

# Postsecondary Enrollment Options Program

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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**T**he 1985 Legislature enacted the Postsecondary Enrollment Options program as one of the first of several state efforts to reform public education and expand opportunities for Minnesota students.<sup>1</sup> According to state law, the program is intended to “promote rigorous academic pursuits and provide a variety of options” for 11th- and 12th-grade students by giving them an opportunity to take postsecondary classes at state expense. Policy makers hoped that the competition from colleges and universities might force secondary schools to become more responsive to the needs of students and parents.

Over the program’s 10-year history, some policy makers have become concerned that it might not be fulfilling its statutory purposes and might even have some negative effects on K-12 education. In June 1995, the Legislative Audit Commission directed us to study the program. We asked the following questions:

- **What types of students have participated in the Postsecondary Enrollment Options program and why? To what extent have participating students, parents, and school administrators been satisfied with the program?**
- **What types of courses have students taken, and have they completed them satisfactorily?**
- **How have secondary and postsecondary schools implemented the program? Has access been a problem in any part of the state?**
- **How have schools been affected by the Postsecondary Enrollment Options program? What has been the fiscal impact of the program on students, school districts, postsecondary schools, and the state?**

To answer these questions, we interviewed students, teachers, counselors, administrators, and state experts in education budgeting and finance. We analyzed student records and payment data from the Department of Children, Families and Learning and studied data on students’ characteristics and performance. To assess satisfaction with the program, the adequacy of its implementation, and the extent of problems associated with it, we surveyed almost all of the state’s high school prin-

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<sup>1</sup> *Minn. Stat.* §123.3514. Other examples include open enrollment, high school graduation incentives, and the educational effectiveness program.

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**Overall, the Postsecondary Enrollment Options program satisfies participants and poses few problems.**

cipals, directors of alternative learning programs, and participating postsecondary campuses plus a representative sample of 300 student participants and their parents. Finally, we visited a number of secondary and postsecondary schools throughout the state.

Our study focused on students who left their secondary schools for at least part of the day to take one or more courses at a postsecondary school through the Postsecondary Enrollment Options program during the 1994-95 school year. We did not look at students who took postsecondary courses in their own high schools, postsecondary courses through contracts between schools, or secondary school courses that might lead later to postsecondary credit.<sup>2</sup>

Overall, we found that most students, parents, postsecondary school administrators, and directors of alternative secondary schools have been satisfied and had few problems with the Postsecondary Enrollment Options program. High school administrators reported various concerns about the program's educational effect and its administrative and financial burden, but we found no evidence that they or other high school staff have unduly discouraged students from participating.

Program participants have been strongly motivated by monetary savings due to the program. We estimated that program participants and their parents avoided having to pay about \$10.9 million for postsecondary tuition, fees, books, and materials in 1993-94 that would have been required if they had enrolled in postsecondary courses without the program. We estimated that the program cost the state about \$4.5 million by increasing postsecondary education costs by \$16.3 million while decreasing K-12 education expenditures \$11.8 million.

## BACKGROUND

The decision to participate in the Postsecondary Enrollment Options program rests with students, parents, and postsecondary schools--not with school districts. Districts must inform students about the program by March 1 of each year, and the law encourages school officials to provide counseling for interested students.<sup>3</sup> To participate, students must meet the admission requirements of the postsecondary school that they wish to attend. Students receive secondary credit for courses successfully completed and may apply for postsecondary credit for the same courses after graduating from high school.

All juniors and seniors enrolled in Minnesota public schools, except for cultural exchange students, as well as some adults 21 years old or more who have not graduated from high school are eligible to participate in the program under the High School Graduation Incentives Act. Eligible postsecondary schools include

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<sup>2</sup> The law permits individual districts to contract with postsecondary schools to provide courses to their students at postsecondary campuses, but Department of Children, Families and Learning provides no reimbursement and so does not maintain records of student participation in these cases. High school programs that may later lead to postsecondary credit include Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses.

<sup>3</sup> *Minn. Stat.* §123.3514, Subd. 4, 4a, 4b.

all public postsecondary schools; private, non-profit vocational schools that grant associate degrees; accredited opportunities industrialization centers; and private colleges if they have on-campus housing and are liberal arts, degree-granting institutions.

