



Wisconsin
Evaluation
Collaborative

March 2021

Addendum to Academic and Career Planning Evaluation

for the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction | 2019-20



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About the Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative

The Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative (WEC) is housed at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. WEC's team of evaluators supports youth-serving organizations and initiatives through culturally responsive and rigorous program evaluation. Learn more at <http://www.wec.wceruw.org>.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank all survey participants and interviewees for their time, perspectives, and expertise. In addition, the authors thank the Academic and Career Planning team at the Department of Public Instruction. The authors would also like to thank Alison Bowman at the Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative for her work and support.

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Section I

Introduction

Introduction

The following is an addendum to the final report for the 2019-20 Evaluation of Academic and Career Planning (ACP) conducted by the Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative (WEC), part of the Wisconsin Center for Education Research (WCER) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, for the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI). This addendum provides further information on ACP implementation based on two sources of data unavailable at the time of the final report: data on student participation in career-based learning and dual enrollment and data from interviews and case studies conducted in six districts throughout the state.

The overarching evaluation questions for the 2019-20 statewide evaluation are the following:

1. To what extent are school districts and schools implementing ACP infrastructure and activities?
2. What are the varieties of ACP infrastructure and activities across different school and district contexts?
3. What are stakeholder (administrators, school counselors, teachers, students, families) perceptions about ACP infrastructure and activities?
4. What, if any, changes have occurred in terms of student outcome data compared to baseline data?
5. What, if any, associations between ACP elements and outcomes can be measured at school or student levels?

The specific infrastructure elements and student activities of interest, referred to in Evaluation Questions 1-3, are the following:

Infrastructural elements:

1. An inclusive schoolwide culture with administrative engagement, prioritized goals, staff participation and which is student-focused.
2. Regular and ongoing informing of and engaging families in their students' ACP.
3. Regular and ongoing supportive and safe student relationships with adults.
4. Non-judgmental, informed, comprehensive education and career advising.
5. Equitable access to all ACP opportunities.
6. Regular, ongoing and dedicated time for ACP activities.
7. Outlined ACP activity curriculum that is scaffolded and developmentally appropriate (scope and sequence).
8. Career pathways.

Student activity components

1. Students participating in career-based learning activities.
2. Students taking dual credit, AP, and IB courses.
3. Students participating in Industry-Recognized Credentials (IRCs).
4. Students utilizing knowledge and skills gained through ACP activity participation to set, modify, and update personal, education and career goals.
5. Students choosing CTE and academic courses applicable to their ACP/career goals.

To evaluate the implementation of certain ACP infrastructural and student activity components, WEC requested statewide administrative data on a variety of outputs and outcomes for the 2018-19 school year. There were, however, restrictions on some of the requested output data. For student participation in career-based learning activities, student enrollment in dual-credit, and student enrollment in college level industry certification courses, the data source that provides these results, the Career and Technical Education Enrollment Reporting System (CTEERS), transitioned to a new data reporting system in 2018-19. Due to this transition, 2018-19 data for these items were not available at the time of the full evaluation report. Since then, DPI provided data on student participation in career-based learning activities, student enrollment in dual-credit, and student enrollment in college level industry certification courses from the new Career Education data reporting consisting of College and Career Readiness (CCR) and Career and Technical Education (CTE) data reporting systems.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which caused the shut-down and/or switch to remote learning in Wisconsin schools beginning in March, 2020 prevented WEC evaluators from conducting the planned case studies in the Spring of 2020. Some initial telephone interviews had already been conducted, and school districts were asked whether they would be interested in postponing their participation until Fall 2020. Some districts did indeed participate, while others declined as they were generally overwhelmed by the impact of the pandemic on instructional delivery. Ultimately, of the initial six districts invited to participate in case studies, leaders in four of the districts participated in one or more interviews, and full case studies were conducted in two districts. Data from these case studies were collected from October through December, 2020, and findings are contained in this addendum.

The full Academic and Career Planning Evaluation 2019-20 report and its executive summary can be found at <https://dpi.wi.gov/acp/quality>.

Methodology

With new 2018-19 data from DPI's Career Education data reporting systems, this addendum provides descriptive information on the student participation in career-based learning activities, dual enrollment courses, and IRCs. Unlike the previous data collection for this information which provided information for 11th and 12th grade students, the 2018-19 data includes student participation information for all high school grades 9-12. Additionally, the new reporting systems provide different classifications of the types of career-based learning activities. Due to the new data sources as well as the change in classifications, this addendum does not include direct comparisons across time between the 2018-19 data and previous years. To examine participation across subgroups, this addendum also provides participation rates by race/ethnicity, economically disadvantaged status, disability status, and English proficiency status. DPI administrative data also provided student demographic information. For more information on general data preparation, refer to the Technical Appendix in the full report.

The interviews and case studies were conducted virtually, using telephone and video-conferencing platforms such as Zoom. Table I shows the types of data collection used in each district. Pseudonyms are used to identify districts to protect the confidentiality of participants, with the exception of Pittsville, which elected to be identified.

Interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded with participants' permission, and recordings were transcribed. Transcripts were analyzed and coded by theme to identify patterns and phenomena of note. Representative and illustrative quotes were identified to help describe the phenomena in question.

Table I: Case Study Districts - Data Collection Methods

DISTRICT	DISTRICT TYPE	NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS WITH LEADERS	DOCUMENT ANALYSIS	FOCUS GROUPS - SCHOOL PERSONNEL	FOCUS GROUPS - STUDENTS	FOCUS GROUPS FAMILY MEMBERS/ COMMUNITY MEMBERS
Elm Tree	Small city	1	yes	-	-	-
White Oak	Small suburb	2	no	-	-	-
Spruce Grove	Mid-sized suburb	4 (n= 4)	yes	2 (n=15)	2 (n=7)	1 (n=3)
Pittsville	Small rural	3 (n=6)	yes	1 (n=10)	4 (n=18)	-
Bloomington	Small rural	2	no	-	-	-
Cottonwood	Small rural	1	yes	-	-	-

Section 2

Findings

In this section, we present data and findings related to student participation in ACP student activity components and case studies. Findings on student participation directly relate to Evaluation Question 4 and findings from case studies directly relate to Evaluation Question 3.

Student Activity Components

Student participation in career-based learning activities

DPI's Career Education reporting systems provide information on two major categories of certified career education programs: Youth Apprenticeships and State Skills Standards Co-Ops. This latter category consists of DPI Occupational, DPI Youth Leadership, and DPI Employability Skills programs. Figure I shows the percentage of high school students participating in each of these two major types of career education programs. Of high school students (Grades 9-12), approximately two percent of students participated in Youth Apprenticeships and one percent of students participated in State Skills Standards Co-Ops in 2018-19.

Figure I: Percentage of High School Students Participating in Youth Apprenticeships and State Skills Standards Co-Ops
2018-19

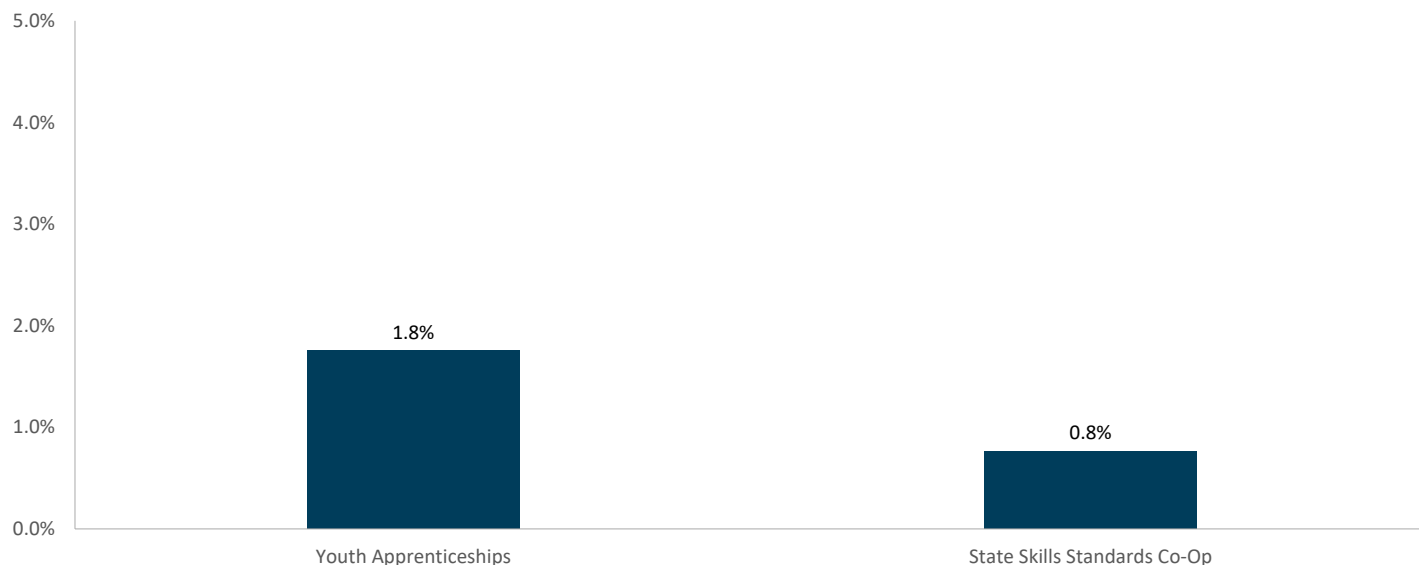


Figure 2: Percentage of High School Students Participating in Youth Apprenticeships by Grade, 2018-19

by Grade, 2018-19

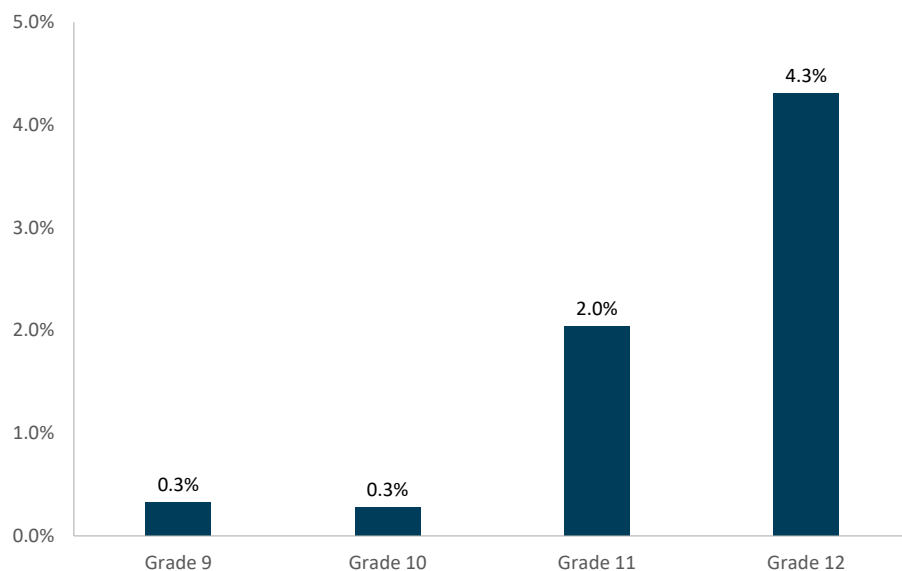
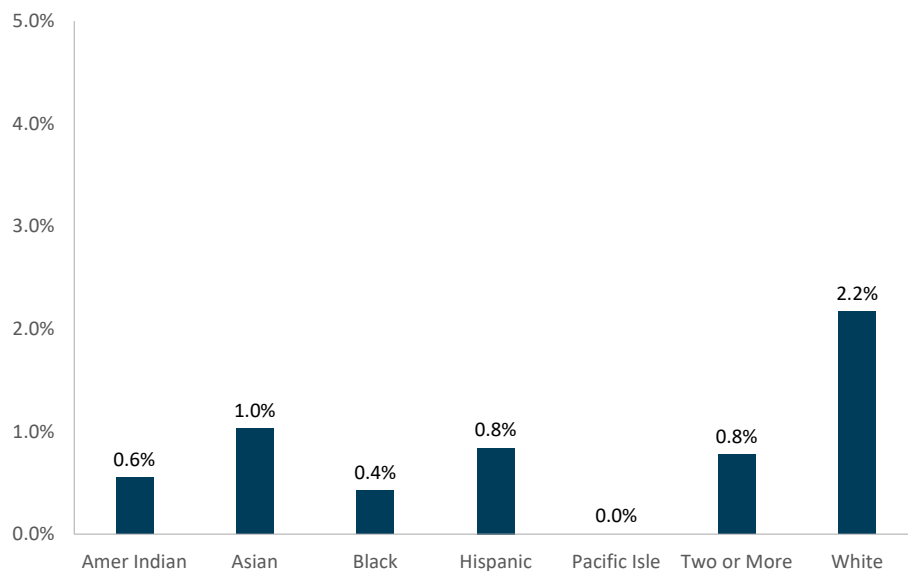


