WHAT ARE
Automatic Enrollment (Opt-Out) Policies?

AUTOMATIC ENROLLMENT IN ADVANCED COURSEWORK POLICIES, ALSO CALLED "OPT-OUT" POLICIES, ARE A POTENT POLICY LEVER TO EXTEND ACCESS TO RIGOROUS AND POTENTIALLY COLLEGE-CREDIT BEARING COURSES FOR UNDERSERVED STUDENTS. These policies automatically enroll any student who meets the state standard on the statewide exam in preceding level in advanced courses (or through another measure), rather than asking students and families to "opt in" to advanced coursework or relying on identification by teacher or school counselor recommendation, which can include biases. Opt-out policies are designed to reduce systemic barriers to dual credit and advanced classes, particularly for under-represented groups, and can help address hidden systemic inequities by more equitably enrolling students who are ready and eager to be in advanced classes based on multiple measures.

Examples of States' Opt-Out Policies

Legislation targeted on one grade and one subject

- Texas requires school districts to establish an opt-out policy to enroll students into accelerated math in sixth grade to improve chances of gaining access to Algebra I in eighth grade, to increase the number of students completing advanced math in high school propelling them for college and workforce readiness.

Expansive legislation inclusive of multiple grades and/or subjects

- Washington requires districts to automatically enroll any student who meets or exceeds the state standard on the eighth grade or high school English language arts or mathematics statewide student assessment in the next most rigorous level of advanced courses or program offered by the high school that aligns with the student's goals beyond high school.

- North Carolina requires that, when practicable, local boards of education offer advanced learning opportunities in mathematics in grades 3-5, and advanced courses in mathematics in all grades 6 and higher.

Competitive Grant Programs for local education agencies (LEAs)

- Colorado has a grant program local districts can apply for if the district automatically enrolls each student entering the ninth grade or higher if a student meets or exceeds proficiency on a state assessment. Funds can be used to expand the number of advanced courses offered, incentivize teachers to teach advanced courses, provide teacher training and professional development, and expand parent and student engagement related to advanced course enrollment and student success.

6 Key Considerations for Advocates

To ensure automatic enrollment policies intentionally reach and support students traditionally shut out of advanced coursework, state policies should prioritize the following six conditions for success:

1. Policies are based in equity

- Several states include background on why the law is necessary, including data that shows inequities. This can be helpful to outline why the state thinks it is important, but also communicates to districts and schools the problem the policy addresses.

- Successful policies consider that adult expectations drive student achievement and positive school climates, and districts should clearly communicate the policy to educators, because their buy-in makes the difference.

- Impactful policies remove barriers like fees and paperwork. Eliminating barriers, even small ones, is a no-brainer for expanding access to and belonging in advanced courses for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds.

2. Require robust yearly data collection and reporting

Successful policies must be transparent with data around access and success and use regular data reports to inform implementation. For example, in North Carolina, 2022-23 data found that statewide, 8% of students in grades 6 and above who scored at the highest level on their prior year's exam were not placed in an advanced math course, so districts should investigate if there are hidden barriers keeping out students.

3. Policies prioritize communication and relationship-building with families

Successful policies prioritize early communication with families, including information sharing about opportunities for, how to enroll, and the benefits of advanced coursework at the middle school level at the latest.

4. Qualifying measures include multiple measures of eligibility

One test measure can be a starting point, and there is data to show even that single measure can expand access to students who show readiness but have been kept out of advanced opportunities. But truly successful policies are committed to expanding their definitions of readiness — considering things like student ambition, student mindsets, or class grade.

5. Acceleration should be happening before high school

Research shows that an important time to get students thinking about their future paths is in middle school. Successful policies in North Carolina and Texas target students in the grades 3-5, with Texas' policy focused on middle school to get more students into Algebra I classes in the eighth grade. The potential for long-term impact of automatic enrollment policies is heightened if the policy is implemented in middle school.

6. One subject is good, but more subjects are better

Several policies focus on only one subject (math), but more states have opened up automatic enrollment policies to additional subjects, like science, humanities, and English language arts. By broadening the type of rigorous classes, successful policies will yield increased enrollment and access to advanced coursework for *more* students across disciplines.