

# Rethinking “Seat Time:” State Approaches to Earning Credit in Out-of-School Time



## Introduction

To decrease high school dropout rates, improve student achievement, personalize learning and better prepare students for postsecondary life, many states are rethinking the traditional ways students earn high school credit. Beyond time in the classroom, states are considering competency-based systems, also referred to as proficiency-based credits. Policies in more than half the states currently provide students with the option to shift from the classroom time required to complete a course (also known as “seat time”) to mastery of skills and content.<sup>1</sup> Some states use community assets and out-of-school time resources to allow and encourage teachers, schools, community partners and students to collaborate on credit-bearing expanded learning opportunities (ELOs), such as after-school and summer programs, internships and independent study. This structure capitalizes on the experience and expertise of many ELO providers to facilitate individualized learning, an approach that lends itself to competency-based credits; partnerships with schools ensure ample rigor and mastery for gaining credit. Outlined below are various state competency-based education policies that include an allowance for earning credits during out-of-school time.

## State Policies in Practice

**New Hampshire** In 2005, the New Hampshire Board of Education began requiring high schools to assess students based on their mastery of course-level competencies and allowed ELOs as options to earn middle and high school credit. This allowance became a statewide requirement in 2008. Four high schools piloted the credit-bearing ELO program and completed more than 1,000 individualized ELO programs during the 2009-2010 school year. Each school district designed and implemented their ELO programs, allowing students to earn credit for out-of-school time activities in social studies, civics, economics and other subjects. After-school workers and other community partners were paired with participating students and teachers to facilitate and assess student learning.<sup>2</sup> Surveys of the ELO pilot programs showed student growth in self-confidence and work readiness, and stakeholders indicated interest in sustaining and expanding ELO programs.<sup>3</sup> The state Board of Education is now encouraging other school districts to adopt policies and begin offering credit-bearing ELO programs.

**Ohio** Senate Bill 311 (2007), the Ohio Core Curriculum Act, required the state Board of Education to adopt a plan to require all Ohio school districts to allow students to earn high school credit based on demonstrated subject area competency, instead of completed hours of classroom instruction. Students in Ohio now can earn high school credit by completing traditional coursework, showing mastery of course content or pursuing “educational options” through the “credit flexibility” program. This program allows students in all districts to create individualized learning plans for earning credit through out-of-school time pursuits such as after-school programs, educational travel, internships, community service, arts, music or sports. The Ohio State Board of Education currently is reviewing implementation of the Ohio Core policy in the 2011-2012 school year to provide information for future versions of the program.<sup>4,5</sup>

**Oregon** A policy change by the Oregon state Board of Education in 2002 allowed school districts to award credit to high school students based on proficiency. Students can demonstrate their proficiency in a subject by traditional in-class work or through documented out-of-school expanded learning experiences. The Oregon Department of Education piloted proficiency-credit programs in seven schools between 2004 and 2006. In 2007, the state Board of Education increased graduation requirements and allowed proficiency-based credits to fulfill some of these requirements. In 2009, the board adopted the Credit Options Rule, requiring all in-class work to be connected to a demonstration of proficiency or mastery of standards. Students now can earn credit through this standards-based system in the classroom, outside the classroom, through prior learning or through competency examinations.<sup>6</sup> H.B. 2220 (2011) enhanced this by requiring student proficiency evaluations to include content-based assessments, criterion-referenced assessments and performance-based assessments.

**Rhode Island** In 2003, the Rhode Island Board of Regents passed new regulations that require high school students to “graduate by proficiency” by demonstrating achievement in standards-based content as well as applied-learning skills.<sup>7</sup> Schools now must offer students opportunities to complete “diploma assessments,” which include exhibitions, portfolios, Certificates of Initial Mastery or end-of-course assess-



ments, to demonstrate mastery of the required competencies. Rhode Island also revised its Basic Education Code to require all school districts to develop and implement ELOs to fulfill academic and graduation requirements. ELOs, which can be used in combination with diploma assessments, further enforce the idea of applied learning. In 2012, the Providence After School Alliance has worked with schools to pilot various credit-bearing ELOs.<sup>8</sup>

## Recent State Policy Actions

**Iowa** S.F. 2284 (2012) allows school districts to award high school credit to students based on their ability to demonstrate mastery of required competencies, rather than on traditional time-based models. The law also created a task force to conduct a study of competency-based instruction, including standards, assessment models, professional development and integration with the Iowa Core curriculum. Final task force evaluations and recommendations are due in November 2013.