Figure 3: Percentage of High School Students Participating in Youth Apprenticeships by Race/Ethnicity, 2018-19

by Race/Ethnicity, 2018-19



To provide further context into the types of students participating in these activities, the following figures and tables show the percentage of students participating by grade, race/ethnicity, economically disadvantaged status, disability status, English proficiency status, and CESA. As seen from Figure 2 and Figure 7, the majority of students participating in Youth Apprenticeships and State Skills Standards Co-Ops are in 11th and 12th grade. Figures 3-6 show some evidence of gaps in participation based on student population. White students participate in Youth Apprenticeships as a rate over double that of any other race/ethnicity. Economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, and English learner students all participate at lower rates compared to students not in those categories. Compared to Youth Apprenticeships, there is less of a gap in participation in State Skills Standards Co-Ops across subgroups as seen from Figures 8-11. Regionally, participation in Youth Apprenticeships is highest in Cooperative Educational Service Areas (CESAs) 3, 9, 10, and 11 and lowest in CESA 12 (Table 2). Participation in State Skills Standards Co-Ops is highest in CESA 9 and lowest in CESA 12 (Table 3)

Figure 4: Percentage of High School Students Participating in Youth Apprenticeships

by Economic Status, 2018-19

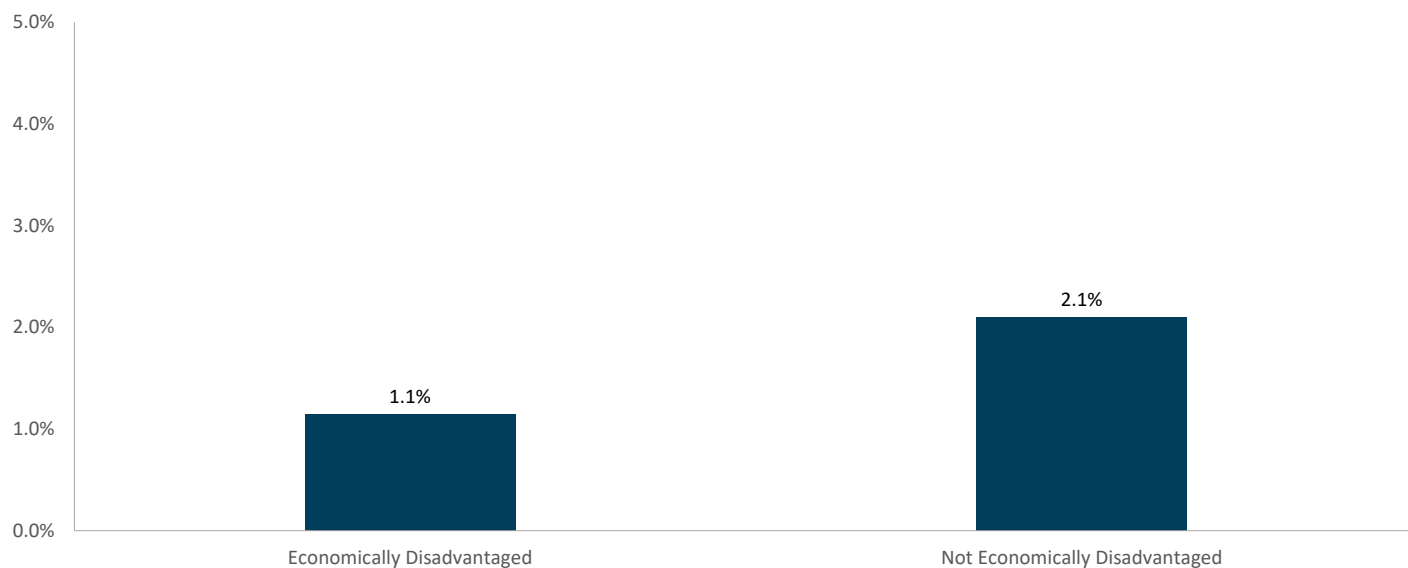


Figure 5: Percentage of High School Students Participating in Youth Apprenticeships

by Disability Status, 2018-19

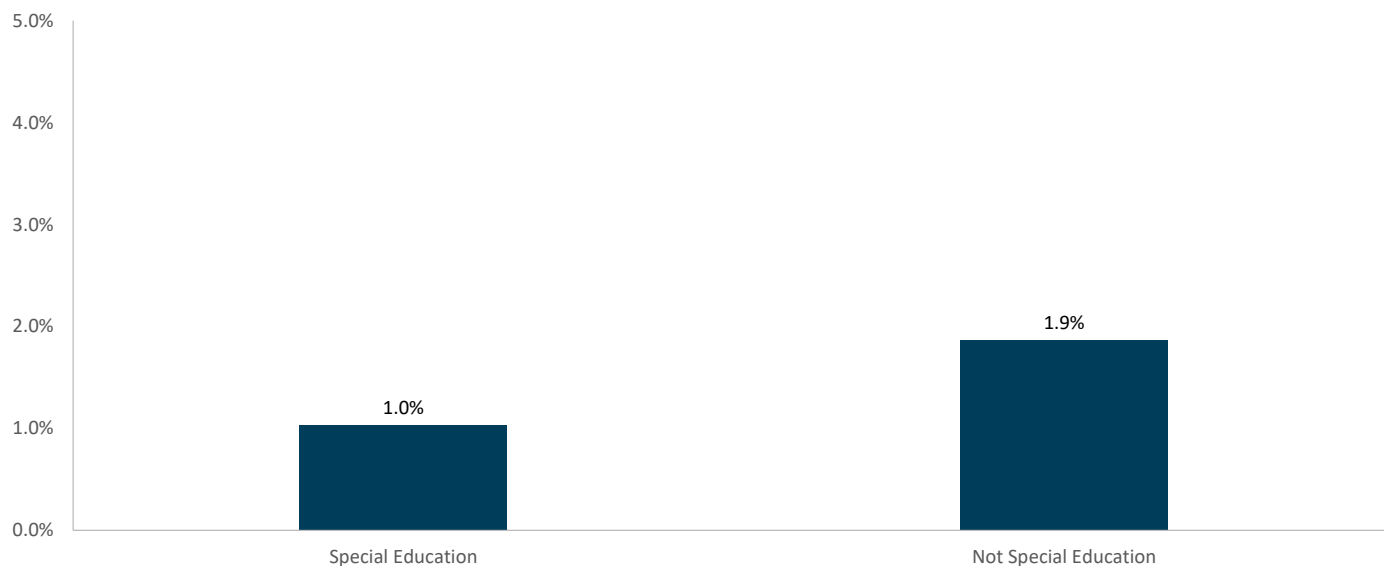


Figure 6: Percentage of High School Students Participating in Youth Apprenticeships

by English Proficiency Status, 2018-19

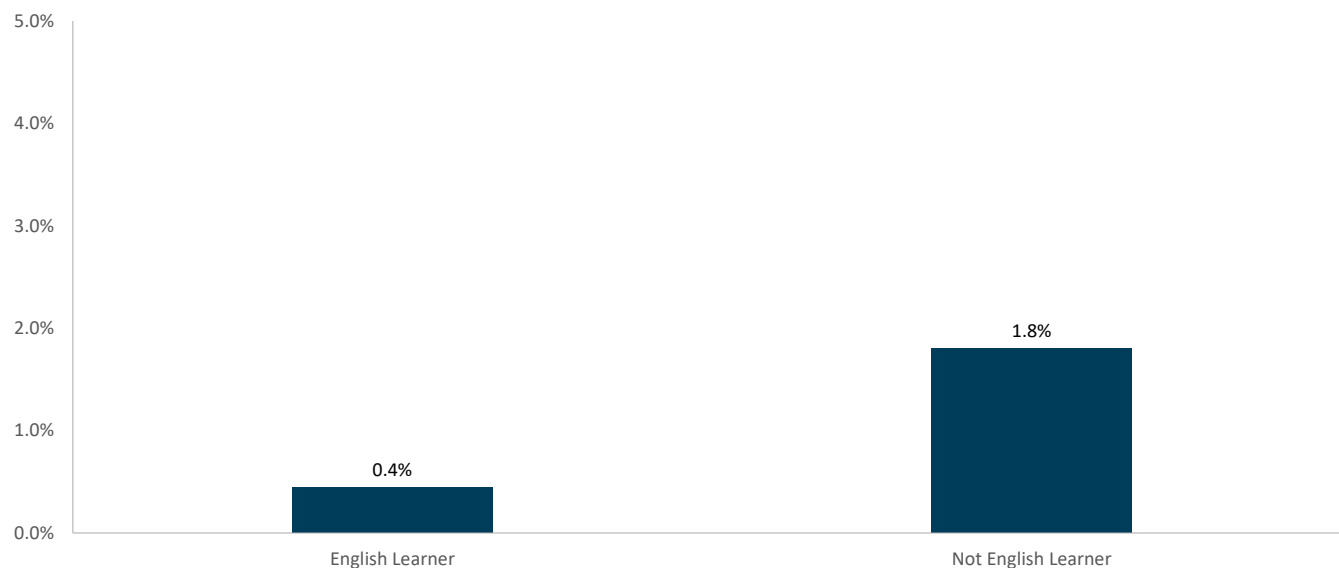


Table 2: Percentage of High School Students Participating in Youth Apprenticeships

by CESA, 2018-19

CESA	PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS
1	0.7%
2	2.7%
3	3.5%
4	0.9%
5	2.2%
6	1.4%
7	1.4%
8	0.7%
9	3.5%
10	3.5%
11	3.5%
12	0.2%

