School Within a College.
Supporting Transitions from Secondary School to Higher Education

At a Glance

- Ontario’s School Within a College program provides provincial funding to partnerships that immerse secondary school students in the college environment.

- School Within a College targets disengaged students who are at risk of dropping out of high school, not participating in post-secondary education, and struggling to transition to employment and careers.

- Since it was launched in 2008, School Within a College has raised high school completion rates and improved students’ preparedness for college.
Executive Summary

Countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) share a common challenge in their secondary and post-secondary education systems: how to increase secondary school completion rates and improve access to post-secondary education (PSE), particularly by under-represented groups.

Ontario’s School Within a College (SWAC) program is one initiative that is responding to this challenge. The program provides an alternative means for disengaged students to complete their secondary school education. They can do so while immersed in the college campus experience and earning credits toward a college credential. The program is tailored to students who are most at risk of dropping out of high school, and thus likely to struggle to make successful transitions to PSE and employment.

Partnerships between school boards and Ontario’s public colleges are essential to SWAC. Indeed, they are its very cornerstone.

This briefing profiles the School Within a College program and offers lessons for other jurisdictions aiming to help more students make successful transitions from high school to PSE.

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Overview

A common challenge faces secondary and PSE systems in OECD countries: secondary school completion rates are low for certain groups of students. These young people are less likely to make a successful transition to PSE and employment, setting them up for further challenges in their life ahead.
Dual credit and dual enrolment programs are two strategies currently being used to help more secondary school students complete their high school requirements, while at the same time getting a head start on a post-secondary qualification. These programs allow secondary school students to take courses that award them credits that can be used toward both a secondary school qualification and a certificate, diploma, degree, or apprenticeship certification from a post-secondary institution.

Since 2008, Ontario’s School Within a College (SWAC) program—one example of a dual credit/dual enrolment strategy—has given students who might not otherwise move into PSE the opportunity to complete their secondary school requirements in a college setting. This province-wide program rests on partnerships between school boards and 22 of Ontario’s 24 public colleges. According to Ontario’s Ministry of Education, these partnerships have led to a total of 75 locally tailored SWAC initiatives, which have seen annual enrolments of more than 3,000 students since 2012–13.¹

SWAC is increasingly ubiquitous on Ontario college campuses: the number of initiatives offered under the SWAC banner expanded by 53 per cent between 2011–12 and 2014–15. Enrolment in these initiatives increased by more than 60 per cent over the same time frame, with some colleges offering SWAC at multiple campuses and with a number of school boards.²

This briefing looks at the province-wide SWAC program, and draws on examples from St. Clair College in Windsor, Ontario, which has SWAC partnerships at two of its campuses.

Ontario’s School/College/Work Initiative

SWAC is part of Ontario’s School/College/Work Initiative. Introduced in 1997, the initiative delivers provincial government funding to a number of innovative programs aimed at helping students make successful transitions from school to college and work.3 Ontario’s Ministry of Education and Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities jointly fund the School/College/Work Initiative.4

Objectives

SWAC supports the overall School/College/Work Initiative objective of improving Ontario students’ transitions from school to college and work. The specific focus of SWAC is to equip at-risk students—those identified as likely to drop out of high school, or as unlikely to pursue PSE—with the education and range of skills they need to navigate the transition from secondary education to college and work.

The SWAC program has four distinguishing features. First, the program requires students to work toward the credits they need to obtain their Ontario Secondary School Diploma. Second, some of the credits they earn—through dual credit courses—count toward a college or apprenticeship program, thereby allowing them to get a head start on a post-secondary credential. Third, the program immerses students in the college setting. Finally, the program provides students with a variety of opportunities to learn about college, apprenticeship, and career pathways, and to develop a range of skills that will help them to succeed.5

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3 School College Work Initiative (SCWI), SCWI Newsletter (December 2005).
4 SCWI, SCWI Newsletter (Fall 2014).
5 Government of Ontario, Dual Credit Programs (fact sheet).
Eligibility

