



650 W. State Street • Room 307 • Boise, ID • 83702  
P.O. Box 83720 • Boise, ID • 83720-0037

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Contact: Mike Keckler  
208-332-1591 (office)  
208-866-5734 (cell)  
[Mike.Keckler@osbe.idaho.gov](mailto:Mike.Keckler@osbe.idaho.gov)

**ADVANCED OPPORTUNITIES UPWARD TRAJECTORY**

By Matt Freeman, executive director, Idaho State Board of Education

High school graduation season is just about here and when students throughout Idaho begin crossing the stage to collect their diplomas, some will walk away with college degrees too.

Last spring, 126 Idaho high school graduates were awarded an associate degree at high school graduation, a 46 percent increase over the year before. They did it using the State's Advanced Opportunities program, enabling them to earn college or career technical dual credits while still in high school.

The Advanced Opportunities program is literally taking off.

Students in 2017 earned more than 143,000 dual credits – a 350 percent increase since the legislature launched the program nearly a decade ago. The number of students taking advantage of dual credits is also skyrocketing – from 5,000 in 2008 to 26,000 in 2017 – an increase of more than 400 percent.

There are a couple of factors helping to spur the impressive growth: two years ago, the legislature and the governor invested up to \$4,125 each year for each junior high and high school student interested in Advanced Opportunities, essentially making college courses free for dual credit earners. The Board also worked with Idaho Digital Learning to create a pathway allowing students to have access to online courses needed to earn an associate degree no matter where they live.

“With some of the distance learning options that we have in place, kids in rural districts are now able to take courses that 10 or 15 years ago would only be available in large schools in the state of Idaho,” Weiser High School Principal Dave Davies said.

For years, Davies has been urging his students to take advantage of dual credits, calling the program a great thing for the kids at Weiser High. He says dual credit earners prove to

themselves and their families that they are ready for college-level work. The fact that the state is picking up the cost is a big incentive. “Kids who in the past, would have never been able to afford even the reduced rates can take these classes as long as they are willing to work and to dedicate themselves to their studies,” he said. “That \$4,125 is just an incredible thing for these kids and their families.”

Despite the incentive and the overall dual credit participation trends, there are gaps in the traditionally underserved populations. For instance in the 2014-2015 school year, 31 percent of students who were eligible for Free or Reduced Price Lunch (FRPL) graduated high school with some form of dual credits, compared to 43 percent of students who were not eligible for FRPL – a 12 percentage point difference.

When we look at students from different ethnic groups, the percentage of Hispanic, Native American, African American and Asian American students graduating with duals credits are 5 to 16 percentage points lower compared to Caucasian students.

More girls than boys are taking dual credit courses too. In spring 2016 there was a gender difference of 14-points when 49 percent of Idaho’s female graduates left high school with some form of dual credit compared to 35 percent of male students.

We are concerned about these gaps. The Board staff is researching this to help us better understand why some students choose to take dual credits and why some don’t. We are committed to removing barriers and finding ways to make sure all students have access and understand the benefits of earning dual credits.

In Weiser, Principal Davies is busy touting dual credits to all of his students and their parents. “I tell people all the time that kids right now who are willing to take advantage of these opportunities that are out there academically...really the sky is the limit. It’s really a good place to be right now.”

For more information about the State’s Advanced Opportunities dual credit program, visit the following websites:

<https://boardofed.idaho.gov/k-12-education/advanced-opportunities-for-high-school-academics/>

<http://www.sde.idaho.gov/student-engagement/advanced-ops/>

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