WHAT FAMILIES WANT TO KNOW ABOUT DUAL CREDIT

SYNTHESIS & RECOMMENDATIONS

SUMMARY OF CAREGIVER FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

DUAL WASHINGTON CREDIT

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INTRODUCTION

Washington has a variety of dual credit options for students to earn college credit while in high school. Research consistently shows that students who take these courses have higher high school GPAs and are more likely to enroll in and persist in college. Research also shows that many students capable of the college-level rigor that dual credit courses offer are not enrolling in these courses - and that Black, Latino, Indigenous, and low-income students are underrepresented.

Washington state has worked to expand access to dual credit programs by lowering costs (most notably, by removing the student cost to participate in College in the High School), establishing the nation's first required academic acceleration policy, and requiring that districts communicate with families about dual credit options available to their students. Yet, disparities by race and income in enrollment persist.

Meanwhile, research also demonstrates that students desire to go on to post-secondary opportunities at high rates, yet teachers and school staff consistently underestimate the percentage of their students who have this desire. This "aspiration gap" has been well documented across Washington state. The result is uneven communication - some students and families hear a lot about dual credit, while others may be unintentionally left out of communication on these important subjects.

In partnership with the Gates Foundation Horizons grant program, Stand for Children Washington and Kinetic West set out to hear directly from families about their awareness of dual credit options for their student(s) and their desired communications. We conducted focus groups and interviews across four regions in Washington. This report synthesizes our findings, and recommendations for schools and districts looking to ensure all families have the right information to make the best decisions with their students.

METHODOLOGY

Kinetic West conducted a series of focus groups and interviews with a total of 43 parents and caregivers of middle and high school students in November and December 2025.

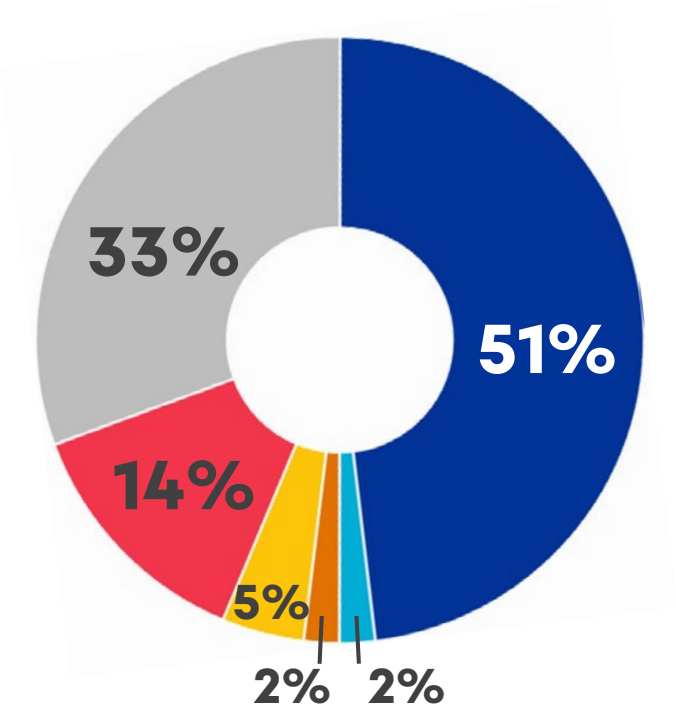
4 Focus groups (in English)

18 Families (across 4 focus groups)

4 1:1 Interviews (in Spanish)

21 1:1 Interviews (in English)

Race/Ethnicity Represented



Caregivers were asked about their knowledge of dual credit options, any challenges their students had faced in accessing dual credit, what information they wanted to know about dual credit options, and what their communication preferences were. Findings were remarkably consistent across regions, while there were a few notable differences for Spanish-speaking families which will be highlighted below.

- White
- Not shared
- Hispanic/Latinx
- Black/African American
- Multiracial/Multicultural
- Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander/Samoan

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

While we were able to learn from many families across all four regions, there were a number of factors that limited our ability to recruit more families, especially those from underrepresented communities – BIPOC, low-income and rural families.

Time of year

Recruited for focus groups in November and December, a busy time of year for families with the holidays and college application season.

Limited partner capacity

Nonprofit partners, ESD, school and district staff had competing priorities, including other tasks related to the Horizons grant, which constrained outreach. Horizons regions in eastern Washington did not participate.

Information-sharing concerns

Reluctance from families to share contact information or engage with unfamiliar organizations, heightened by worries about immigration enforcement in WA.

When reviewing results, readers should consider:

Sample size and representation

While much of the feedback was consistent across regions, the small sample means results should be interpreted with caution. School districts range in size, their dual credit options, and communications which can impact parent and caregiver experience and resources.

