

Participating in early postsecondary opportunities (EPSOs)—including dual enrollment, Advanced Placement (AP), and International Baccalaureate (IB)—offers many benefits to students who enroll.

However, too often, students who have shown the potential to be successful in these courses do not participate in them. This is especially true for students of color and low-income students.

In Tennessee, early postsecondary opportunities are an essential component of the state's college and career readiness indicator, Ready Graduate. To be deemed a Ready Graduate, students in Tennessee must meet the ACT college readiness score or achieve a combination of participation in early postsecondary opportunities, meet an Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) benchmark score, and/or earn an industry credential. The disparities we see nationwide in EPSO participation and ACT test scores are reflected in Ready Graduate rates in Tennessee. For the class of 2022, 39.7 percent of graduating students were deemed Ready Graduates. However, only 20.8 percent of economically disadvantaged students were Ready Graduates, compared to nearly 52 percent of non-economically disadvantaged students; and only 22.6 percent of Black, Hispanic, and Native American students were Ready Graduates. These disparities expand into EPSOs in Tennessee as well. A recent report from Tennessee SCORE found that students of color are underrepresented in dual enrollment, and students of color who do participate are earning fewer college credits than their white counterparts.

Hamilton County Schools (HCS) in Chattanooga, TN made Ready Graduate rates a priority in their new strategic plan, which included a goal for 75 percent of graduates to be Ready Graduates by 2030. To meet this goal, the district needed access to real-time EPSO enrollment data to determine whether students were on track to meeting the Ready Graduate indicator. Through the district's participation in ESG's Momentum Metrics Network, leaders from Hamilton County Schools worked with their coach to develop a plan for getting real-time EPSO data in the hands of decision makers.

THE MOMENTUM METRICS NETWORK

was a cohort experience that provided dedicated coaching and support to help districts identify data-driven strategies to improve students' postsecondary attainment, with a special focus on students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and first-generation college-going students. The experience was grounded in ESG's seminal report *From Tails to Heads: Building Momentum for Postsecondary Success*, which identified eight high-leverage metrics that states, districts, and communities can prioritize to help more students move successfully through high school and into postsecondary education and training.

The "Momentum Metrics" are designed to help educators and administrators develop effective district-wide strategies and target key supports at the school and student level. Over the past two years, ESG has provided individualized coaching to a set of Tennessee districts, enabling district teams to analyze data, assess implementation capacity, identify sources of funding, and design and implement aligned district strategies to increase college and career readiness. During year one, district teams created action plans to drive improvements on specific Momentum Metrics; in year two, each district focused on deeper implementation of one of their plan's core elements.

HCS BY THE NUMBERS

44,185

Total Students
Enrolled

49%

Black, Hispanic &
Native American

28%

Economically
Disadvantaged

Data pulled from the Tennessee Department of Education District Report Card.

METRICS OF FOCUS



Potential for
Advanced Coursework



High-Quality
Pathway Participation

Historically, all reporting about EPSO enrollment was hand-tracked by counselors, which was both time-consuming and made counselors the arbiters of that data. The district's central office had little insight into the details of student enrollment and was reviewing outcome data at a point beyond when student interventions were possible. To start, Hamilton County needed to clean their back-end data to ensure courses were coded correctly and industry-based certifications were being captured. Once the data systems were clean, they built a tool in IBM Cognos that evaluates point-in-time EPSO and Ready Graduate rates. The tool looks at the EPSO courses the student has completed or is enrolled in to determine whether they have met, are on track to meet, or are not on track to meet the Ready Graduate indicator. Additionally, they created a dashboard that allows district and school leaders to break down the data by subgroup.

Hamilton County focused on feedback from three main stakeholder groups:

1 STUDENTS

Student focus groups revealed that there was conflicting messaging and inconsistent opportunities offered to students between high schools.

2 EPSO COORDINATORS & PRINCIPALS

The Hamilton County team conducted interviews to understand building leaders' greatest pain points for managing EPSOs. They also got user feedback on the tools themselves.

3 DISTRICT LEADERSHIP

The Hamilton County team shared the data with district leadership which led to conversations about school-based equity goals.

Once the tools were created, it was essential to ensure building leaders and counselors were equipped to use the tools. The Hamilton County team created a unified communication strategy that engaged community superintendents, principals, school EPSO coordinators, and counselors around the importance

of Ready Graduate and EPSOs. The district's Learning Community Superintendents set school-level goals for the coming year targeted at eliminating the gap of Black, Hispanic, and Native American (BHN) students to non-BHN students meeting Ready Graduate. The team introduced the dashboard to Learning Community Superintendents and trained principals and school counselors on how to use the dashboard to track progress toward Ready Graduate. The EPSO Lead has also begun to organize an EPSO advisory group made up of counselors, school leaders, and community superintendents to help further this work.

MAJOR WINS

1. Counselors, principals, and district leaders now have access to real-time EPSO enrollment and completion data. The district office can use this data to evaluate EPSO offerings across schools and counselors can use the data to advise students and make schedule adjustments in real-time. For example, one way to meet Ready Graduate is to complete four EPSOs; for a rising senior who has completed two EPSOs and is only enrolled in one for their senior year, a counselor can have a discussion with the student about adding a fourth EPSO to give the student a greater chance of meeting the Ready Graduate benchmark.

2. The district has demonstrated a commitment to the EPSO work. Not only did Hamilton County invest in data sharing tools, they have implemented district- and school-level Ready Graduate goals, and hired a dedicated EPSO Lead in the district.

3. The district saw an increase in Ready Graduate rates for the class of 2022, and the classes of 2023 and 2024 are on track to surpass previous years' rates. The Ready Graduate rate for the class of 2022 is anticipated to be about four percentage points higher than the previous class.

ONGOING CHALLENGES

1. Lagging testing data. Most of the EPSO testing results are not sent to the district until the summer, meaning these data are excluded from the initial end-of-year review. The strong communication and collaboration between the EPSO Lead and the data team helped identify this problem, and the two are working together to update the tools as quickly as possible before the new school year. They are also evaluating whether students failing to complete the required testing for EPSOs is a driver of equity gaps.

2. Principal engagement. With so many high-priority items, it can be hard to engage every building leader in the importance of EPSOs. To ensure everyone buys into the importance of this work, community superintendents set school-level goals and are using the data dashboard to have conversations about EPSO completion rates when they meet with building leaders.

THE ROAD AHEAD

Over the next school year, Hamilton County will be focusing on school-specific strategies and efforts to support challenges to meeting EPSO goals. This will be accomplished through professional development for school leaders as well quarterly check-ins with community superintendents and principals. The district is also working on providing clear information to students and parents, including piloting a Ready Graduate one-pager for each student which counselors can use in their advising discussions. Counselors will use the dashboard to identify students who have not yet earned Ready Graduate status to enroll students in the appropriate EPSOs to meet the criteria. Through targeted advising, the district aims to increase EPSO enrollment for the coming school year. Other long-term goals include eliminating barriers to dual enrollment (such as transportation and funding) and expanding access to AP testing.

Access to data has also helped the district identify where they want to dig in further. The Hamilton County team is now considering how EPSO participation impacts postsecondary outcomes so that they can expand access to the highest-impact EPSOs. They are also exploring why disparities exist in EPSO participation and completion rates for students of color and identifying ways to grow EPSO programs in schools with the fewest opportunities.