Figure 7: Percentage of High School Students Participating in State Skills Standards Co-Ops

by Grade, 2018-19

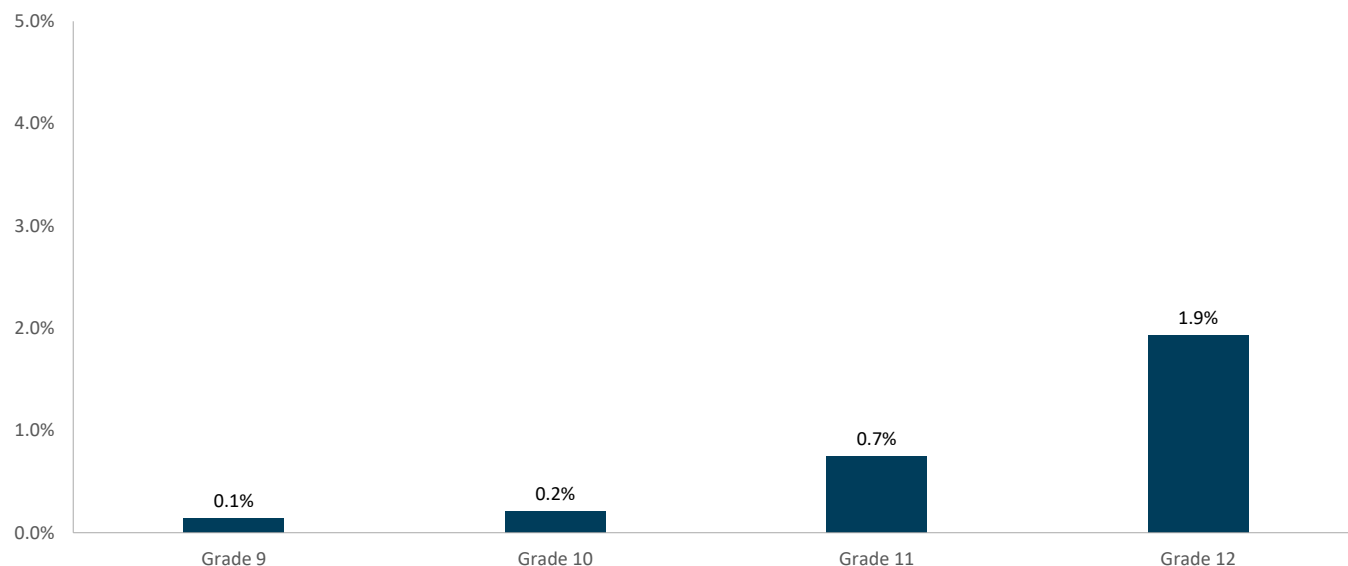


Figure 8: Percentage of High School Students Participating in State Skills Standards Co-Ops

by Race/Ethnicity, 2018-19

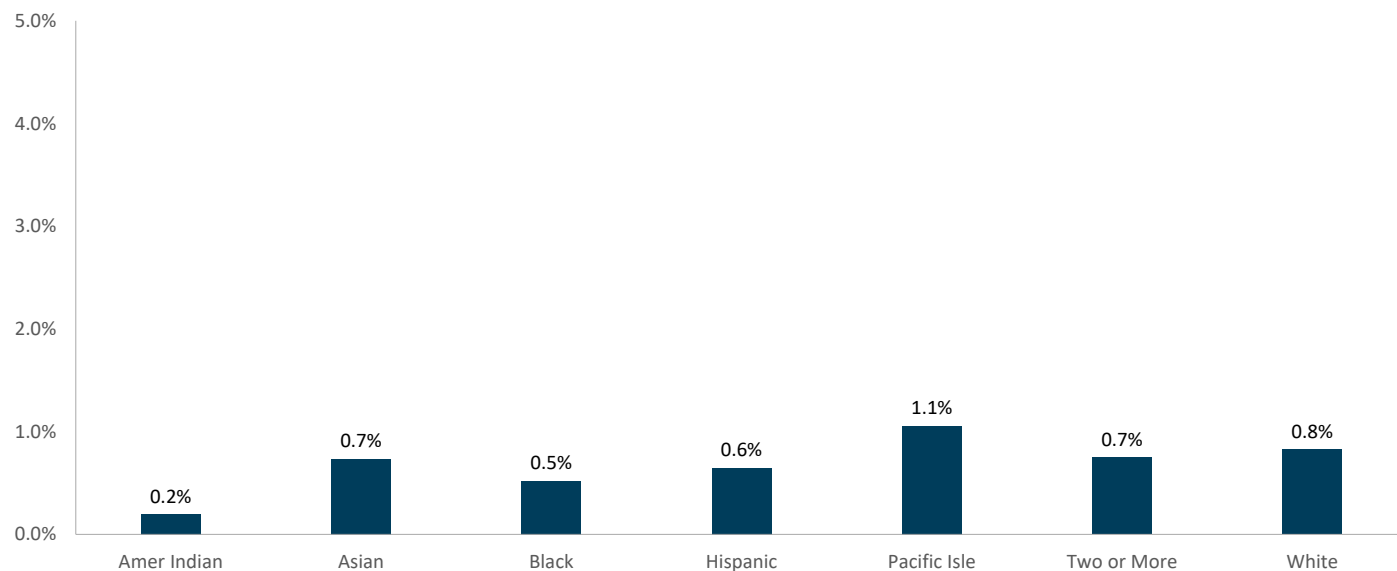


Figure 9: Percentage of High School Students Participating in State Skills Standards Co-Ops

by Economic Status, 2018-19

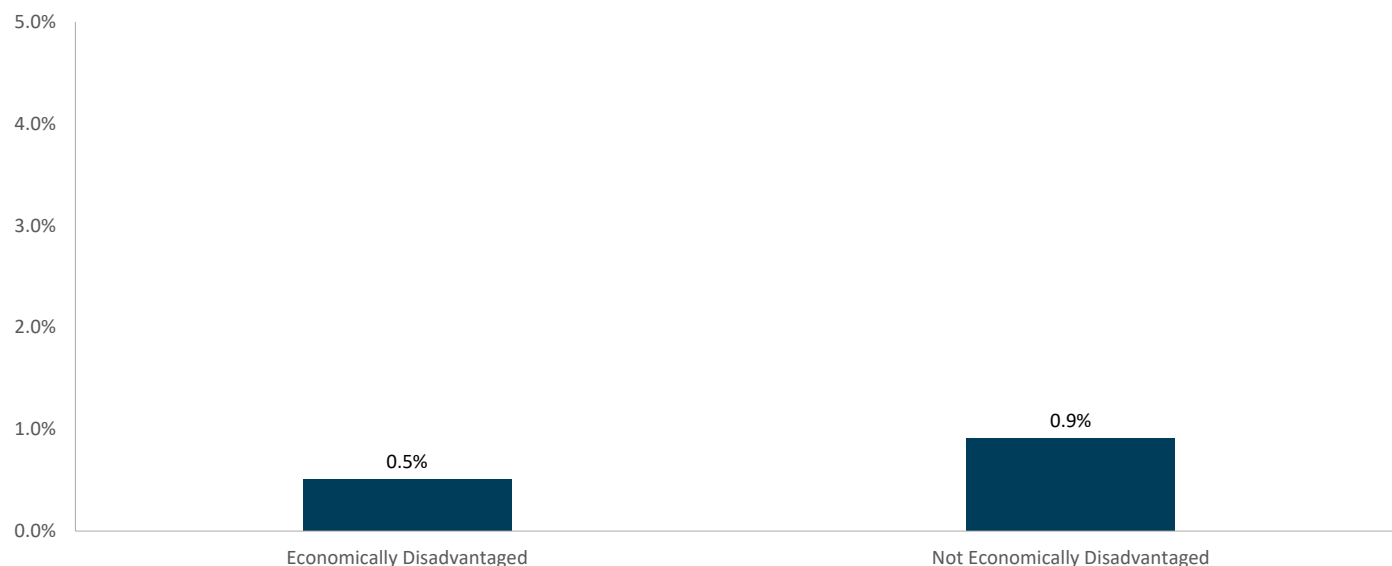


Figure 10: Percentage of High School Students Participating in State Skills Standards Co-Ops

by Disability Status, 2018-19

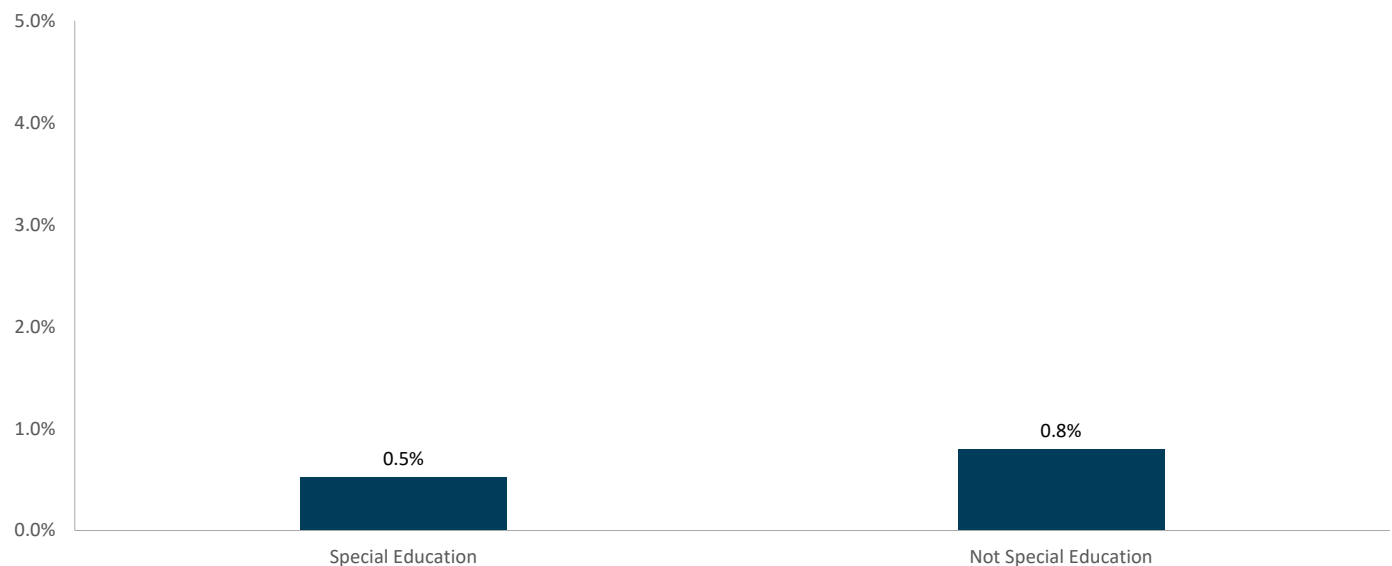


Figure II: Percentage of High School Students Participating in State Skills Standards Co-Ops

by English Proficiency Status, 2018-19

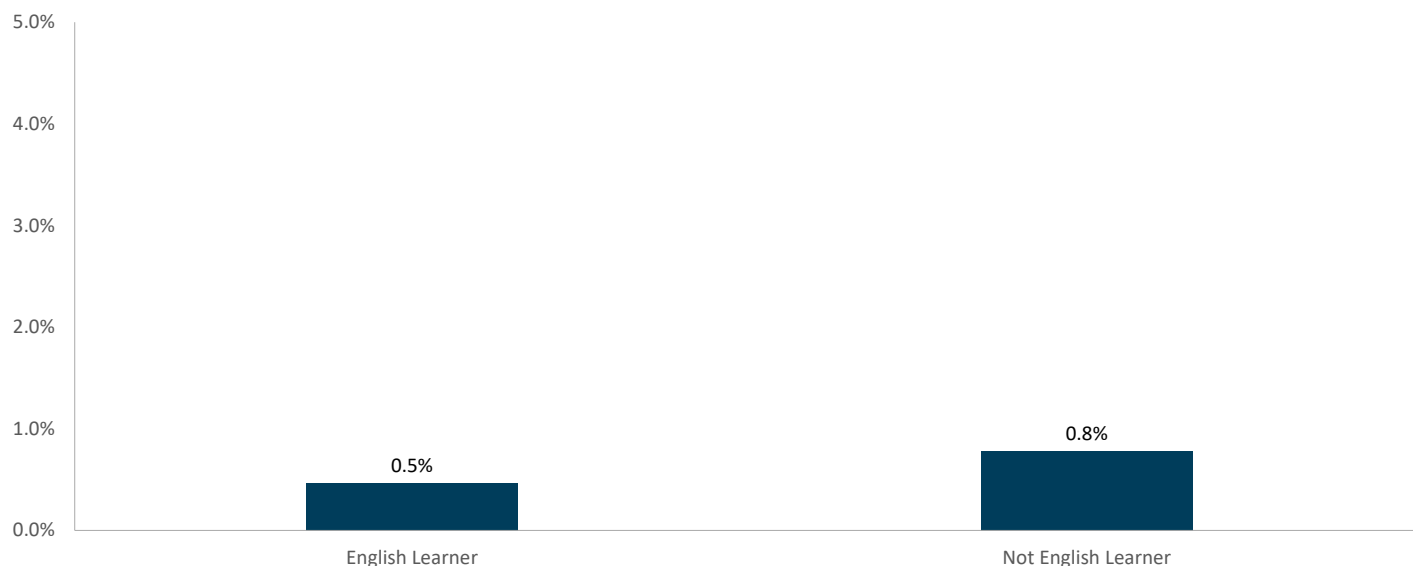


Table 3: Percentage of High School Students Participating in State Skills Standards Co-Ops

by CESA, 2018-19

CESA	PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS
1	0.2%
2	1.6%
3	0.6%
4	0.1%
5	1.1%
6	0.5%
7	0.2%
8	0.3%
9	3.5%
10	0.4%
11	1.6%
12	<0.1%