SWAC is targeted to high school students who encounter significant difficulties that impede their prospects of finishing high school and progressing to PSE. Many of these students come to the program with a history of being bullied, abusing substances, struggling with learning disabilities, or facing challenges in their home lives. Students admitted into SWAC programs have been identified as unlikely to succeed if they remain in their traditional high school setting, yet they also show a commitment to completing high school and an interest in pursuing a college credential.6

Programming

Each SWAC initiative is unique in its program offerings. The requirements set out by the Ontario Ministry of Education allow partner school boards and colleges to develop programs tailored to meet local and regional needs. One primary requirement is that SWAC students must be enrolled simultaneously in at least one course leading to a secondary school credit and at least one college course. This ensures that students in the program are on track to complete high school while gaining exposure to a college program. The college credits that the students earn can be applied to other Ontario college programs, so students need not be committed to pursuing a program at their SWAC institution.7

Students attend their full-time SWAC program of studies for an entire semester, or multiple semesters, at the college campus. A dedicated SWAC teacher delivers the secondary school curriculum at a college classroom. Class time is split between cohort-based learning, where a class of students learns the same material, and independent study.

6 Interview with The Conference Board of Canada.
7 SCWI, SCWI Newsletter (Fall 2014).
SWAC class sizes are generally small, with fewer than 20 students. This allows these students to receive more individual support than in the mainstream secondary school classroom setting.  

In addition to a program of studies that intermingles secondary school and college curriculum, SWAC students attend workshops on topics such as time management, study skills, and learning strategies. Curriculum often comprises hands-on activities and career exploration, and some SWAC initiatives include field trips, cooperative education placements, and community service. In St. Clair’s SWAC programs, for example, students are enrolled in two dual credit courses each semester. One of these is a predetermined course taken together by the cohort of SWAC students. The other credit can be fulfilled by any of a variety of college options open to the students, allowing them to pursue their interests. Students in St. Clair’s programs are also required to devote some of their time in the program to volunteering with an organization in their community. 

Resources 

Government funding for the entire School/College/Work Initiative is more than $35 million annually, with roughly $5 million of this going toward SWAC programs. The majority of this funding comes from the Ontario Ministry of Education, with contributions from the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities (MTCU) making up the balance. 

Students do not incur any costs for their participation in SWAC. All resources directed to the program come from school boards’ operating budgets (for secondary school teachers and additional staff, such as social workers), college budgets (for college instructors, a campus classroom, and other campus resources), and the School/College/Work
Integration of the secondary school program into the college campus distinguishes SWAC from other programs.

Initiative (to cover the costs of program administration, and students’ transportation to and from the college campus). According to the Ministry of Education, government funding to support SWAC students averaged $1,749 per credit in 2013–14. This compares to $1,629 per credit for students in other dual credit programs outside of SWAC. SWAC funding is a bit higher, given the small class sizes and requirement for more individualized support.

Innovations

SWAC is distinct from other dual credit programs in Ontario, including the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program and Specialist High Skills Major, in its targeted approach to at-risk students. Other ways in which SWAC differs from other dual credit programs include:

• **Immersing students in the college environment.** Most Ontario students enrolled in dual credit courses outside of the SWAC program remain at their secondary school for most of their studies. In contrast, SWAC provides an immersive experience in which students attend one of Ontario’s public college campuses for a whole semester.

• **Providing a shared environment for secondary school and college teachers to work together.** SWAC secondary school teachers get an immersive experience on the college campus, similar to their students. Secondary teachers interact with college instructors who deliver dual credit courses, with some of these courses even “team taught” by both a secondary school and college instructor. This provides a venue for instructors from the two systems to share techniques and learn from one another. Their first-hand experience in the college environment also helps secondary school teachers become familiar with college programs and pathways.