Potential selection bias

Families who participated tended to have higher awareness of dual credit, which may influence findings. There could be self-selection bias in that parents wanting to participate are more likely to be familiar with dual credit. Broader surveying would be required to determine dual credit awareness rates.

DUAL CREDIT AWARENESS

Respondents had generally good awareness of dual credit. 88% of families had heard of dual credit through official or unofficial channels, whether or not their student had participated. Running Start was most familiar to families, while in-school options were least familiar, especially Career and Technical Education (CTE) dual credit. Families have a general understanding that dual credit is advanced learning and can earn a student college credit. Families believe dual credit has long term benefits accelerating access and progress to higher education.

"[I] have a **basic understanding of the option.** I don't have a clear understanding of CTE pathways vs. Running Start."

-NWESD Parent

"I have let my children make their own decisions; **I have not had the support to inform myself as a parent.**"

-PSESD Parent (translated from Spanish)

Notably, the 5 families who were not familiar with dual credit all identified as Black/African American or Hispanic. Furthermore, all Spanish-speaking families reported relying heavily on their student or other families to get information, as opposed to official school channels. While the sample is too small to draw statewide conclusions, these experiences point to particular communication gaps for families furthest from educational justice.

"Students can leave high school with a **jump on college**, save on general ed requirements and gives them an understanding of college academics. It's also **great to challenge them.**"

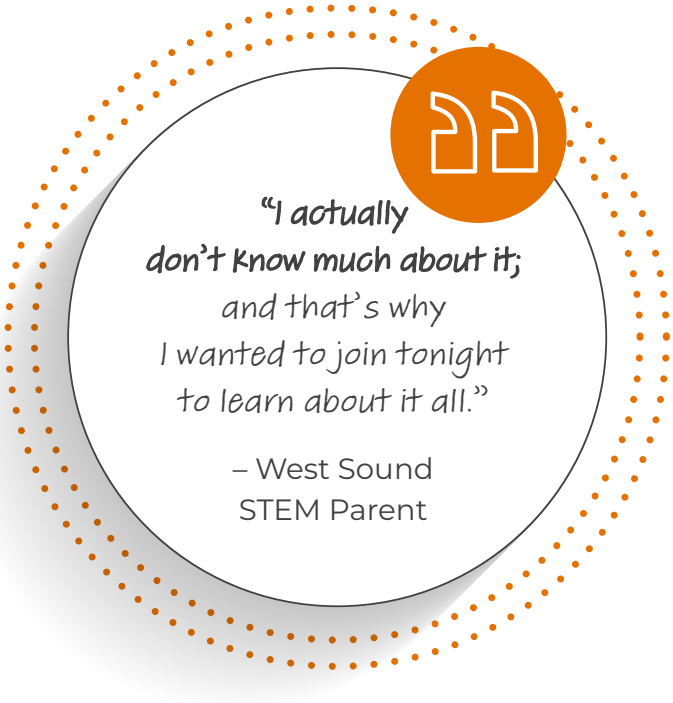
-ESD 112 Parent

CHALLENGES ACCESSING DUAL CREDIT

Before enrollment and across all regions, families expressed a lack of timeliness and clarity around the different dual credit options available. In addition to challenges with clarity and timeliness, many families expressed receiving limited information from official channels such as counselors and other school resources.

The information that families were looking to receive included:

- What dual credit is
- What options are available
- Enough time to decide if it's a good fit for their student's learning and enroll



Families with students currently enrolled in dual credit continued to have questions and seek additional information about how to transfer credits and whether the credits would be useful to their student's long-term academic pathway.

"[I] would love to get better information about ***what is transferable and what counts for which college credit, like a visual with a chart and checkboxes.*** *In my work experience, I've learned that some of the transferability is so dependent on professors and their level of clarity on courses offered at college."*

-NWESD Parent

"Like, at first, you think, oh wow, they're going to save 2 years on their college education, we're going to save a lot of money. But that's not necessarily the case, depending on which route they go. So, I would like to say, ***cool, they're going to save on... on that, but I just know it's not a guarantee.***"

-West Sound STEM Parent

A distinct theme around Running Start came up, with families feeling unsupported while their students were enrolled. Key subthemes included:

- Lack of wraparound supports from teachers and counselors for Running Start students
- Lack of communication between the high school and college
- Inability to find the right person to ask questions
- Feeling disconnected from the high school community
- A lot of time-consuming paperwork

Finally, families reflected that they learned about the positive benefits of dual credit, but not the potential tradeoffs or challenges until their student was actually enrolled. They wanted more information prior to enrollment.

WHAT INFORMATION DO FAMILIES NEED AND WANT?