## POSTSECONDARY SCHOOL PARTICIPANTS

In all:

- **During the 1994-95 school year, 87 postsecondary campuses throughout the state enrolled secondary students through the Postsecondary Enrollment Options program.**

However, this does not include all public or private postsecondary campuses. Several private colleges told us they would like to participate but are ineligible. Eligibility criteria for the Postsecondary Enrollment Options program differ from those used by financial aid programs also intended to encourage postsecondary education. To remove this inconsistency and further expand options for high school students, we recommend that:

- **The Legislature should consider amending *Minn. Stat. §123.3514* so that private colleges and for-profit vocational schools that are eligible for the State Grant program may also enroll secondary students through the Postsecondary Enrollment Options program.**

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**Some postsecondary schools are not eligible for the Postsecondary Enrollment Options program yet participate in the State Grant program.**

## STUDENT PARTICIPATION

We found that:

- **Six percent of Minnesota public school juniors and seniors took courses at postsecondary schools through the Postsecondary Enrollment Options program in 1994-95.**

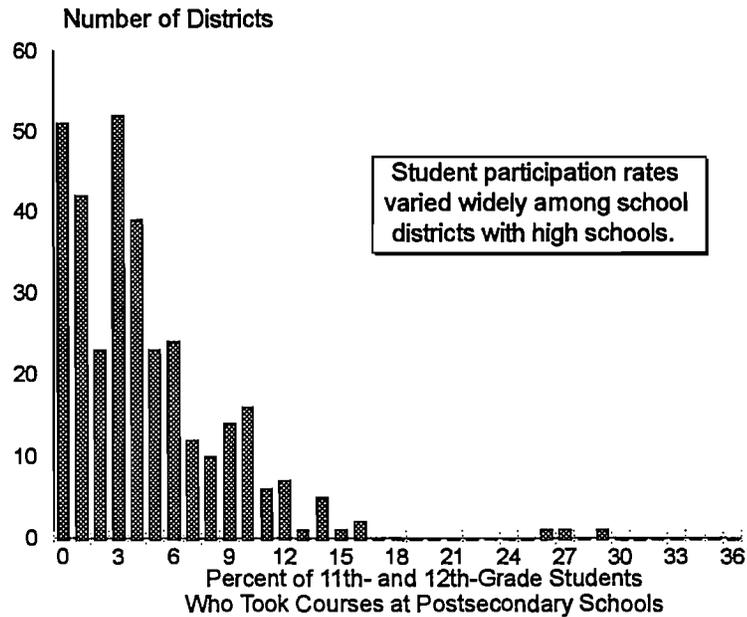
In all, the Department of Children, Families and Learning recorded 6,671 official participants out of the state's 112,989 public school juniors and seniors.

As shown below:

- **Student participation rates varied considerably among school districts and high schools during the 1994-95 school year.**

Using data collected by the Department of Children, Families and Learning, we found that student participation rates ranged from 0 to 29 percent of high school

### Student Participation Rates in the Postsecondary Enrollment Options Program, 1994-95



Sources: Office of the Legislative Auditor Secondary School Survey (n = 401), 1995, and Department of Children, Families and Learning, 1995.

### Some outstate students have less access to the program.

juniors and seniors.<sup>4</sup> The average participation rate in school districts was 4.4 percent and the median was 3.4 percent.

Fifteen percent of all districts with high schools (48 of 331) reported that no students from their districts participated in the program during the 1994-95 school year. Most of these districts (43) were in central or northern Minnesota; none were in the Twin Cities area. About one-half of the districts lacking program participants were more than 20 miles from a city with a postsecondary school. These districts accounted for approximately 4 percent of the state's total 11th- and 12th-grade enrollment for 1994-95.

Compared with students from the seven-county Twin Cities area, outstate students were slightly less likely to participate. Our study showed that, for outstate students, distance was the single most important explanation for their participation in the Postsecondary Enrollment Options program during the 1994-95 school year. We found that:

- **The closer an outstate school district or high school was to a city with a postsecondary school, the higher the student participation rate in the Postsecondary Enrollment Options program in 1994-95.**

<sup>4</sup> Participation rates for school districts include only those students for whom the Department of Children, Families and Learning reimbursed postsecondary schools. We calculated rates based on the number of juniors and seniors who were enrolled in each district as of October 1, 1994. Although data on the number of participants include a small number of adults, we were not able to determine the overall number of adults enrolled in districts that were eligible for the program.

