more students would have already been exposed to college courses.

Los Angeles Unified, the state’s largest district, approved in September an agreement with the Los Angeles Community College District to offer college courses at district high schools.

Officials said it’s part of an ambitious goal to have all 30,000 students from the Class of 2019, this year’s sophomores, take at least one college course by the time they graduate. Eventually, all students would have at least one college course completed before they graduate.

“This is a motivator to expose all our students in high school to college,” said Jesus Angulo, the district’s director of academic and counseling services. “In the past (dual enrollment) was mostly for high-achieving kids.”

Los Angeles Unified will work with the Los Angeles Community College District’s nine campuses to help build the courses and staff the classrooms. Angulo said the goal is to have all 80 district high schools offer some college courses in the future.

Hector Torres, a junior at Fremont High School in south Los Angeles, said he looks forward to taking college classes, but also worries about how he’ll handle the advanced coursework.

“It sounds like it will be a great opportunity for high school students to get a sense of how college works,” said Torres, who is undecided about his college plans. “I expect these classes will be a lot tougher and require more studying. But maybe that will help me become a better student in the end.”

Even though the courses are open to all students, officials acknowledge that not everyone is academically ready for the extra workload of college courses.

Carmen Hermosillo, a counseling coordinator at Los Angeles Unified, said students will be encouraged to talk with their parents and high school counselors before they sign up for college courses so they don’t take on more than they can manage.

“Most students might take just one college course a semester to start,” she said. The expectation is not for students to be both full-time high school and college students, she said.

The 2016 state law does not set GPA or other academic requirements for high school students to enroll in college courses, meaning they’re open to anyone as long as a student meets the course’s prerequisites.

Los Angeles Unified had about 4,000 of its nearly 190,000 high school students this fall take one or more college courses. Sarah Kratzer, a high school senior at Harbor Teacher Preparation Academy in Los Angeles Unified, has been taking college courses at Los Angeles Harbor College since her freshman year of high school. The community college and high school share a campus. Kratzer, 17, is on course to graduate this spring with both an associate of arts degree and a high school diploma.

“For me, the selling point was that I’d be able to get two years of college by the time I graduate high school,” said Kratzer, who has been accepted to Stanford University next fall. “That means I’ll be able to save a lot of money in tuition.”