**Maine** L.D. 1325 (2009) required that multiple pathways to learning—including apprenticeships, online classes, dual enrollment and technical education—be provided for all Maine students. L.D. 949 (2011) built upon L.D. 1325 by requiring high school students to demonstrate achievement in core learning areas to earn a standards-based diploma rather than a traditional time-based diploma. In 2012, the Maine state education commissioner created a strategic education plan that supported competency-based credits by encouraging ELOs and “anytime, anywhere” learning. Ten school districts in Maine have formally adopted the performance-based approach to learning.<sup>9,10</sup>

**Michigan** In 2010, the Michigan Legislature added the option of a seat-time waiver by amending the State School Aid Act of 1979. This amendment allows school districts to waive the minimum amount of school time required by offering students access to innovative programs such as experiential learning, online learning, work-based learning and continuing to work toward a high school diploma without physically attending high school.<sup>11</sup> The Michigan Legislature currently is considering H.B. 5392, which would make the waivers permanent.

## Conclusion

The state policy examples discussed here encompass a wide range of approaches for students to meet high school graduation requirements, including seat time waivers, pilot programs and competency-based credit options. State policymakers who want to implement credit flexibility policies might think about doing so in stages by using waivers, pilot programs or task force studies. In most implementation examples, community partners have played a key role in developing, facilitating and executing credit-bearing ELO programming. For this reason, state legislators may want to encourage and support partnerships between in-school and out-of-school education providers. Policymakers can facilitate such partnerships by defining or requiring school districts to clarify the oversight role of certified school personnel, allowing for coordination of resources across entities, removing barriers to data-sharing between schools and community partners and encouraging cross-professional development between in-school and out-of-school education providers. A variety of options are available to states that seek to restructure how, where and when high school students can earn credits toward graduation.

## Acknowledgements

This brief was generously funded by The Wallace Foundation. NCSL is grateful to the foundation for recognizing the importance of keeping state legislatures informed of expanded learning opportunities policies across the country. Ashley Wallace wrote this brief with research assistance from Lauren Heintz. The author acknowledges The Wallace Foundation staff for their thoughtful feedback and suggestions. Editing and formatting were performed by Leann Stelzer.

## Notes

1. Jennifer Dounay Zinth, “Credit Recovery and Proficiency Based Credit,” *The Progress of Education Reform* 12, no. 3 (June 2011): 3.
2. New Hampshire Department of Education, *Extended Learning Opportunities* (Concord, N.H.: New Hampshire Department of Education, 2009).
3. Steven Ellis and Ivan Zuliani, *The New Hampshire Extended Learning Opportunities Evaluation: Final Report of Evaluation Findings* (Hadley, Mass.: UMass Donahue Institute, 2011).
4. Ohio Department of Education, “Ohio’s Credit Flexibility Plan,” (Columbus: Ohio Department of Education, last modified Aug. 29, 2012), <http://www.ode.state.oh.us/GD/Templates/Pages/ODE/ODEDetail.aspx?page=3&TopicRelationID=1864&ContentID=61432&Content=131625/>.
5. Ohio Department of Education, *The Ohio Core* (Columbus: Ohio Department of Education, 2010), slides 16-20.
6. Oregon Department of Education: Office of Educational Improvement and Innovation, *Proficiency-Based Teaching and Learning in Oregon: An Evolution from State Policy to Practice* (Salem, Ore.: Oregon Department of Education, January 2011), 1-2, 9.
7. Rhode Island Board of Regents, *The Rhode Island High School Diploma System* (Providence, R.I.: Rhode Island Board of Regents and Rhode Island Department of Education, 2005), 4-6.
8. Rhode Island Afterschool Plus Alliance, *Expanded Learning Opportunities in Rhode Island* (Providence, R.I.: Rhode Island Afterschool Plus Alliance, 2010), 1-3.
9. Maine Department of Education, *Ready, Aim...RSU18 Customized Learning Implementation Case Study* (Augusta, Maine: Maine Department of Education, 2012), 1, 9-14.
10. Maine Department of Education, *The Logical Next Step: RSU 57 Performance-Based Education Implementation Case Study* (Augusta, Maine: Maine Department of Education, 2012), 1-3, 13-14.
11. Michigan Department of Education, “Seat Time Waiver.” Michigan Department of Education, Lansing, May 24 2012, [http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/Seat\\_Time\\_Waiver\\_386737\\_7.pdf](http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/Seat_Time_Waiver_386737_7.pdf).



NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF STATE LEGISLATURES  
*The Forum for America's Ideas*

National Conference of State Legislatures  
William T. Pound, Executive Director

7700 East First Place  
Denver, Colorado 80230  
(303) 364-7700

444 North Capitol Street, N.W., #515  
Washington, D.C. 20001  
(202) 624-5400

[www.ncsl.org](http://www.ncsl.org)

© 2012 by the National Conference of State Legislatures. All rights reserved.