Figure 12: Percentage of High School Students Participating in Dual Enrollment

by Type, 2018-19

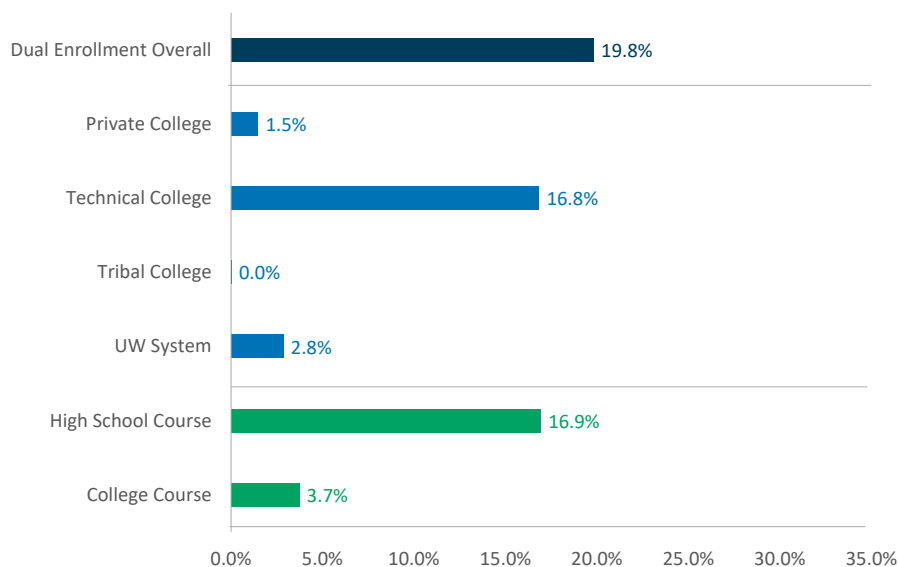
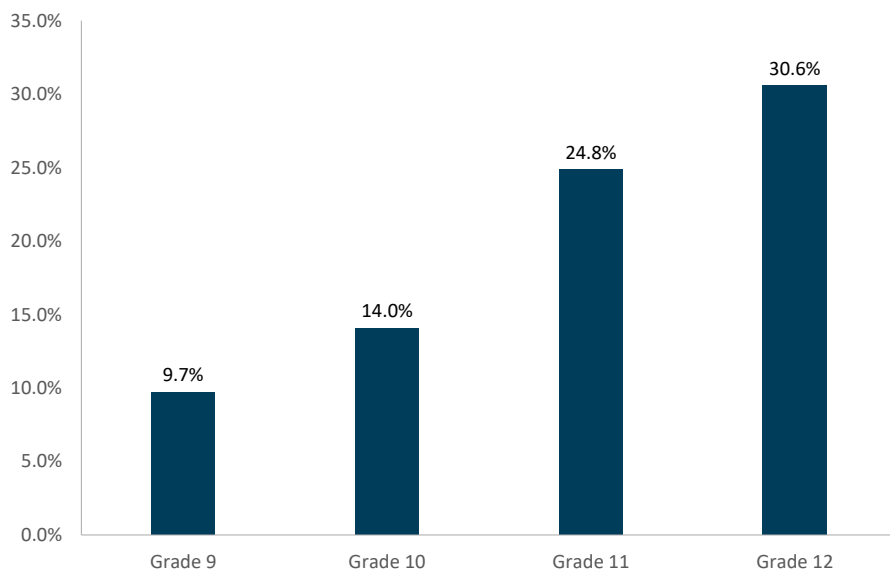


Figure 13: Percentage of High School Students Participating in Dual Enrollment

by Grade, 2018-19



Students taking dual enrollment courses

The Career Education data reporting systems provide information on student participation in dual enrollment in two ways: first, the type of institution at which the student potentially earns post-secondary credits – private college, technical college, tribal college, or UW System – and second, whether the course was at the high school or college. Figure 12 shows the percentage of high school students participating in dual enrollment courses overall and by the type of institution and location of the course. Close to 20 percent of all high school students in 2018-19 participated in some type of dual enrollment course. The vast majority of these dual enrollment courses provided credits with technical colleges and occurred in students' high schools.

Dual enrollment participation by various subgroups is found in Figures 13-17 and Table 3. As seen, participation gradually increases throughout high school with approximately 10 percent of students participating in dual enrollment in 9th grade and 30 percent in 12th grade. Asian and White students participated at the highest rates while American Indian and Black students participated at lower rates. Economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, and English learner students also participated at lower rates. Examining regional variation, Table 4 shows dual enrollment participation was highest in CESAs 6 and 10 and lowest in CESAs 8 and 12.

