The University of Texas at Austin

Education Research Center POLICY BRIEF

The Causal Effect of ECHS Openings in Texas

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Executive Summary

This research proposal examines the causal effects of opening Early College High Schools (ECHSs) in Texas. Since 2004, Texas has led the development and implementation of innovative ECHS programs, with nearly 65,000 students currently served across approximately 230 schools. Given the increasing importance of a smooth transition from high school to college—particularly for underserved students—and the expansion of the ECHS model across the United States, this project aims to provide a comprehensive evaluation of ECHS openings from two perspectives. First, the study investigates whether attending an ECHS yields benefits for participating students in both the short and long run. This analysis will estimate the direct effects of ECHS openings and contribute to a cost–benefit assessment. Potential benefits, including higher high school graduation rates, increased postsecondary enrollment, and improved labor market outcomes, may ultimately lead to increased tax revenues over time. Second, the study examines whether the presence of ECHSs affects students in nearby traditional high schools. Identifying potential spillover (indirect) effects on these students will help assess the broader impact of ECHS expansion. From a policy perspective, these findings will inform decisions regarding the continued expansion of ECHSs in Texas and contribute to efforts to broaden access to postsecondary education among underrepresented populations.

Key findings include:

1. **Indirect Effects.** For the indirect effects, the datasets revealed limited observable variation in key measures during the study period. This limited variation posed challenges in detecting clear downstream indirect effects on the examined outcomes within the available data. As a result, the findings were unable to definitively characterize the impacts of opening ECHS on these outcomes.

2. **Direct Effects.** The author attempted several methods, including emailing all potential school districts in Texas and setting up meetings with school administrators to obtain school lottery data. However, no lottery data were ultimately obtained; therefore, the direct effects were not further investigated.

These findings underscores the ongoing need for improved data collection to better capture relevant exposure variation and enhance future analyses of potential effects on affected populations.

What We Studied

The launch of Early College High Schools (ECHS) is approaching its 20th anniversary. This innovative high school model has expanded significantly in Texas and North Carolina since 2002. With the increasing demand for skills and training in the labor market beyond high school, enrollment in and graduation from postsecondary institutions have become important determinants of career success. Underrepresented students, who often face lower academic performance and come from disadvantaged family backgrounds, typically encounter greater barriers to college entry.

Providing a smooth transition from high school to college, along with financial support, is therefore critical to their success in the labor market.

To address these challenges, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation launched the Early College High School Initiative (ECHSI) in 2002. Early College High Schools are designed primarily to serve "at-risk" and underrepresented students, with the goal of increasing access to postsecondary education for those least likely to attend college. These schools allow students to earn both a high school diploma and either an associate degree or up to 60 credit hours toward a bachelor's degree. Typically, ECHSs partner with local colleges in Texas to offer dual-credit courses. Their admissions processes resemble those of charter schools: they are open enrollment with no eligibility requirements, and when demand exceeds capacity, admission is determined by a lottery (sometimes weighted toward underrepresented students).

Since 2004, Texas has implemented the ECHS model extensively and has become a leader in its development and application. Currently, approximately 65,000 students are served by around 230 ECHSs in the state. In Texas, ECHSs operate as full-day programs, often as autonomous high schools where campus leaders have authority over scheduling, hiring, and budgeting. These schools also include a liaison from an institution of higher education (IHE) with decision-making authority, as well as highly qualified staff who receive ongoing support and training. ECHSs may be located on a college or university campus or within a traditional high school setting. Specifically, they may function as standalone campuses (standalone academies) or as smaller learning communities within larger high schools (school-within-a-school models). Standalone models are typically situated near partner colleges or universities and send students to those campuses for postsecondary coursework, while school-within-a-school models often employ teachers credentialed by partner institutions to deliver college-level courses on the high school campus.

Research Questions

This study focuses on a comprehensive causal analysis of ECHS openings in Texas that can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of ECHSs and provide a possible guide on future expansion. The followings are two research questions:

1. Do ECHS students have better outcomes than they would have had at other high schools? Outcomes vary from short run high school performance, mid run college outcomes to long run labor market performance.

2. Does ECHS affect other traditional high school students nearby (i.e. the spillover effect of ECHS on traditional high school)? Potential benefits from attending ECHS might generate competition pressure which could push all schools better, but also might crowd out students who would have attended ECHS and been more competitive.

Discussion and Policy Recommendations

The absence of statistically significant findings in this study highlights important data and measurement limitations. In particular, future research should prioritize improved data collection on school admissions lotteries, longer-term outcome tracking, and richer measures of student exposure to ECHS environments. Expanding sample sizes and leveraging more granular administrative data may also enhance statistical power and allow for more precise identification of both direct and spillover effects. Addressing these limitations is essential for more accurately detecting the impacts of ECHS expansion.

Beyond academic contributions, from a policy perspective, this study tried to provide guidance on the optimal placement of ECHSs. If schools are established in areas with a high concentration of target populations, then even students who do not directly enroll in ECHSs may still benefit through indirect exposure. This implies that strategic placement could maximize both direct and indirect benefits of the program.