Questions families want to answer **BEFORE** enrolling:

- What paperwork needs to be completed and when do we start the paperwork?
- What will my student's schedule look like?
- Can my student handle the academic rigor?
- How many advanced classes can they handle at once?
- How will my student's high school experience and social life be impacted?
- What type of supports will my student have?
- Will the credits actually transfer and be valuable to my student's pathway?
- What does my student have to do in order to earn or transfer the credit?
- How will the grades my student earns in dual credit impact their college GPA and future major access?

"Other families with older high school students/graduated in our district who have gone through the dual credit process. **Hands on knowledge of how to navigate the systems** - what or who to avoid. Or who is a good resource."

-NWESD Parent

"I would like to know more information about topics on **how many credits are needed, whether taking extra classes is very stressful, and whether my daughter is actually ready to take these classes...**"

-PSESD Parent (translated from Spanish)

"With AP, **I didn't know about the $100 test fee,** the communication wasn't clear about the associated fees."

-PSESD Parent (translated from Spanish)

"Asking **broad questions** about dual credit - **how does it work,** how does the scheduling work since she hasn't participated yet."

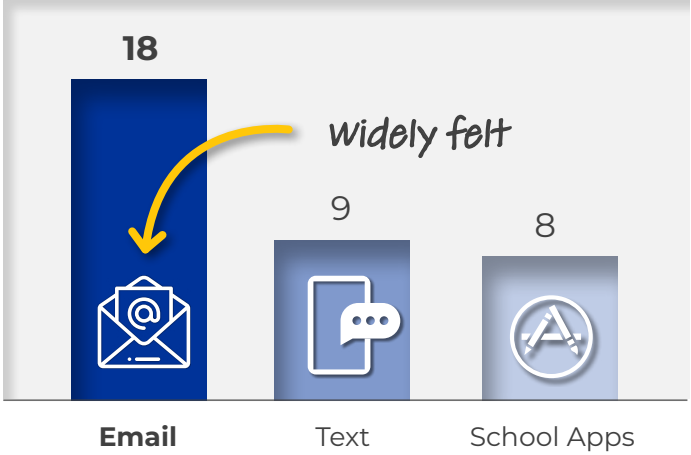
-NWESD Parent

Families stressed that they would like general information about all the dual credit options before their student enrolls, in order to determine which option would be best. But they also want to get more detailed information to inform their decision making, including what the enrollment process is, what supports are available if students struggle, and what tradeoffs exist between different options.

HOW DO FAMILIES WANT TO LEARN INFORMATION?

Currently, families rely on a mix of digital channels—email, text and school apps—to access academic information. There is a significant amount of variability in which methods are most preferred. For example, 100% of families interviewed in Spanish identified text messages as the most useful, most trusted and most likely to be read source of information. However across all families, email was mentioned more than any other communication channel.

Of the channels you named, which ones are most useful for you?



Families also had strong opinions about which methods didn't work for them—highlighting an overwhelming number of emails and "random" texts as not being useful. Again, 100% of families interviewed in Spanish identified that school websites did not work for them to communicate information. This sentiment was also highlighted by many families interviewed in English as well.

"I would visit the website more if it was useful but lots of the content is irrelevant."

-PSESD Parent

"I actually don't look at the school website except to find the school year calendar or phone number."

-West Sound STEM Parent

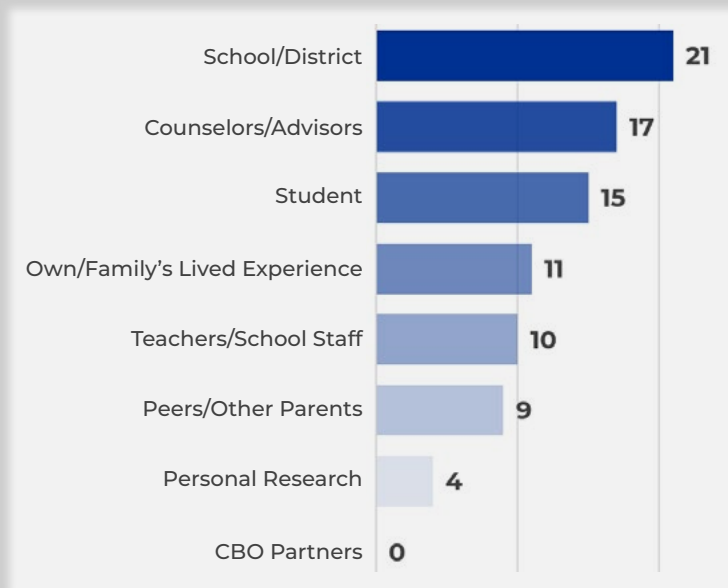
"I don't trust random texts generally so [texts are] not a good way to share information."

-West Sound STEM Parent

These seemingly contradictory findings—some parents find emails and texts very helpful and trustworthy, others find them spammy or overwhelming—points to a need to communicate similar information in a variety of channels and to tailor that communication to the audience.