Figure 14: Percentage of High School Students Participating in Dual Enrollment

by Race/Ethnicity, 2018-19

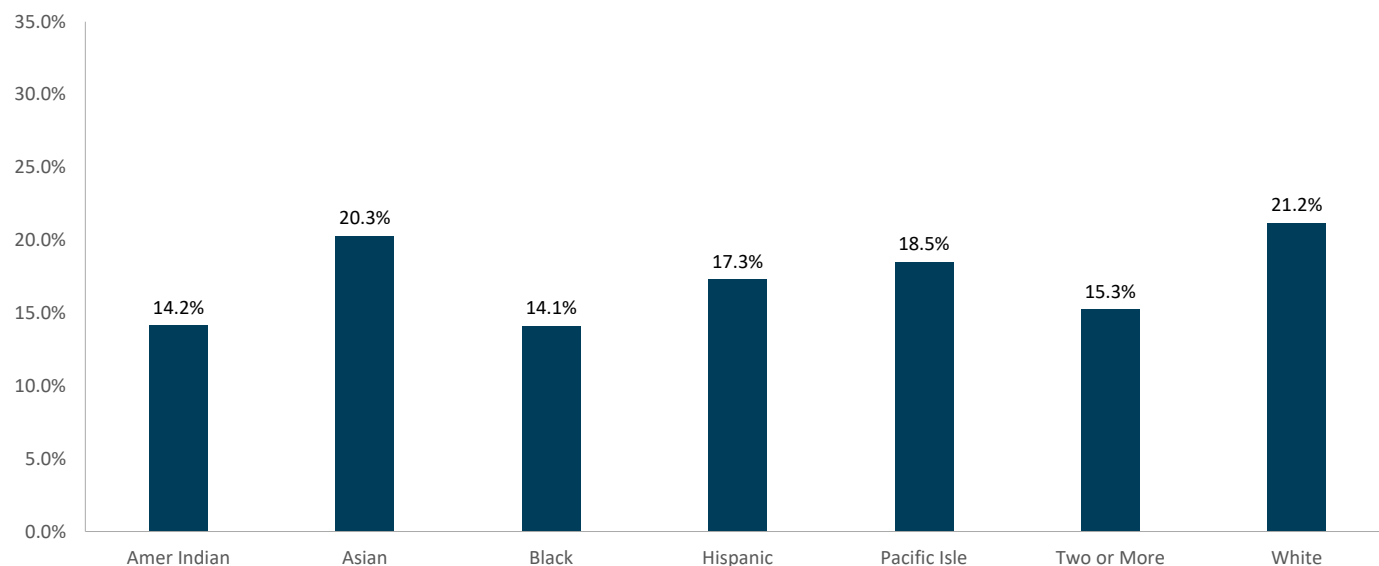


Figure 15: Percentage of High School Students Participating in Dual Enrollment

by Economic Status, 2018-19

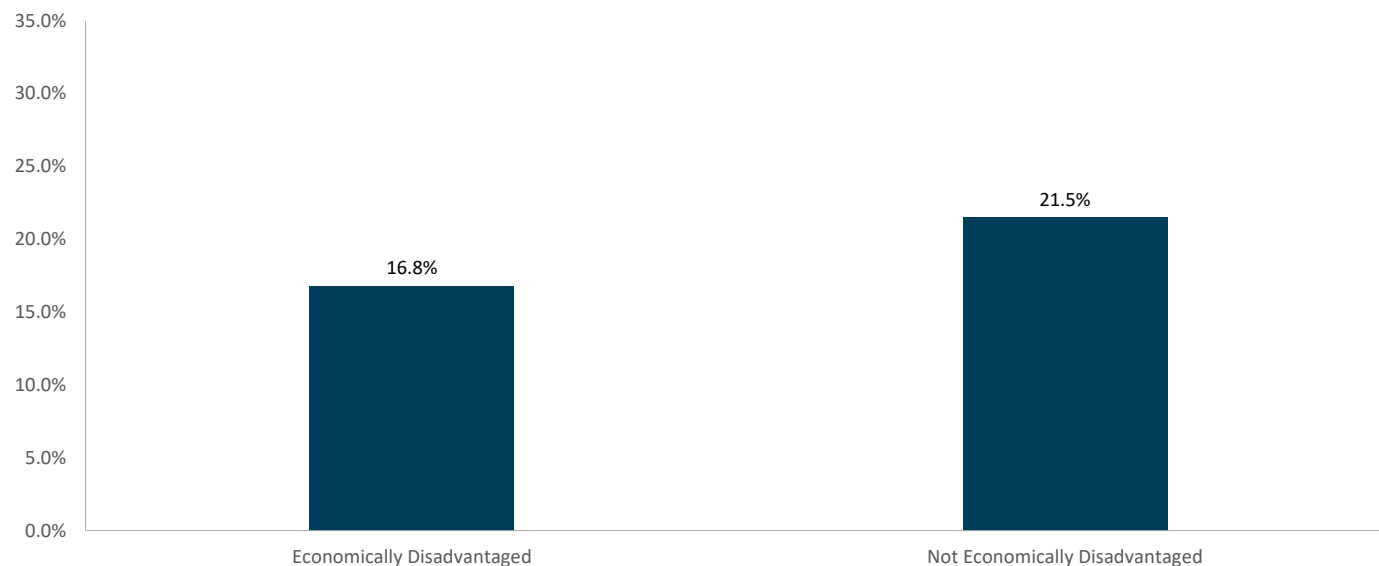


Figure 16: Percentage of High School Students Participating in Dual Enrollment

by Disability Status, 2018-19

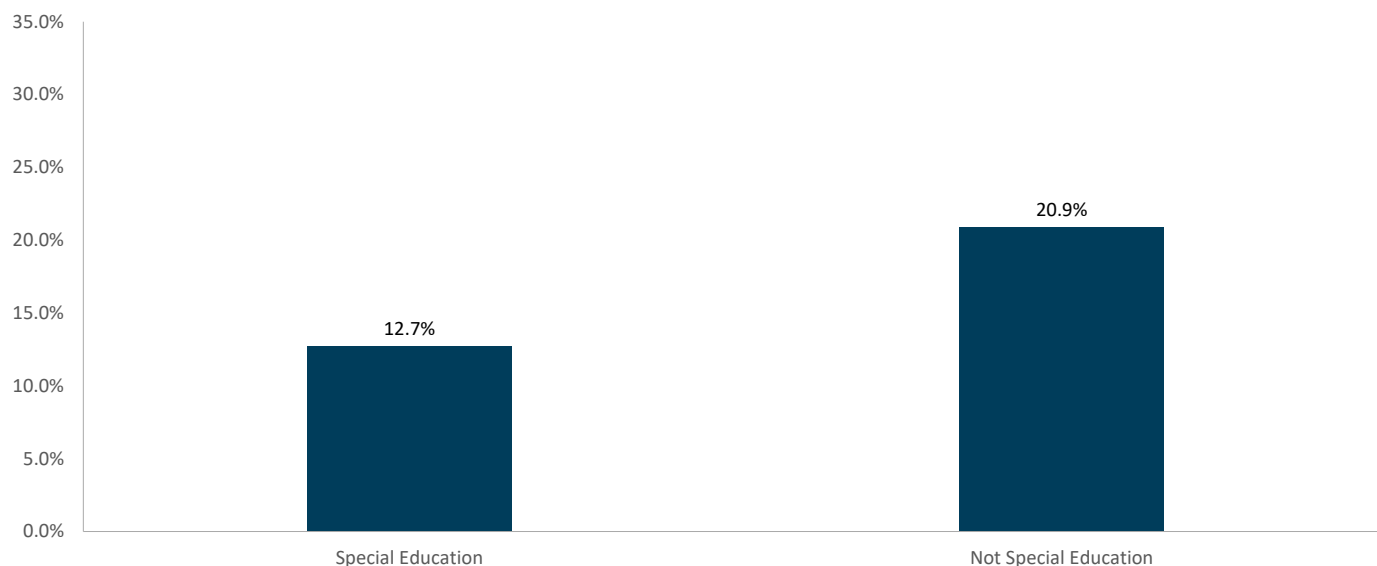


Figure 17: Percentage of High School Students Participating in Dual Enrollment

by English Proficiency Status, 2018-19

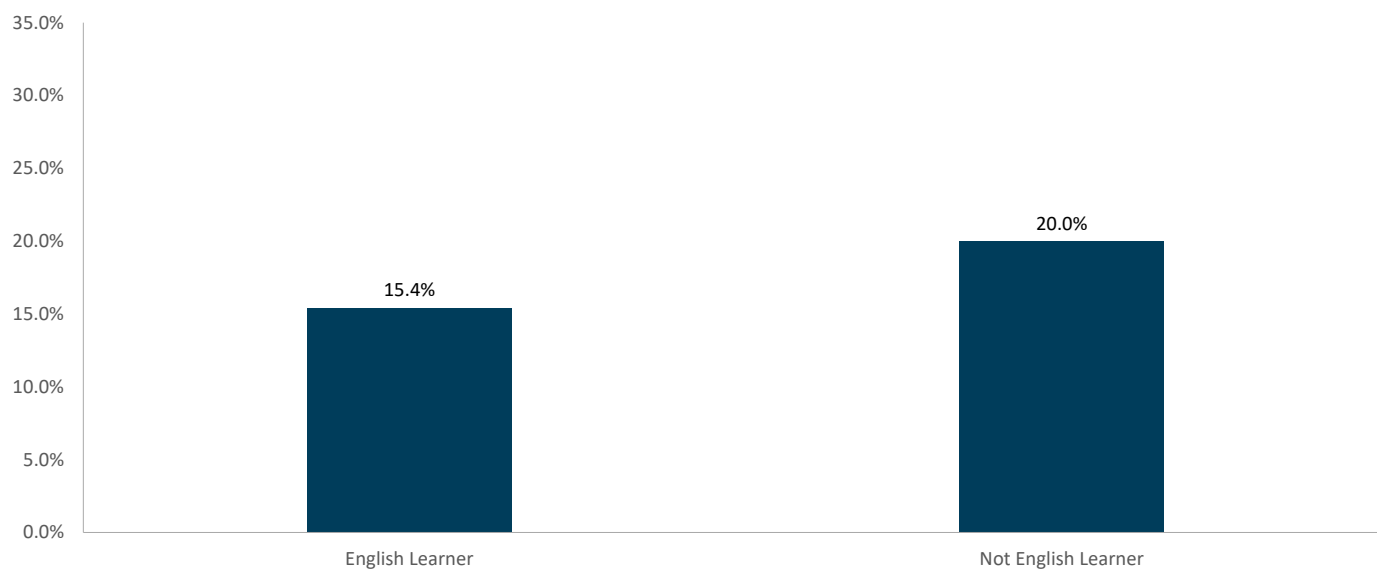


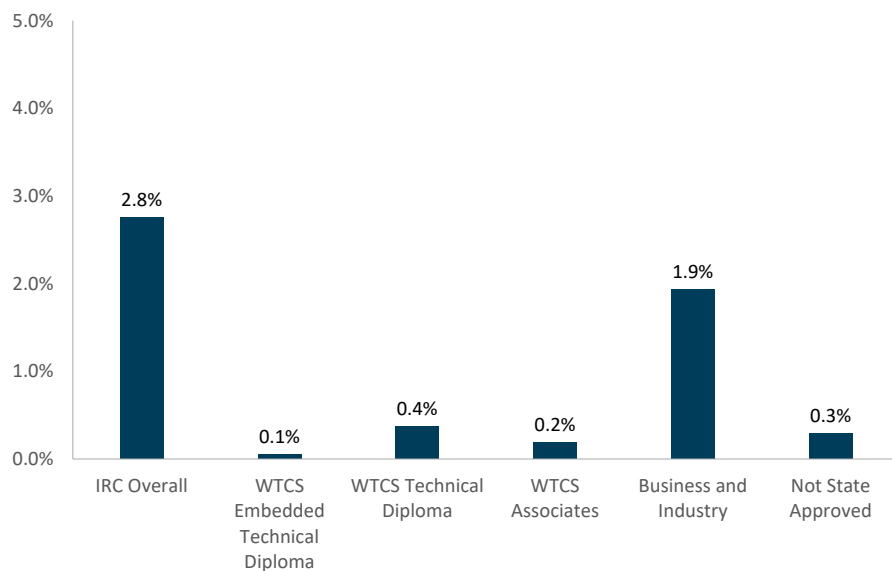
Table 4: Percentage of High School Students Participating in Dual Enrollment

by CESA, 2018-19

CESA	PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS
1	15.1%
2	17.8%
3	19.5%
4	18.9%
5	15.3%
6	30.0%
7	25.8%
8	11.2%
9	20.8%
10	30.4%
11	21.6%
12	11.9%

Figure 18: Percentage of High School Students Participating in IRCs

by Type, 2018-19



Students participating in Industry-Recognized Credentials (IRCs)

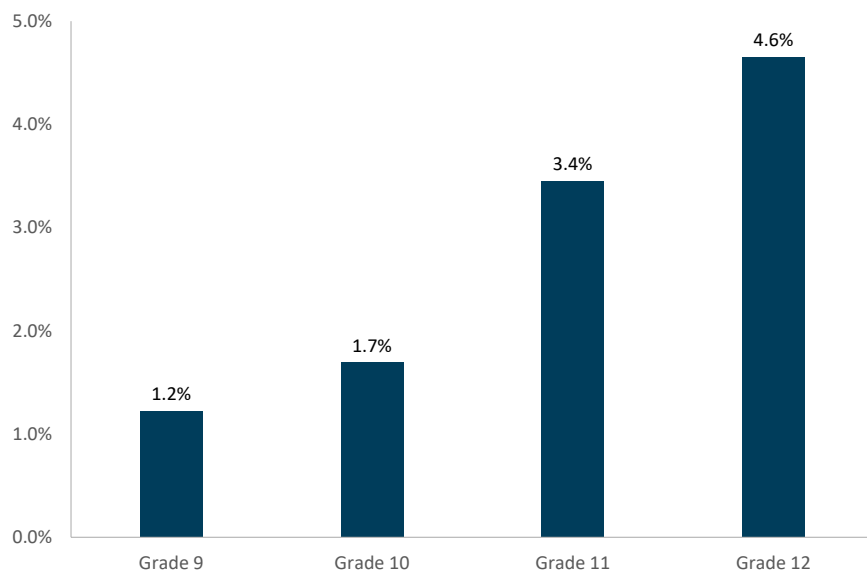
The Career Education data reporting systems provide information on five types of IRCs:

- State-Approved Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS) Embedded Technical Diploma
- State-Approved WTCS Technical Diploma
- State-Approved WTCS Associates
- State-Approved Business and Industry
- Not State-Approved

Figure 18 shows the percentage of high school students participating in IRCs overall and by each of these five types. Overall participation in IRCs in 2018-19 was at slightly less than three percent of high school students with the majority of participation in State-Approved Business and Industry IRCs.

Figure 19: Percentage of High School Students Participating in IRCs

by Grade, 2018-19



As with the previous types of student participation, this addendum also provides information on IRC participation by various subgroups of students found in Figures 19-23 and Table 5. As with other career-based learning and dual enrollment, participation in IRCs increased throughout high school. Across racial and ethnic groups, Asian, Pacific Islander, and White students participated in IRCs at the highest rates while Black students participated at the lowest rates. There were also gaps in participation based on economic status and special education status. As seen in Figure 23, however, there was only a slight difference in participation between students based on English proficiency status. Regionally, CESA 10 had the highest participation rate in IRCs and CESA 12 had the lowest.