12 CODE, “Advisory: School/College/Work Initiative.”
13 Interview with The Conference Board of Canada.
14 Interview with The Conference Board of Canada.
• **Focusing on skills-based training at the college level.** In contrast, other widely known dual credit/dual enrolment programs such as Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate focus on preparing students for a transition to university.\(^{15}\)

## Challenges, Solutions, and Keys to Success

Student retention is an ever-present challenge for School Within a College, given that many of the students in the program have become disenchanted with their prior education or continue to face serious obstacles to learning. School boards and regional planning teams are encouraged to develop local strategies to respond to retention issues. St. Clair College, for example, has responded by creating a staff position whose role is to devise strategies that will increase students’ engagement with the SWAC program. The retention coordinator facilitates activities that promote team-building and bonding between students and instructors, as well as connection to and belonging within the wider community. The retention coordinator helps to establish relationships with community-based organizations, which welcome SWAC students into volunteer roles. In other SWAC initiatives, program coordinators are experimenting with a variety of course offerings to understand which ones students find most engaging.\(^{16}\)

Canadian research on dual credit programs reveals several challenges these programs face, including:\(^{17}\)

• gaining buy-in from potential partners;
• skepticism about the quality of the coursework and program;
• reluctance to invest resources in disengaged students;
• concern that these students’ participation in college courses will diminish the quality of college programs;
• concern that students will struggle to integrate into the college culture.

\(^{15}\) Watt-Malcolm, “Dual Credit: Creating Career and Work Possibilities for Canadian Youth.”
\(^{16}\) Interviews with the Conference Board of Canada.
\(^{17}\) Watt-Malcolm, “Dual Credit: Creating Career and Work Possibilities for Canadian Youth.”
These concerns do not appear to hold for Ontario’s SWAC. The overwhelming uptake of these programs by Ontario colleges and school boards and their significant allocation of resources affirms that there is buy-in from partners. Ministry of Education officials and School Within a College coordinators point out that SWAC students taking courses for college credit are held to the same standards as regularly enrolled college students and that they “rise to the occasion” by performing at a level that is on par or that even exceeds that of college students, suggesting there is little reason for concern about program rigour and students’ ability to integrate.\(^{18}\)

Other challenges relating to dual credit programs do exist, however. Credit transfers between institutions can be complicated, especially for students who wish to attend an out-of-province college. Concerns exist about equity of access, particularly for students in remote and rural areas, where school board partnerships with colleges may be more difficult to establish.\(^ {19}\) Further research could help to understand whether—and how—SWAC initiatives have been able to mitigate these challenges.

**Benefits, Outcomes, and Impacts**

Several assessments of School Within a College and Ontario’s dual credit programs have concluded that these programs have positive outcomes for students.\(^ {20}\) Despite the day-to-day challenge of maintaining student engagement, province-wide retention rates for the program are strong—86 per cent of students complete SWAC and earn dual

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18 Interviews with The Conference Board of Canada.
19 Watt-Malcolm, “Dual Credit: Creating Career and Work Possibilities for Canadian Youth.”
20 See, for example: Dennis-Raycroft, *The Dual-Credit Journey: Chronicling the Success of Dual Credit Students at St. Lawrence College*; Whitaker, *The Impact of Dual Credit on College Access and Participation: An Ontario Case Study*; Philpott-Skilton, *High School/College Transitions: A Case Study Examining the Impact of a Dual Credit Program at Fleming College*; Community Partnerships Office and Academic & Student Affairs Special Research & Evaluation Projects, George Brown College, *Opportunities for Non-Traditional Pathways to Postsecondary Education in Ontario*; Swift, “Canadian Researchers Ask, Do Dual-Credit Programs Help Students Succeed?”
Research has shown that students in SWAC and other dual credit programs are better prepared for college than are control groups, feel more aware of their college and career pathways, are more likely to enrol in college or apprenticeship programs than the general Ontario high school population, and are less likely than the general Ontario high school population to go straight into the workforce without a PSE credential. In one SWAC initiative, nearly all participants who did not go directly into PSE the year following high school graduation had immediate plans to do so. St. Clair’s six years of involvement in SWAC have resulted in about 60 per cent of participating students going on to graduate high school. While this figure is lower than the Ontario SWAC average (80 per cent in 2012–13), this is significant given that St. Clair’s SWAC program admits only students who had previously dropped out of high school.