For example, the median participation rate was 7.4 percent for high schools located in the same outstate cities as postsecondary schools compared with 2.0 percent for high schools more than 40 miles from a city with a postsecondary school. However, few students were far from cities with postsecondary schools, and 6 percent of program participants solved the access problem by living on postsecondary campuses in 1994-95.

Distance from cities with postsecondary schools did not affect student participation in the seven-county Twin Cities metropolitan area, probably because most districts and high schools are within easy commuting distance to several postsecondary schools. Other potentially important factors, including the availability of postsecondary courses in high school, the depth of the secondary curriculum, and school administrators' level of satisfaction with the program, were statistically insignificant.

## STUDENT PERFORMANCE

Our study found that most public and private postsecondary education systems typically imposed tougher admission requirements on secondary students than on regularly admitted postsecondary students. However, technical colleges usually applied the same admission standards for all students during the 1994-95 school year. We also found that:

- **Program participants generally received higher grades than regularly admitted postsecondary students during the 1994-95 school year, except at technical colleges, where they did somewhat worse.**

Nine percent of the grades earned by secondary students at technical colleges were "F" or "No credit" compared with 6 percent of the grades received by new degree-seeking technical college students. Also, program participants' overall grade point averages were higher than those of regularly admitted public postsecondary students, except at technical colleges.

Although some technical college administrators have since raised their admissions standards, we recommend that:

- **The Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system should establish a general, uniform policy for admitting secondary students who enroll in technical colleges through the Postsecondary Enrollment Options program.**

Last fall, the system changed its Postsecondary Enrollment Options policy to allow colleges to establish different academic progress standards for secondary students.<sup>5</sup> It maintained a single, uniform admissions policy for secondary students who apply to state universities and community colleges (juniors must rank in the

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<sup>5</sup> Minnesota State Colleges and Universities Board Policy 3.5, *Postsecondary Enrollment Options Program*, amended September 20, 1995.

upper third of their high school class and seniors in the upper half) but left the policy silent regarding technical colleges. Such a policy might require counseling, placement tests, interviews, and/or a certain level of academic performance, subject to individual exceptions.

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**Students commonly take core academic courses.**

Most of the postsecondary courses taken by program participants were in core academic areas, mainly in social sciences (27 percent) such as history, economics, and political science; language arts (23 percent) such as English, composition, and literature; math (8 percent); science (7 percent); and world languages (4 percent). Vocational and technical courses accounted for 12 percent of all courses, along with business (4 percent), and health (3 percent). Five percent of the courses involved physical education and arts/music, respectively. According to at least two-thirds of the students in our survey, postsecondary courses proceeded at a faster pace, were more in-depth, and required more homework time than secondary courses.

Although the statutory purposes of the Postsecondary Enrollment Options program are to promote rigorous academic pursuits and a variety of education options, we found that:

- **School administrators, students, and parents said that the most important reasons why students participated in the program were to get a head start on college credits and to save on postsecondary costs.**

As shown, 94 percent of the students in our survey said that getting a head start on college credits was "important" or "very important" to their participation in 1994-95, and 82 percent said that saving on postsecondary costs was "important" or "very important." Eighty-seven percent of the secondary administrators and 92 percent of the postsecondary administrators in our surveys said that college credits were "important" or "very important" to the students who used the program in 1994-95, while 90 percent of the secondary administrators and 95 percent of the postsecondary administrators said the same of the importance of saving money. Likewise, 88 percent of the 1994-95 program participants' parents agreed that getting a head start on college credits was "somewhat important" or "very important" to their children, but they were less likely (78 percent) to stress the importance of saving on postsecondary costs.

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**Students participate mainly to earn college credits and save money.**

By comparison, 77 percent of the program participants, 30 percent of secondary administrators, 65 percent of postsecondary administrators, and 87 percent of the parents said students participated because courses were more challenging. And 59 percent of students, 40 percent of secondary administrators, 81 percent of postsecondary administrators, and 76 percent of parents said an "important" or "very important" reason for the students' participation was that courses were not available in secondary schools. Nine percent of the students admitted participating because the postsecondary classes were less challenging, 18 percent because they wanted to avoid a certain high school course or teacher, 23 percent because they wanted to please their parents, 14 percent because they wanted to be with friends, and 46 percent because of the postsecondary school's location.