That includes considering who the most "trusted messenger" might be. In the interviews and focus groups, parents and caregivers most consistently identified the school district and school counselors as the most trusted source of information about academic options. Families also want to hear from students and families who already went through the process about their experiences.

Who do you trust to provide information about academic options for your student(s)?



Regardless of method, families agree that **consistent, early, and frequent** communication is a top priority.

Families want to know about dual credit options **consistently and frequently**—not just once. This ranged from "once a month" for one parent in the West Sound STEM region to "every six months" for a parent interviewed in Spanish through PSESD. In addition to hearing about dual credit options often, they would like multiple reminders of enrollment deadlines and any other key dates.

~50% **families specifically said they want to know as early as 8th grade and as late as 9th grade orientation**

"I would like an **all-in-one page of what's available and when we should start enrolling or registration.** The counselors need to share this with parents. If they are sharing with kids, it isn't making it home to parents."

-NWESD Parent

"Well, it is very important to receive it when high school begins, or **as soon as possible,** and reminders, **at least once every 6 months.**"

- PSESD Parent
(translated from Spanish)

"9th grade orientation was good, it would be nice to know **at least a year before your child is eligible** to participate."

- ESD 112 Parent (translated from Spanish)

"Multiple reminders leading up to any deadlines is very helpful."

-West Sound STEM Parent

They want to hear about these options **early** as well—50% noted wanting to know in 8th grade through 9th grade orientation. One family specified they wanted information about options at least a year before their child was eligible to enroll, and one Spanish speaking parent noted wanting to be informed "early enough to guide, encourage and plan" their student's learning.

For Spanish-speaking families, low quality translated materials was raised as another barrier to communication. Spanish-speaking families shared that messages are often poorly translated, making them difficult or confusing to understand, and leading to missed opportunities, uncertainty about requirements, and a sense that communication is not designed with Spanish-speaking parents in mind. One family perceived that there was a financial cost to access information—which was later clarified to mean that there were unexpected costs to participate in information sessions (e.g. childcare, transportation, meals).

Feedback about translation quality was echoed by school counselors who shared that in particular the Talking Points app used to translate messages for multi-lingual families has had inaccurate or misleading translations which has added confusion.

In short, families want to hear about rigor, differences between options, long-term benefits/impact, costs, and honest experiences and they want to hear about these topics through a mix of digital channels and school-led events.

CONSIDERATION

Every family had a specific reason why they did or didn't prefer a communication channel. This highlights the intentionality required in finding the most trusted method, while also meeting families where they feel connected and engaged.

70% find **email, text, or school apps** (like ParentSquare) meaningful and trustworthy

40% find **in-person or virtual meetings and events** meaningful and trustworthy

RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATION WITH FAMILIES

After hearing from 43 families across WA, we found a clear difference between the current and ideal experience.

Families want **clear, detailed, accessible,** and **centrally located** information . . .

early and often so they have enough time to make an informed decisions

in-person so they **learn from both students and families about their experiences** with dual credit while enrolled

digitally through existing channels like email, text, and the school website so they can access general information

with direct contact information and resources if they have specific questions or concerns that will impact their decision

To better serve families with what they need, we recommend:

- Create a **centrally located place** with clear, detailed, and accessible information about the dual credit options available at your school. Consider leveraging your existing **school website.** This is also a great place to keep a link to your course catalog.
- Develop a **regular communication cadence** of emails, texts, and in person events where you lay out dual credit options, answer parent and caregiver questions, and share key dates.
- Connect with local middle schools to **share information to 8th grade families** about dual credit options.
- **Leverage multiple forms of communication** to reach the broadest number of families: share the same information in an email, a text, and a flyer for example. Avoid sharing information only through flyers and printed materials.
- Identify **clear points of contact for questions** at the high school and partner colleges and share their contact information with families.
- Invest in **high quality translated materials** for the languages commonly spoken in your district. Do not rely on automated translation without review from bilingual staff or partners.

WHAT'S NEXT?

STAND for children

Stand for Children Washington is developing a dual credit communications toolkit with sample materials to help your district implement these recommendations and improve dual credit communications.

Visit www.DualCreditComms.org for more information.

KINETIC WEST

Kinetic West is a Seattle-based social impact consulting firm that works with nonprofits, businesses, government, community partners, and funders to solve their toughest challenges. We are driven by our passion and shared sense of responsibility to our communities. Our core focus areas are workforce development, education, and economic development.

STAND for children | WASHINGTON

Stand for Children Washington is a unique catalyst for educational success and social progress to create a brighter future for us all.

- Champion data-driven policies that expand opportunity, especially for students who need the most support.
- Ensure policy change translates into real impact in classrooms and communities.
- Center the voices of those most directly affected to lead meaningful solutions.

DUAL WASHINGTON CREDIT