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Six Sacramento students are pioneers in a three-year, accelerated medical school program with a focus on primary care.

Classes started June 16. The program is testing one way to address the primary-care shortage in California: getting physicians in the workforce sooner.

Legislation is winding its way through the state Capitol that would allow these students to become licensed doctors in three years instead of the usual four. The new pathway doesn't try to cut corners, but it could cut student debt

The UC Davis School of Medicine is one of 11 medical schools selected nationwide last year by the American Medical Association to receive \$1 million to develop new programs to train future doctors. Kaiser Permanente is partnering with UC Davis to allow students to simultaneously perform primary-care residencies at Kaiser for a net total of six years of training.

The idea is to immerse students in Kaiser's health-care system for seamless integration between medical education and medical practice. The focus is on treating chronic conditions like diabetes and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. Students will have three full years with the same mentor at the same Kaiser clinic, no matter what other rotation or classes they are taking, said Dr. who runs the Kaiser side of the program. "And they will have a group of patients at the clinic they will be following over time. Medical students don't usually have that ability."

Impetus for the program comes from economic issues related to student debt and how new doctors find their career path. "Why is there a shortage and what can we do about it?" posed Dr. Tonya Fancher, director of the UC Davis part of the program.

Far more students come to medical school wanting to be primary-care physicians than leave school with the same mind set, Fancher said. One of the barriers is medical school debt. An accelerated schedule can ease that burden.

In addition, experience in Kaiser's approach to primary care — considered a model for the nation — boosts the value of the program, Fancher added.

Assembly Bill 1838 by Democratic Assemblywoman Susan Bonilla from Concord creates a shorter pathway to licensure through accelerated programs approved by national accreditation agencies. It is sponsored by the University of California — which operates six medical schools in the state — and the Medical Board of California, which regulates, licenses and disciplines doctors.

The legislation comes at a time when demand for primary-care doctors is high due to federal health reform. AB 1838 has sailed through the Legislature without opposition. It was on the Senate floor at press time.