## Administrators', Student Participants', and Parents' Ratings of the Importance of Various Reasons for Program Participation, 1994-95

	Secondary Administrators		Postsecondary Administrators		Students		Parents	
	Percent Who Said the Reason Was:							
	Important	Very Important	Important	Very Important	Important	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important
To get a head start on college credits	38%	49%	37%	55%	21%	73%	21%	67%
To save on postsecondary costs	29	61	36	59	38	44	21	57
Courses were more challenging	23	7	41	24	43	34	36	51
Courses were not available in secondary school	29	11	54	27	35	24	31	45

Note: The question, with some variation depending on the survey, was, "Students use the Postsecondary Enrollment Options program for a variety of reasons. Please indicate how important you think the following reasons were to students from your school who took courses at postsecondary schools during the 1994-95 school year."

Sources: Office of the Legislative Auditor Surveys of Secondary Schools (n = 401), Postsecondary Campuses (n = 76), Students (n = 300), and Parents (n = 300), 1995. Student and parent surveys are subject to sampling errors of ± 6 percentage points.

<sup>a</sup>Not asked.

Further, we found that:

- **Saving money on college costs was especially important to students with lower family incomes.**

As total family income decreased, the percentage of students who said that saving money on postsecondary costs was a "very important" reason for their participation in the Postsecondary Enrollment Options program steadily increased. All of the students in our survey whose parents reported total family incomes below \$15,000 and 79 percent of students with family incomes between \$15,000 and \$29,999 said that saving money was a "very important" reason why they participated. Sixty-eight percent of the students with total family incomes of \$30,000 to \$49,999 and 54 percent with incomes between \$45,000 and \$59,000 said that saving money was "very important," compared with 42 percent of students from families with incomes of \$60,000 or more.

## PROGRAM SATISFACTION

In our surveys, we asked about overall attitudes toward the Postsecondary Enrollment Options program. We learned that:

- **Most program participants, their parents, postsecondary school administrators, and directors of alternative secondary schools were**

**satisfied with the Postsecondary Enrollment Options program, but most high school administrators were not.**

Seventy-three percent of participating students told us that they were "very satisfied" with their experience in the program and another 24 percent said they were "somewhat satisfied." Ninety-five percent of participants' parents said that they would "definitely" or "probably" encourage their children to participate again. Seventy-two percent of postsecondary administrators and 82 percent of alternative school directors, but only 42 percent of high school administrators, "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that the program was generally performing in a satisfactory manner.

In addition, we found that:

- **Sixty-two percent of student participants said they had no major problems using the program in 1994-95.**

The students' two greatest problems, each affecting 36 percent of respondents, related to scheduling difficulties and the availability of specific postsecondary courses. Also, we asked students about who was involved in their decision to participate and whether they were encouraging, discouraging, or neutral and found that:

- **Students rarely reported that secondary teachers, counselors, or administrators discouraged their participation.**

Secondary school staff may have appropriately discouraged some students from participating because they were unprepared for college-level courses or had weak academic records. Also, it is important to note that what students may regard as discouragement could instead reflect school districts' legal duty to do as much as possible to warn students about the consequences of failing postsecondary courses and the effect that participation could have on high school graduation.<sup>6</sup>

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**Most students reported no major problems in using the program.**

## **NEEDED IMPROVEMENTS**

We asked about ways to improve the program and found that:

- **Student participants, their parents, and school administrators generally agreed that there was a need for better information about the Postsecondary Enrollment Options program.**

About one-half of the students and postsecondary administrators said that information provided by secondary schools was in "much" or "critical" need of improvement, and 37 percent of parents agreed. Twenty-two percent of the secondary administrators, 25 percent of the student participants, and 29 percent of the parents also suggested the need for better information from postsecondary schools. Thirty-

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<sup>6</sup> *Minn. Stat.* §123.3514, Subd. 4a.

six percent of the students expressed a desire for improved communication between secondary and postsecondary schools, as did 22 percent of the secondary administrators and 12 percent of the postsecondary administrators. About one-half of the secondary administrators further indicated the need for better information about their students' postsecondary performance, while about one-third of the postsecondary administrators said that they needed better information about students' high school graduation requirements.