Anecdotal evidence from students and School Within a College coordinators reveals that SWAC students derive further value from the program. They gain the reward of succeeding in college courses and graduating on time and with their peers. This can only boost their self-esteem and confidence, both of which will help them to continue their education. One SWAC coordinator believes that just making it to school and re-engaging with learning is a significant achievement for SWAC students, who face day-to-day challenges in their personal lives. One student said this about the SWAC experience: “Being in a college made

22 Swift, “Canadian Researchers Ask.”
23 Dennis-Raycroft, The Dual-Credit Journey.
24 Community Partnerships Office, Opportunities for Non-Traditional Pathways.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Interview with The Conference Board of Canada.
29 Province-wide, 21 per cent of SWAC students had previously dropped out of high school. Government of Ontario, Dual Credit Programs: 2012–13 School Year Report.
30 Interviews with The Conference Board of Canada.
31 Interview with The Conference Board of Canada.
me feel as if I was moving forward with my life, not falling even more behind. … I needed a place where it was a more focused environment. People were there to accomplish something, not socialize.”

The teachers and institutions involved in SWAC also benefit. Secondary school teachers and college instructors have shown a noteworthy interest in sharing teaching and learning strategies that apply to both levels of education. The School/College/Work Initiative has supported this knowledge sharing both regionally and provincially. And when SWAC programs encourage the students to volunteer in the community as part of their education, as St. Clair College's program does, community agencies also benefit.

SWAC has inspired school boards to develop other innovative initiatives that serve underachieving or disengaged students. The Thames Valley District School Board and the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario, have initiated a School Within a University (SWAU) program. Its objective and delivery mode are similar to those of SWAC. The major difference is that the program targets students who have the potential to succeed in university programs. Some of the people involved in St. Clair's SWAC programs have also voiced the desire to see a program similar to SWAC that serves an older, adult target group. These initial outcomes are a promising indication of the longer-term potential of School Within a College.

32 SCWI, SCWI Newsletter (Fall 2014).
33 Interview with The Conference Board of Canada.
34 Interviews with The Conference Board of Canada.
35 Thames Valley District School Board, “School Within a University.” Although influenced by the SWAC model, SWAU is not an initiative funded through SCWI.
36 Interview with The Conference Board of Canada.
Lessons Learned

Ontario ranks among Canada’s top-performing provinces on education measures, including equity of outcomes in kindergarten to Grade 12 education and high school attainment. The province also earns an A+ for college attainment. Ontario’s focus on helping students to achieve success seems to be paying off, and initiatives such as School Within a College are part of its strategy to help young Ontarians complete secondary school and transition to PSE. Given that a post-secondary credential is increasingly essential to both individual prosperity and Canada’s economic health, other jurisdictions may find value in implementing initiatives such as SWAC.

It is important that the Ontario context be carefully considered when assessing the SWAC model’s potential for success in other jurisdictions. Canada’s colleges, institutes, and polytechnics serve somewhat different roles, depending on the province or territory. They offer programming that is not only vocational in nature but also academic. Other jurisdictions should consider the following in implementing programs that aim to improve transitions from secondary to post-secondary education:

- Focus on underperforming, struggling, or disengaged students, and implement the resources and programming necessary to support these learners.
- Establish centralized funding, policies, and guidelines to achieve a cohesive program of sufficient scale.
- Incorporate local-level priorities in determining resource allocation and programming.
- Leverage the existing resources of local school boards and colleges.

38 Ibid.
39 For a discussion of the different models across Canada, see Howard and Edge, *Policies, Laws, and Regulations*. 
School Within a College is creating opportunities for high school students to re-engage with their education.

Not surprisingly, research on the challenges of dual credit programs suggests that it takes time to generate buy-in from the multitude of partners that are necessary to ensure success.\textsuperscript{40} Such programs must be positioned as part of a long-term strategy to improve transitions from secondary to post-secondary education.

**Conclusion**

Ontario’s School Within a College program is creating opportunities for high school students to re-engage with their education and to get a head start on a college credential. More than 3,000 Ontario students annually are part of a non-traditional program that allows them to develop a range of skills, experience the college environment, and explore career options.

These students, who otherwise may not complete high school or have the opportunity to enter post-secondary education, gain immediate and long-term benefits from the program. SWAC students go on to study at college, significantly improving their opportunities for future prosperity.

Other jurisdictions interested in raising high school and college attainment and making their education outcomes more equitable can find lessons in this model.

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\textsuperscript{40} Watt-Malcolm, “Dual Credit: Creating Career and Work Possibilities for Canadian Youth.”
APPENDIX A

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