



POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT OPTIONS

by Jennifer Thomsen

The Postsecondary Enrollment Options Act allows high school juniors and seniors to enroll in courses at Colorado higher education institutions. The program aims to provide students with opportunities for additional academic challenge and rigor and to offer an alternative educational setting that may stimulate interest and motivation in learning. This issue brief provides an overview of the postsecondary enrollment options program (PSEO), as well as a description of a recent policy issues that have been discussed in this arena.

Colorado Law

House Bill 88-1244 created the Postsecondary Enrollment Options Act, which allows public school students enrolled in the 11th or 12th grade to enroll in courses at Colorado higher education institutions. School districts are required to notify all students and parents of the opportunity for postsecondary enrollment, allowing sufficient time for students and parents to consider this option.

Eligibility. In order to participate in the PSEO program, a student must be a public school student enrolled in the 11th or 12th grade. Further, the student must be:

- not more than 21 years of age;
- qualified for course work at a higher academic level than is available at the student's school or deemed to be in need of a different environment by the high school; and
- eligible to receive high school credit for the higher education course.

Tuition reimbursement. Qualified public school students or their parents pay tuition for postsecondary

courses and then receive reimbursement from the student's school district for the first two courses per academic term. Tuition reimbursement is contingent upon the student successfully completing the course. If a student attends a public higher education institution, the amount of tuition subject to reimbursement may not exceed the in-state tuition rate. If a student attends a nonpublic higher education institution, the amount of tuition subject to reimbursement may not exceed the average in-state tuition rate at comparable public institutions. If a student enrolls in three or more academic courses, the school district has discretion in determining whether to reimburse a student or parent for the third or additional course.

Cooperative agreements. After receiving written notification from a student who wishes to participate in the program, the high school develops a cooperative agreement with the higher education institution selected by the student. The agreement defines which courses will be accepted for high school credit, college credit, or both. It also establishes a protocol for tuition payment.

Special student circumstances. If a student qualifies for free or reduced-cost lunch, the school district pays the student's tuition for up to two courses directly to the higher education institution. Further, a school district may enter into an agreement with a student to pay the tuition in circumstances in which the tuition payment would be a financial hardship for the student or student's parent or guardian and the student "has shown evidence of responsibility for and commitment to successfully completing" the courses. In situations in which the school district agrees to pay the tuition, the student and the student's parent or guardian must sign a promise to repay the tuition if the

student fails or does not complete the course for any reason, without the consent of the high school principal.

School District and Student Participation

In the 2004-05 school year, the most recent school year for which data is available, 5,393 students attending school in 134 school districts and 2 boards of cooperative educational services (BOCES) participated in the PSEO program. The 5,393 participating students represent 5.6 percent of the participating district and BOCES 11th and 12th grade enrollment and 5.2 percent of the total statewide 11th and 12th grade enrollment. Table 1 illustrates PSEO program enrollment from the 2000-2001 school year through the 2004-2005 school year.

Table 1
PSEO Program Enrollment
2000-01 through 2004-05 School Years

School Year	Total Program Enrollment	Percent Change Over Prior Year
2000-01	4,348	(13.5%)
2001-02	5,123	17.8%
2002-03	5,426	5.9%
2003-04	5,188	(4.4%)
2004-05	5,393	4.0%

Recent PSEO Program Policy Issues

Fifth-year programs. In June 2001, the Office of the State Auditor conducted a performance audit of PSEO programs. That audit raised a number of issues surrounding district "fifth-year" programs, which allow high school students to voluntarily extend their high school education one year and graduate with a high school diploma and an associates degree simultaneously. The audit found that existing fifth-year programs involved a rigorous curriculum and required high school students to complete a minimum of 60 postsecondary credit hours between their junior year and fifth year of high school, while also meeting high school graduation requirements. During FY 1999-2000, the audit said, 203 students, or 0.2 percent of Colorado high school junior and seniors, participated in fifth-year programs.

The audit raised a number of concerns about fifth-year programs. One concern revolved around the potential financial impact if large numbers of students decided to participate in these programs. Participating students chose to remain in high school for an additional year, so the school district received an extra year of per pupil revenues (PPR) for each of these students. In addition, the higher education institution received FTE funding for the students based on the number of credit hours generated, a potential "double-dip" situation. The audit also raised questions about the legality of fifth-year programs, since they are not specifically authorized in state law.

At the request of the Legislative Audit Committee, the Colorado Department of Education, the State Board of Education, and the Colorado Commission on Higher Education discussed the policy issues surrounding fifth-year programs and, in August of 2001, found that state law does not authorize such programs. Further, it was decided that this position should be clearly conveyed to school districts and higher education institutions and that existing fifth-year programs should be discontinued, allowing only those students already in these programs to complete them.

In 2003, the State Board of Education instituted a rule prohibiting school districts from receiving PPR for students in fifth-year programs. Fifth-year programs are allowable however, if the school district itself pays for them.

Legislative proposals. In 2006, the General Assembly considered House Bill 06-1358, which would have created a "middle college" program aimed at students who would otherwise be likely to drop out or decline to continue into higher education after high school. It would have provided state funding for up to 500 students to enroll at higher education institutions while enrolled in the fifth or subsequent year of high school. The bill did not pass.

In 2007, Senate Bill 07-148 established the "Fast College Fast Jobs" pilot program. The program allows eligible school districts to contract with higher education institutions to create programs through which students enrolled in targeted high schools could simultaneously complete, within five years, both the requirements for a high school diploma and an associates degree or a career and technical education certificate. Approximately 70 high schools in 29 of the state's 178 school districts may be eligible to participate in the program beginning in the 2007-08 school year.