Figure 20: Percentage of High School Students Participating in IRCs

by Race/Ethnicity, 2018-19

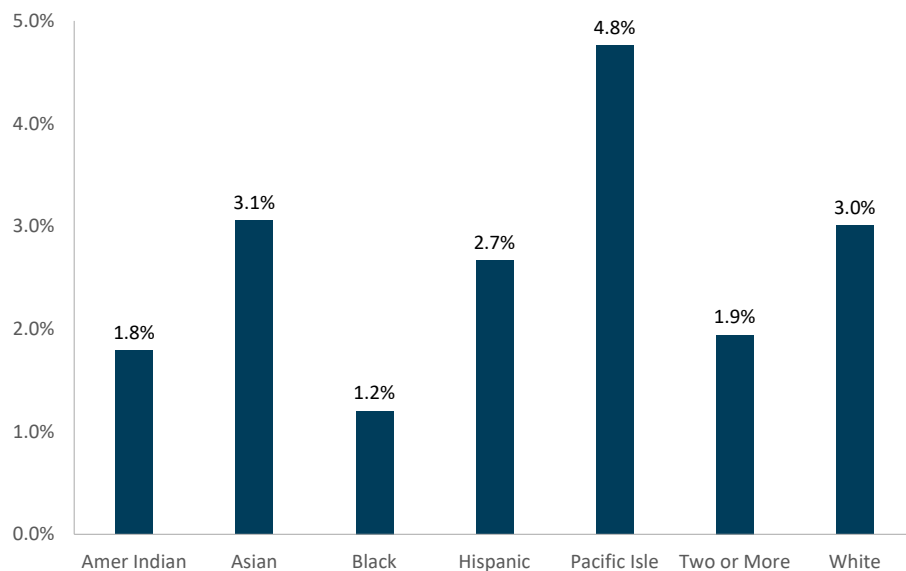


Figure 21: Percentage of High School Students Participating in IRCs by Economic Status, 2018-19

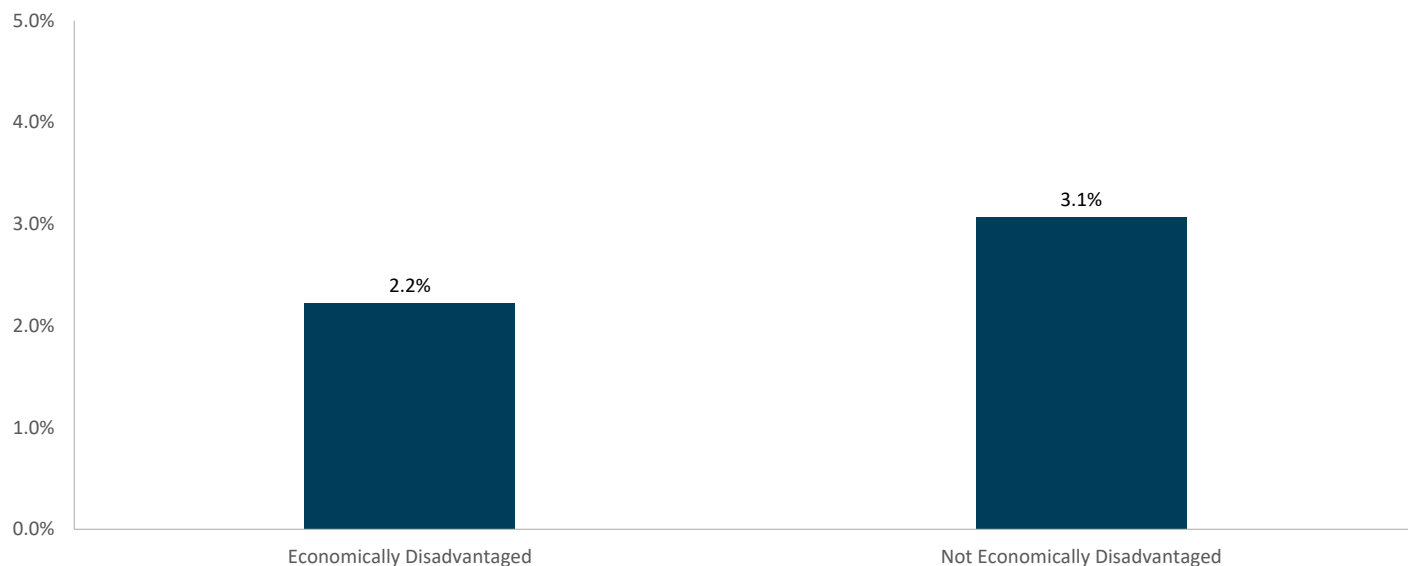


Figure 22: Percentage of High School Students Participating in IRCs by Disability Status, 2018-19

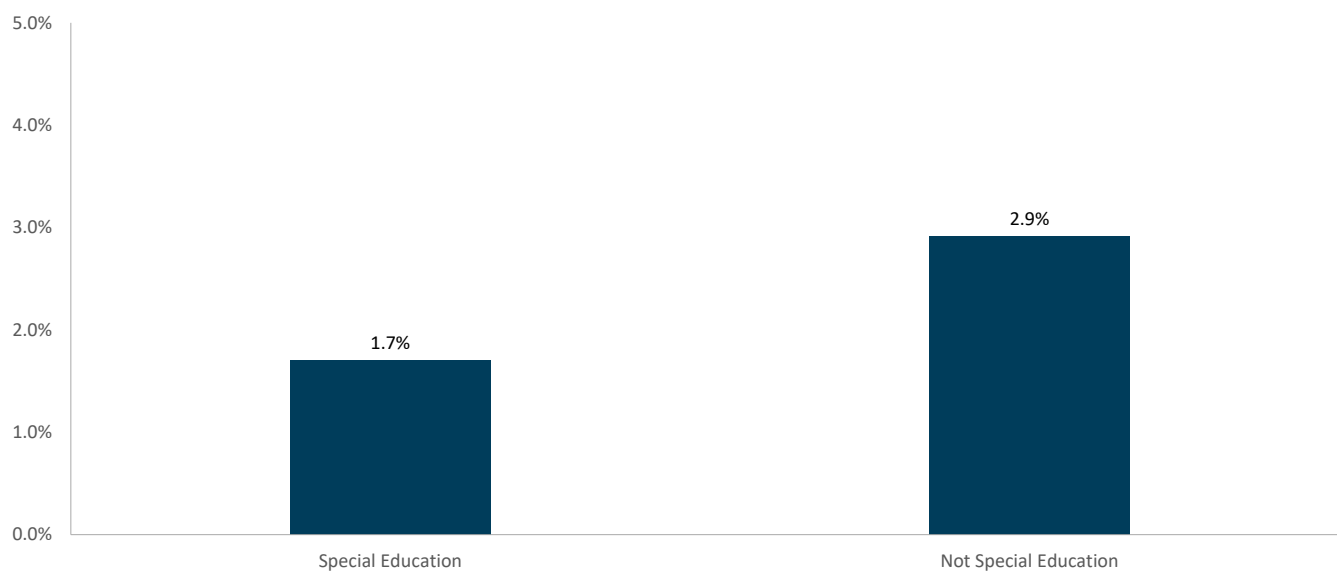


Figure 23: Percentage of High School Students Participating in IRCs

by English Proficiency Status, 2018-19

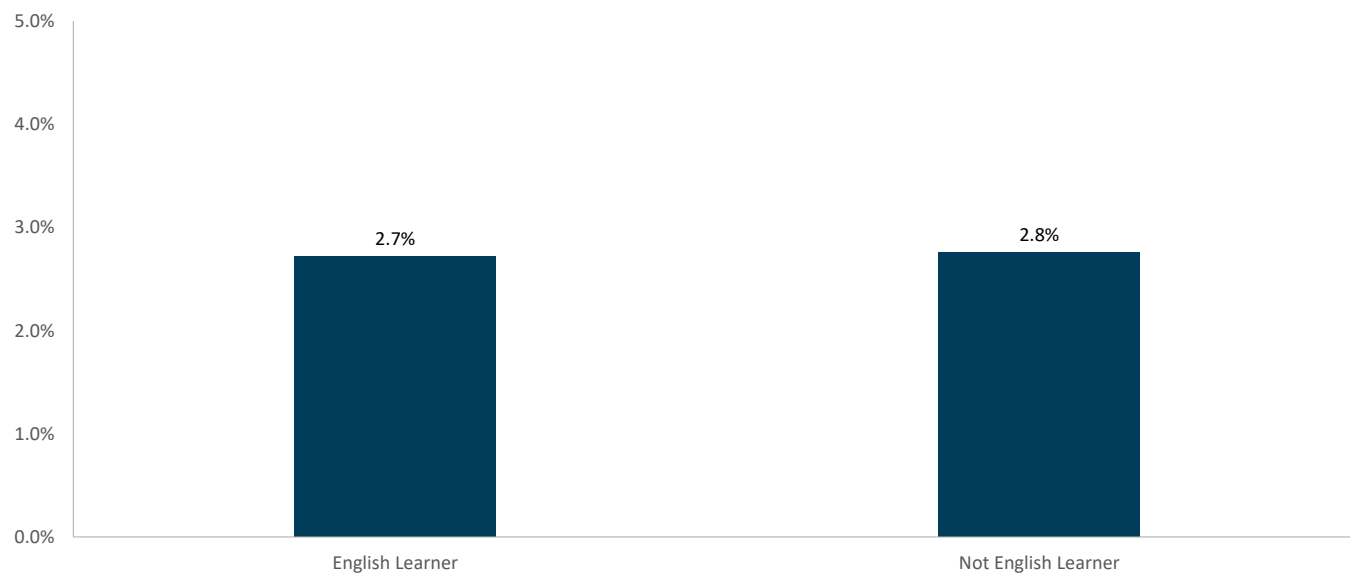


Table 5: Percentage of High School Students Participating in IRCs

by CESA, 2018-19

CESA	PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS
1	2.4%
2	3.3%
3	2.4%
4	1.3%
5	1.4%
6	2.2%
7	5.1%
8	1.2%
9	1.3%
10	7.0%
11	1.5%
12	0.3%

Case Studies

Qualitative data from the six full and partial case study districts reinforced findings from previous years in the evaluation study but also provided some additional findings. Among these six districts, ACP was being implemented with varying degrees of intensity, success, and buy-in. Not surprisingly, those with well-established programs continued to implement them fully or nearly fully despite the challenges brought on by the pandemic. Those with weak programs tended to put many or all aspects on hold. Yet the disruption to schooling brought on by the pandemic also provided insight to nearly all the districts in terms of their ACP programs, in some cases providing opportunities for pivots, adjustments, or new practices, in other cases providing an opportunity to rethink their programs and plan a post-pandemic restart, and in all cases, to underscore the importance of ACP in general. The findings from these case studies will be presented by major theme, looking at implementation, changes in implementation due to COVID-19, innovations undertaken to address pandemic challenges, and planned retooling for the future.

Implementation

In the six districts interviewed, the range of implementation varied, with one district implementing a very ingrained and robust program (Pittsville) and another district (Elm Tree) featuring an institutionalized program with many community and post-secondary connections. The other districts had less robust levels of implementation, breadth, and buy-in. All but Cottonwood had all staff involved in ACP programming to some degree, but in certain districts, the majority of staff were involved in ACP only in terms of staffing Advisory or Resource periods in which Xello activities were done. These dedicated ACP times ranged in frequency from several times a week to once a month, and in some cases, the Xello surveys and other activities were not integrated into any other programming and had little or no discussion, follow-up activities, or other forms of accountability. Not surprisingly, those districts with minimal staff involvement and/or a limited ACP curriculum did not feature strong staff or student buy-in for the program. In particular, those districts in which ACP consisted of little more than Xello activities had the weakest levels of buy-in. Teachers in Spruce Tree, which nominally involves all staff in ACP programming in the form

of assigning Xello activities during Advisory, did not tend to detect a connection between the Xello activities and the senior Capstone process.

The more robust programs not only had dedicated ACP time but integrated ACP-related curriculum into content courses as well. Similarly, these districts offered courses, typically required, such as “9th Grade Career Power,” Personal Finance, career and technical education (CTE) and business education courses, and, in Pittsville, a four-year “CTE Academy” required for all students. Job shadowing continued to be named as very popular among students, and viewed as an effective means for “trying out” careers of interest. In two of the districts, some level of job shadowing was required for all students.

Impact of COVID-19

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on instructional delivery in general and ACP implementation in particular varied somewhat among the districts in question. Generally speaking, the more robust or institutionalized the ACP program was in a school pre-pandemic, the less the program was curtailed in the Spring semester of 2020 and in the Fall 2020 semester. Those schools who had one or few people in charge of ACP generally saw a collapse of the program, as that person, usually a counselor, was often overwhelmed with student mental health concerns. Those programs with a whole-school approach were able to maintain their implementation due to the integrated nature of the programming, distributed leadership, and well-established delivery methods. Similarly, in those programs where Xello activities comprised all or the majority of ACP programming, implementation often fell by the wayside, often because the disconnected Advisory or Homeroom periods where they had been implemented were no longer taking place, or taking place much less frequently, and no longer afforded time for ACP activities. When these activities seem unconnected to rest of the curriculum, they may easily be discarded as a “waste of time” or “of limited value” when school staff feel overwhelmed.