## EFFECTS ON SCHOOLS

In general:

- **Secondary administrators were more likely than postsecondary administrators to cite negative effects due to the Postsecondary Enrollment Options program.**

Twenty-three percent of the secondary administrators said the program had caused budget problems, 20 percent said that it had adversely affected their ability to schedule classes, and 12 to 14 percent said that the program undermined staff morale, support services for interested and participating students, student participation in school activities and appropriate staffing levels. Other problems, each mentioned by fewer than 10 percent of the secondary administrators, included student-staff interaction, communication with postsecondary schools, the number and quality of secondary courses, parental involvement, and student morale. In contrast, postsecondary administrators' two most common problems, mentioned by only 14 percent each, involved staffing levels and providing support services to participating or interested students.

Based on these and our other findings, it is clear that the Postsecondary Enrollment Options program could operate more efficiently for the benefit of all concerned. We recognize that it may have had some detrimental effects on secondary and postsecondary schools, but these are outweighed in our view by the benefits that the program has apparently brought to program participants. In addition, we think that administrative problems with the program may often be resolved by closer cooperation between secondary and postsecondary schools. Thus, we see no need to make major changes in the design of the Postsecondary Enrollment Options program. However, we recommend that:

- **Secondary and postsecondary schools should better coordinate their efforts and direct individual students to the most appropriate schools and courses for them.**

We hope that by working more closely together, schools can arrive at local solutions to problems related to admissions policies, students' academic performance and choice of courses, and secondary class planning and scheduling. Ultimately, we think it is local school districts' responsibility to determine whether students have fulfilled their overall high school graduation requirements, and it is postsec-

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**Secondary administrators' biggest concerns had to do with budgeting and class planning.**

ondary schools' responsibility to make appropriate decisions about which students to admit.

## FISCAL IMPACT

We estimated the costs and financial benefits of the Postsecondary Enrollment Options program for 1993-94 and found that:

- **The Postsecondary Enrollment Options program reduced state and local expenditures for K-12 education by about \$11.8 million during the 1993-94 school year but increased the state's postsecondary costs by an estimated \$16.3 million.<sup>7</sup>**
- **By participating in the Postsecondary Enrollment Options program in 1993-94, students and their parents avoided paying an estimated \$10.9 million in costs for tuition, fees, and books if the same students had enrolled in the same postsecondary courses without the program.**

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**The program's net cost to the state and localities was about \$4.5 million in 1993-94.**

We calculated that the net budgetary and non-budgetary cost of the program to the state and localities was about \$4.5 million in 1993-94, and the net financial benefit to students and parents, after subtracting education support expenses, was \$9.6 million. Students and the state could realize future financial benefits if postsecondary credits earned in high school are later transferred to postsecondary degree programs, but we could not estimate these benefits precisely.

At the district level, we calculated that:

- **The median difference in education aid was \$14,149 among school districts where students participated in the Postsecondary Enrollment Options program during 1993-94.<sup>8</sup>**

We estimated that the program caused a median reduction of 0.34 percent of districts' total budgets. Or, looking at aid differences per participant in weighted pupil units, the median reduction was \$4,017 each.

In addition, we found that:

- **Fifty-seven percent of postsecondary school administrators said that they placed no limit on the number of secondary students that they admitted, although statutes say that postsecondary students should take priority.**

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<sup>7</sup> The 1993-94 school year corresponds to the state's 1994 fiscal year.

<sup>8</sup> The average reduction in aid was \$30,433 per school district, but this is affected by a few large districts. For this reason, we prefer to use median figures, which represent the point where roughly half the districts would see higher or lower reductions.

Also, 45 percent said they allowed participants to register at the same time or before regularly admitted postsecondary students. We were told that, in some cases, it was impractical for students to wait to see if space was available and impossible for them to plan their schedules to meet high school graduation requirements otherwise. In addition, 38 percent of the seniors enrolled at the same postsecondary school the next year as regular students. As a result, it was often to postsecondary schools' advantage to admit secondary students, thus reducing future recruitment costs.