COVID-19 Impact on Robust Programs

Pittsville's ACP program exemplifies the phenomenon in which a strong program was well maintained during the pandemic. Pittsville's required CTE Academy continued both in the spring and the fall, with only minor modifications, such as a switch to virtual job shadows in some cases. As the high school principal described, the importance of maintaining the CTE Academy and the associated senior capstone projects is such a high priority at Pittsville High School that the cohorts created for scheduling in-person versus remote instructional days were based on the cohorts that already existed for the CTE Academy groupings—student groups that are created in 7th grade, stay together until graduation, and are matched with the same teacher for all six years. This system emphasizes the importance of developing strong student-teacher relationships, and school and district leadership felt that both the CTE Academy and the relationships were crucial to maintain during the pandemic.

Those internships, Youth Apprenticeships, and other work-based learning placements that were already in place in Spring 2020 were all able to be completed, in part because Pittsville's remote location did not experience a higher rate of infection at that time. In the Fall of the 2020-21 school year, the annual Employer Breakfast had to be cancelled, but a substitute process for communicating internship expectations to both employers and students, as well as the networking/matching function of the breakfast, were developed and internships continued. Work-based learning continued, often in person, but job shadows were often virtual. Students noted that in some cases, the virtual nature of their job shadows "didn't give you the full experience" but in other cases, the flexibility of students' schedules allowed for "more time to work on things" and to engage in more lengthy job shadows. As one student reported,

"My friend's job shadow was for cyber security with [employer] and she was on a call with them all day, and she got to follow them around on computer all day, and if it were a normal job shadow, it would have been just like an hour."

Some teachers interviewed noted that overall, remote instruction posed challenges for "staying on top of students" who struggled academically and had attendance issues, although this was not specific to ACP programming.

Students tended to agree that doing work online "is a little bit harder" and that "you don't learn as much as in person." When asked why, one student reported that learning suffered when you "don't have the teacher to student contact."

While Pittsville High School's robust program continued, ACP programming at the middle school, due to the creation of pandemic cohorts, shifted from being an all-staff responsibility to being counselor implemented on virtual Wednesdays, a change which leadership felt was not ideal. Because the student cohorts traditionally began in seventh grade, high school leaders are concerned about the impact on incoming ninth graders next year, as these students will not have benefited from the cohort system as early as prior classes of ninth graders. At the time of the interview, leadership was discussing whether to maintain this change in implementation going forward or whether to revert to the previous system post-pandemic. These concerns underscore a factor that has been noted before in the evaluation—that the reliance on one person or a small group of people to implement ACP puts the quality of the program at risk, and in this case, a weakness in the middle school program is perceived as a potential threat to the strength of the high school program.

Elm Tree's comprehensive ACP program also continued despite the disruptions caused by the pandemic. Elm Tree's program features all-staff involvement, delivering ACP lessons in advisory, strong relationships with area four-year universities and technical colleges, and substantial community involvement. Their thriving early college credit program (transcripted credit and AP courses) continued during the pandemic, although offerings became somewhat more limited and often virtual. A partnership with a local bank to deliver financial literacy and money management lessons to seniors was continued, but also made virtual. The annual Youth Apprenticeship hiring fair had to be cancelled, and while the intent is to continue offering apprenticeships, the mechanisms for doing so (likely virtually) were still being developed at the time of the interview.

Supporting Student Needs During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Elm Tree's leadership was inspired by an ACP-related Community of Practice session presented by DPI to consider the importance of ACP in preparing students for their post-pandemic futures. They are focusing on supporting students by engaging in regular conversations with teachers that consider goals, plans, and needs to help move forward. The Elm Tree high school counselor reported that these conversations were going well, and that students are...

“consistently ready to have those conversations about their future and what they want to do. It gets them un-stuck from all of the stress that we’re feeling today. In a counseling setting, it’s been excellent. It helps them heal and move on.”

Similarly, Elm Tree has been doing a lot of work with social-emotional learning, often during dedicated ACP time, as they view the two as strongly connected in terms of developing students’ “knowledge, skills, and habits.” As a counselor reported,

“One area we focused on more this year is the ability to persevere and to overcome. We’ve been teaching it across the board. This is social-emotional learning, too, obviously. (...) If we look at all the skills you’re learning through all of this, you’re learning how to persevere, you’re learning how to adapt, you’re learning how to be flexible, you’re learning how to use new resources. We have been taking some of the time we’d normally have for ACP in conversations teaching kids how to persist and persevere and overcome.”

Elm Tree has also been considering how to assess the effectiveness of their ACP program. They report having anecdotal evidence from teachers that ACP is “making a difference” but would like to identify or develop more specific measurements in order to continually improve their program. This area of need is often mentioned by districts with ACP programs that have moved beyond initial implementation into a more comprehensive and ingrained program.

Bloomington has developed an ACP program that features regular, dedicated ACP time within advisory and all-staff involvement, cohorting of students from middle school through until graduation, and required courses such as a ninth-grade Career Power course and personal finance. During the pandemic, Bloomington made a concerted effort to maintain ACP programming by incorporating what had been done in advisory period into courses. With the support of their CESA, Bloomington was able to maintain their Youth Apprenticeship program and has a high level of student participation. The district was also able to conduct a virtual college fair that all juniors and seniors attended via their regular content courses. However, their construction academy was delayed last spring, and students finally received their certificates this fall. Similarly, individual junior planning conferences last spring were halted and then held virtually this fall. The school counselor reported that even though they were able to be conducted, it “wasn’t the same experience as sitting down in person with the families” and going over each student’s plan together.

COVID-19 Impact on Less Developed Programs

White Oak and Spruce Grove are both small to mid-sized suburban districts with enrollments of 4,000–6,000 students. They both have rather basic ACP programs and each tends to rely heavily on Xello activities to make up the majority of their ACP programming. Consequently, their programs are not well integrated into their overall curriculum or their missions, and the impact of the pandemic proved particularly disruptive to their ACP work. In both cases, dedicated ACP time was discontinued during remote learning. Teachers and leaders in both districts described a reliance on Xello because it was seen as important for “compliance.” Moreover, even pre-COVID, there did not seem to be much differentiation between grades in terms of Xello activities, but rather, students repeated the same inventories and surveys each year. Not surprisingly, without a true scope and sequence that built upon previous activities, teachers and students in both districts described Xello activities as “boring,” “repetitive,” and frequently asked why they needed to be done. Furthermore, the activities appear to be implemented in a vacuum, without elements of student discussion or reflection, nor with any integration into other elements of ACP-related programming, making them appear disjointed and unconnected to other learning goals. When implemented in this way, it is perhaps not surprising that they were readily discarded during the reorganization of instructional delivery during the pandemic.

Spruce Grove was one of the two districts in which a more in-depth case study was conducted. Although teachers were tasked with leading advisory where Xello activities were implemented, teachers were not familiar with the term “Academic and Career Planning” and did not have a clear understanding of the scope of or rationale for ACP programming. Likewise, they believed that students were not “real excited about some of the things and doing the activities” and that other than perhaps the seniors, students...

“couldn’t make the connections for why they’re actually doing it. They feel they have to jump through hoops and do this exercise because otherwise we’re going to be hounding them, but when it comes down to really seeing how they make the connections to careers, we’re missing the boat there.”

Xello Use Decontextualized

Students who were interviewed, however, reported “doing quizzes on Xello” which “helped me learn about career stuff.” Some students reported taking the activities “really seriously” but noted that not all students do so. When asked what would make the lessons more interesting or relevant, students all reported that doing them “in school” and “in a class” where they can “interact with people” about their findings would be far more valuable than “just doing it by themselves.” This finding appears to underscore the importance of reflecting upon and discussing Xello activities with peers, and that this sort of learning is not as individually focused as one might assume. As another student reported, ACP activities were more interesting before the COVID shutdown because...

“we were just starting on it, and nobody had done anything with the website and it was new, and everyone was just interacting with each other, saying ‘Oh look, I could get this job, or I could get that job.’”

Another student in the same focus group agreed, saying,

“I think that too because we could have a lot of class discussion, like she said, along with, we did presentations, and everyone was going at the same pace and learning together.”

So whereas some school personnel believed that Xello lessons, which are web-based, were ideal for implementing in remote/online learning situations, these students underscored the importance of discussion and interaction about the information they were encountering, and the personal discoveries they were making. Thus, assigning a series of Xello activities without contextualizing them or providing follow-up activities involving peer interaction seems to be of limited value.

COVID-19 Impact on Capstone Projects

The capstone project is a key feature in the Spruce Grove ACP program and traditionally had been comprised of a series of Xello activities, resume development, and an optional community service component in the initial years of high school, culminating in the required senior project. While the capstone project has been implemented for 16 years, district leadership had recently conducted surveys and other means for gathering feedback on how to improve this component, redesigning the senior project to include both community service learning and career research, with one being a “major” and the other a “minor,” based on individual student preference. The district rolled out this new system just before the pandemic disrupted schooling in the Spring of 2020. The switch to remote instruction necessitated some changes to the planned implementation, including temporarily eliminating the senior career research option and making the service-learning component optional for all grades. Additionally, the proposal process for service learning was changed mid-stream from being approved by students’ advisory teachers to proposals for all grades being approved by the Senior Project Coordinator, yet with no increase in resources for that individual.

Parent Perceptions

The small group of parents interviewed expressed frustration with Spruce Grove’s senior project, saying that it did not have clear goals or follow-up, and that it was “a major stressor” for seniors already worried about graduation and beyond. Most noted that the management and organization of the process was lacking, despite the hard work of the Senior Project Coordinator, whom they felt was overwhelmed. Some parents thought that at least some students were not sufficiently mature or otherwise ready for career planning, and others felt that a specific class for seniors would be beneficial for bringing structure and organization to the various elements of the capstone project.

Student Perceptions

Students reported that the career research element of the senior project was potentially valuable, but that the timing itself should be adjusted, feeling it occurred “too close to graduation” to allow for useful decision-making, and that it should begin earlier in their high school careers. Students valued most the hands-on experiences that came with optional service learning, as well as the job shadows that were part of career research before the pandemic. One high school student in the focus group suggested that there should be required job shadows each year, and “maybe even twice a year for the first two years.” All the other students in the focus group agreed. Students mentioned the value of knowing the “pros and cons of what it takes for certain occupations.” Asked whether they thought there would be some students who would push back and not like such a requirement, one student said,

“I think there would be a few that wouldn’t like it, but this year, when seniors changed, and what we could do changed, and a lot of people had a plan and then they couldn’t do it, there were a lot who wanted to [do] job shadowing and then couldn’t. I think people would like it more than not like it.”

Another student agreed, saying “I think there would be pushback but not enough that it would be a big issue.”

Students also suggested that ACP and career exploration could be improved by “having more interactions with people in certain occupations.” This student mentioned the optional Health and Human Services course that Spruce Grove offers, and felt the kind of exposure to careers that occurred in this course should be available to more or all students, and in different occupational areas. Another student agreed, noting that

“I think there needs to be more exposure to what our options are, because there are a lot of jobs that people might not know about.”

A third student added that exposure to careers could also occur through “speakers and videos” because doing only one job shadow in one career area (the career research component) meant that students would “only do that once or not at all, so to have more variety of exposure to different careers” would be valuable. They also noted that career fairs and other special events should be more widely publicized and open to all students, because “sometimes they have it on announcements but really the only people that know are the people in the class” so an improvement would involve making the whole school aware “or just reminding them about it more.”

Students at Spruce Grove also noted that earlier discussions of career options and the planning that these discussions afforded would be preferable. As one student noted,

“I think it was my freshman year with my counselor, I wish we could have done it again sophomore year, talking about our classes, talking about what you want to do, certain topics and majors would allow you to take certain classes based on that. Specifically what you wanted to do. That would have helped me a lot more if I could have done that in freshman and sophomore year and then again in junior year, to see where I was at, but we only did it once, freshman year.”

Again, while both teachers and parents sometimes cited the belief that career exploration and planning was not developmentally appropriate for students in early high school years (and earlier), students often expressed the opposite. While there is certainly a wide range of maturity and interest among high school students, it seems it is often not the topic at hand (ACP) that turns off students, but rather the ways in which it is conveyed. This apparent disconnect between some adult and student beliefs regarding when career exploration should begin, and how intensive it should be, is notable and likely merits further exploration.

Program Improvement Efforts

Spruce Grove as well as White Oak are aware of the weaknesses in their programs and are making attempts to strengthen their approaches and their offerings. Spruce Grove is particularly interested in how to maximize the value of the capstone project, particularly the senior project, with improved processes for management of the capstone. Similarly, the district is interested in developing a “systems approach” to ACP, and incorporating all grades K-12 in the process. More staff involvement is a chief component of the systems approach they are considering, in part by boosting buy-in among middle school teachers. The district will be considering how to match student advisory groupings with the same teacher throughout high school to maximize relationship building, whether to return to a five-day-per-week advisory schedule with students earning credit for advisory, and how to provide additional support to teachers to learn more about career opportunities for students. White Oak noted that “job shadowing was gaining in speed,” and that Dual Credit and Youth Apprenticeships continued during the COVID-19 pandemic. White Oak is also prioritizing more collaboration with other districts to learn about promising and proven practices.

Finally, Cottonwood, a small rural district that was still developing their ACP program at the time of the pandemic switch to remote learning, shut down in Spring 2020 earlier than most Wisconsin districts due to severe staffing shortages. At the time of their fall interview, they were operating face-to-face but knew that they would need to switch to remote learning as infection levels rose. Because they had determined that they would deliver ACP through required courses, their implementation did not fall off. They did, however, recognize that student loss of learning was occurring across the board with preparations for after high school included. Consequently, Cottonwood decided to focus on how they could help support students in getting “where they need to be.” This will include an emphasis on helping students determine “what can you do in your junior and senior year that will help you later on?” One strategy Cottonwood plans to use is to help students be more intentional in their high school course selections, including providing “a lot of encouragement to take some of those beginning CTE courses” that are available online. Whereas Cottonwood did not yet have a comprehensive and institutionalized ACP program, their dedication to preserving and building on what they had during the

pandemic provides an example of how districts can find positives within the challenges of this school year.

Retooling for the Future

As noted, although the disruption caused by the pandemic is undeniable, it appears that some districts are nonetheless viewing it as an opportunity to rethink their programs and consider how they would tweak or redesign them. Whether programs continued on with only minor adjustments to accommodate virtual learning or were mostly abandoned during the pandemic, all six focus districts had realizations about positive changes that could be derived in their future ACP work.

Virtual and Online Resources

Many districts made use of virtual versions of activities that they were already implementing, such as virtual job fairs, college fairs, and visits, virtual field trips to local employers, virtual job shadows, and the increased use of online courses that granted dual credit. CESAs, universities, and technical colleges were repeatedly cited as key partners in these opportunities, as were some local and regional Chambers of Commerce or economic development boards. The DPI ACP Community of Practice webinars were repeatedly cited as very helpful. As one long-term administrator reported,

“I was impressed, I’m going to be very honest, because it was the first time I could say, ‘Oh my god, I understand what DPI is about now!’ The ACP team at DPI has done a fantastic job, they developed sixth grade and seventh grade lesson plans, they are going to have the eighth grade and ninth grade ones out so that teachers have lesson plans to use that you can basically plug right in and be able to use all of the lessons that are in Xello. The continuity of the lessons and how they follow I think is wonderful, they have done a really good job. That support is great to have – DPI and CESA – they will do anything we ask!”

This additional support for the integration of Xello into the curriculum is key. Xello, always an online tool, was seen by some districts as a convenient way to implement ACP instruction remotely, but as noted previously, when students did Xello lessons independently and without some sort of follow-up or integration with other activities, they reported that they seemed less useful, and often just “busywork.” As always, the implementation of virtual opportunities needs to be done in a thoughtful manner that aligns with and supports the goals of the overall ACP program.

Importance of Interaction with Students

In both case study districts in which students were interviewed, students bemoaned the lack of interaction with and guidance from teachers that occurred in the face-to-face classroom due to the switch to virtual learning. With luck, both students and school staff will be able to benefit from this realization as they go forward. Perhaps more importantly, in schools that do not enjoy a strong all-school culture of ACP, school leaders and teachers can utilize this perception to justify deeper involvement of teachers in the ACP process, emphasizing the importance of building supportive student-adult relationships, and empowering teachers to become more knowledgeable and involved in the career and college readiness of their students.

Assessing and Reviewing Programs

Spruce Grove district leaders recognized the opportunity to assess what they believe is most important in, and conversely, what could be eliminated from their ACP programming going forward. The burden that fell on the Senior Project Coordinator forced the district to recognize that a new management plan for ACP was necessary, and that resources needed to follow priorities. Similarly, Spruce Grove determined that they needed to develop a “systems approach” to their ACP programming, to better integrate it into their curriculum and their mission. Moreover, Spruce Grove leadership was enthusiastic about considering the findings from this case study to help refine their program and expressed looking forward to learning from the successes of other districts. Another positive realized by the district was noted by parents: that communication with families improved during the pandemic. As one parent described, “One of the things we’ve gained through the pandemic is that the district has stepped up its communication. When things happen, an email goes out,

and often a phone call goes out.” Spruce Grove can build on this increased focus on communication to help support not only the refinement of ACP, but of all their programming. Bloomington noted that they had increased their direct-to-parents communications as well.

Pittsville determined that switching from teacher-led to counselor-led delivery of ACP in their middle school due to scheduling changes brought on by the pandemic was a less effective approach. Administrators hoped to return to the original mode of delivery for a number of reasons, not the least of which was the perceived impact it would have on ACP at the high school level, especially given the importance of their multi-year CTE Academy cohorts. Students noted that there were fewer options for their senior internships during the pandemic, but noted that the flexibility in their schedules brought on by virtual instruction allowed them to “work more, make more money, experience more adult life, and see what it’s going to be like in the future.” Similarly, junior job shadows could more easily take place during the school day, be lengthier, and thus more informative.

Elm Tree had to suspend the visits of local businesspeople during the pandemic and realized how truly valuable that element of community engagement was. The district intends to grow that portion of their program once the pandemic has subsided. The disruption to schooling spurred White Oak to accelerate plans for moving more of their ACP programming from Resource time into core content courses. In Bloomington, the principal reported that an apparent effect of COVID-19 was a large shift in the number of students who considered going into the trades. The principal felt this was due in part to the “uncertainty of the college experience,” noting that many more students than usual had applied for early graduation in January, and that a much larger than typical number of students were involved in the Youth Apprenticeship program. It will be interesting to see if this phenomenon plays out across the wider population of Wisconsin students; statewide data will likely address this question eventually.

Section 3

Summary

Key Findings and Recommendations

The data and findings from this addendum report provide additional support to the recommendations made in the Year 5 ACP Evaluation Report for 2019-20. In this section, we reiterate three of the four key findings and recommendations from the main report, noting the additional evidence that supports them. Two additional key findings and recommendations are included as well.

Key Finding #1: Implementation continues to grow across the state; some schools are still in the initiating phase.

The case study data reinforced this finding and showed that those districts that were in the initial stages of implementing ACP, or who did not have an all-school culture of ACP, tended to see their programs suffer during the pandemic. Similar to the potential threats posed by having a sole person or very small group responsible for ACP in a school or district, which this evaluation has described in the past few years, the stressor of the pandemic tended to overwhelm weak systems, whereas strongly embedded programs with distributed leadership were able to be sustained, adapted to the challenges, and in some areas even benefited. Moreover, in those schools where Xello activities constituted the majority of the ACP programming, the switch to virtual learning underscored the importance of integrating Xello activities into the overall ACP curriculum. When students did Xello activities independently and without the benefit of group discussion, reflection, or other types of follow-up, they reported that the activities seemed to be no more than “busywork.”

The recommendations related to this key finding remain the same:

Recommendation: Continue to support schools in the process of building an ACP culture and practices. Leverage the COVID-19 interruption as an opportunity to (re)start, assess, tweak, or even rebuild ACP programs so that they better serve students in the changed economic landscape.

Recommendation: Connected to the above recommendation, continue to message that Xello is not the sum total of ACP programming, but simultaneously leverage the advantages it provides for distance, online learning.

Key Finding #2: Job Shadowing continues to grow in implementation and enthusiasm.

Although the pandemic curtailed some job shadowing in some districts, online versions were often found to be useful. Moreover, the flexibility of student schedules brought on by virtual schooling allowed some students to engage in longer and more informative job shadow experiences, which students noted to be an advantage. Regardless of the pandemic, students in the case study districts continued to name job shadows as a particularly valuable experience, frequently naming it as “the best part of ACP.”

The recommendation related to this key finding remains the same:

Recommendation: Continue to develop and share information, resources, networking opportunities and other means for supporting interested districts in developing or expanding job shadowing and other types of work-based learning programs.

Key Finding #3: Outputs data show evidence of gaps in participation.

The additional data regarding work-based learning and dual enrollment presented in this addendum underscore the findings in the original report based on course-participation data, which show gaps not only by various student subgroups but also by region. The recommendation related to this key finding remains the same:

Recommendation: Continue to pursue additional research into the equitable implementation of ACP in terms of access and participation gaps.

Since the release of the main report, research addressing these questions has begun.

Additional Key Finding #1: The COVID-19 pandemic compelled the development and use of virtual means to implement a number of ACP activities and curricular elements.

Distance, remote, and virtual opportunities during the pandemic were discovered by many of the case study districts to be worthwhile activities in an overall comprehensive ACP program, and may be used to provide additional opportunities to students, particularly in remote areas, even after the pandemic. As in previous years, school personnel indicated that sharing information between districts was particularly useful and desirable; thus, the topic of virtual implementation presents an important area of focus for collaboration and dissemination. During the pandemic, DPI and CESAs have developed considerable resources pertaining to virtual ACP experiences, activities, and strategies, as well as the monthly ACP Community of Practice webinars, which were repeatedly cited as valuable.

Recommendation: Continue to share and promote the many tools and resources connected to virtual and distance ACP implementation, activities, and professional learning, and develop additional resources as needed.

Additional Key Finding #2: District and school leadership have expressed interest in tools and support for measuring the success of their ACP programs and for engaging in processes of continuous improvement.

Regardless of where they were on the implementation spectrum, districts expressed interest in finding evidence-based means for evaluating, refining, and otherwise improving their ACP programs. Resources such as the [Local Evaluation Toolkit](#) and guidance for analyzing local-level student data already exist, but additional support may be warranted. Districts expressed a desire for guidance on how to implement a system-wide approach to ACP, how to improve management processes for intensive programs such as capstone projects and career academies, and how to develop a K-12 ACP program, among other needs. As the state's overall implementation of ACP grows, demand for this type of guidance will likely grow, as well. While these sorts of complex and context-sensitive resources may be more challenging for DPI to develop, it may be beneficial to note that these needs reflect the growth and maturation of ACP across the state, and thus a source of pride for DPI, CESAs, and the many partners who have labored to bring this about.

Recommendation: Continue to develop, communicate and disseminate resources related to local-level ACP evaluation and refinement, particularly those that address more advanced needs such as management processes and systems approaches.

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