



BLURRING THE LINES: Optimizing High School and Postsecondary Credit

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The world is moving to a place where the lines between high school and college are becoming blurred – where developing competencies and real-world, authentic experiences in a particular area of study are valued. Students need opportunities to build more relevant, rigorous, and transferable skills in high school. Giving students hope and different pathways enables them to explore who they are and what they can add to their community. Furthermore, as costs for higher education continue to rise with uncertain outcomes, it is critical to look for ways to preserve pathways for all students to thrive.

This policy brief considers policies to enable students to earn high school and postsecondary credit for work-based learning experiences. And, the timing is right. With more than half of Colorado's 178 school districts operating on a four-day school week, state policymakers should seriously consider opportunities to leverage meaningful, high quality out-of-school learning opportunities.

1 Enabling Intermediaries to Award High School Course Credit for Work-based Learning

Current Colorado law only allows credit to be awarded for learning experiences within district schools, charter schools, and institutions of higher education.

With the state's youth apprenticeship program, CareerWise Colorado, as well as incentive programs for work-based learning supported by the State Legislature, Colorado is seeing significant expansion of work-based learning. The Career Development Success Fund, first authorized in 2016, rewards school districts based on the number of students who complete industry recognized certificates aligned with in-demand jobs and industries. After two short years of implementation, 37 school districts, comprising over 9,000 students have completed these highly valuable opportunities.

A recent victory at the Capitol increased this state investment by three million dollars.¹ As these programs grow and expand, it is worth considering opportunities for more industry credentials and work-based learning to be accompanied by academic credit.

Awarding credit for work-based learning such as apprenticeships or

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community-embedded learning is a process that is currently managed by the district or school where a student is enrolled. This first policy idea involves granting intermediary nonprofit organizations the authority to award high school course credit in lieu of a school district, charter school, or higher education institution.

What are the limitations of this policy?

Districts and schools must comply with a number of regulations that act as constraints on who qualifies as a teacher and how funds can be allocated. This policy limits the kinds of experiences that districts and schools can award credit for. Currently, the burden of awarding community credit falls on individual districts and schools, which is especially cumbersome to small districts with little administrative support. Furthermore, not all districts are well positioned to create robust work-based learning partnerships with employers or to fund a large workforce center where students are receiving work-based learning and industry credential attainment as part of their school.

How could Colorado award credit for work-based and community learning?

New Hampshire is considering a new law that would allow intermediary entities other than districts and schools to award credit.² Following New Hampshire's lead, a Colorado governmental entity could be given authority to license nonprofit entities as credit-issuing education service providers. Once licensed, these entities would only be allowed to offer credit for specific learning experiences. Districts may agree to count credits toward graduation and would have discretion in what kind of credit is awarded and what coursework would be considered elective credit.

The type of learning that would be considered could include work-based competencies, service learning, or learning gained from community-based organizations (like community-based performing or visual arts organizations). Districts would be required to agree to the course and

count credits toward graduation but would have discretion in what kind of credit is awarded and what coursework would be considered elective credit.

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What are the costs and risks of making this change?

If the Colorado State Board of Education was the designated entity, its members could decide whether funding for these activities should be paid for by the family or school system.

The State Board would need start-up funds to study the idea and establish criteria for awarding credit and a process for accrediting organizations. As managing quality control is

at risk, the State Board should consider a limited pilot to test how the process would work in practice. In sum, allowing intermediary organizations to award high school credit for work-based learning is a solution that is plausible with more exploration and research needed to ensure consistency and standardization around what is considered to be creditworthy.

¹ <https://coloradosucceeds.org/press-releases/work-based-learning-gains-at-the-capitol/>

² <https://www.education.nh.gov/news/2018/learn-everywhere-captures-student-learning.ht>

2 Improving Transferability of Career and Technical Education Coursework for Postsecondary Credit

The second policy involves postsecondary credit. During the 2019 legislative session, Colorado Succeeds and other key education partners supported legislation (HB19-1252) championed by Representative Tim Geitner (R) and Representative Barbara McLachlan (D) to allow students and members of the current workforce to receive postsecondary credit for demonstrating competencies gained through work-related experience.

While the bill gained traction, it did not ultimately pass the 2019 session due to competing budgetary constraints. The legislation is expected to be introduced again in the 2020 session.

The policy focused on implementing a statewide plan to award postsecondary academic credit for prior work and learning experiences. The legislation was modeled after a 2017 military prior-learning bill that passed unanimously and established a framework for veterans' prior learning to count for postsecondary credit. The purpose of the policy idea would be to ensure that multiple high-quality pathways exist for students and workers that would lead to postsecondary credit at institutions of higher education.

What are the benefits of this proposed policy?

- Over 400,000 Colorado adults, who have earned some postsecondary credit, would have the chance to have some credits count towards credential completion.
- Increase the transferability and value of career and technical education credentials. For example, Colorado students earned 21,176 postsecondary certificates and associate's degrees in 2016-2017 that align to high-wage, high-skill and in-demand career fields. However, many technical certificates and competencies earned in technical schools are not recognized by higher education institutions as transferable credit.
- Colorado currently experiences a significant drop-off in students pursuing higher education as only 25% of Colorado's ninth graders go on to complete college within six years after high school graduation. Earning credit in high school for work experiences might make students more likely to complete postsecondary degrees. Furthermore, the policy could reconnect the current workforce to postsecondary opportunities and help close the current skills gap in the workforce to become strong contributors to the Colorado economy.
- Creates on-ramps for students often underrepresented in higher education. When students earn postsecondary credit for workplace skills they have developed, they are more marketable to employers, more likely to earn higher wages, and more likely to increase their level of hope in their future. Year after year, national student surveys conducted by Gallup show that fewer than half of U.S. students feel engaged by school or hopeful about their future. Hope, which Gallup found is a better predictor of student success than SAT scores or GPA, is in too short supply among students. Yet at schools where high-quality CTE is in place, truancy goes down and college-going rates rise.



3 Expanding the Colorado Endorsed Diploma

The third policy relates to the Colorado endorsed diploma which guarantees student acceptance into Colorado four-year institutions. In 2017, the CDHE and the Colorado State Board of Education passed a joint resolution³ to establish criteria for the endorsed diploma. As traditional methodologies of deriving course credit from seat-time are eroded and replaced with more and more opportunities to earn credit from authentic, community and work-based learning activities, it is time that the Colorado endorsed diploma reflect this fundamental philosophy shift.

Colorado Succeeds and other stakeholders supported policymakers who passed legislation in 2017 that created the first ever high school STEM diploma.⁴ School districts interested in this opportunity can offer high performing students the opportunity to

receive this distinguished endorsement on their high school diploma. Students must earn at least a 3.5 GPA, achieve minimum scores on standardized tests, and work with a local business to complete a capstone project where competencies and skills related to critical thinking, problem solving, and inquiry-based learning must be demonstrated.

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How could the endorsed diploma enable expanded pathways to college degree attainment?

The CDHE and the State Board could expand this new diploma endorsement by requiring students to complete a significant work-based learning experience such as apprenticeships, together with a minimum number of college credits that students must attain prior to graduation. Such a modification might offer an alternative pathway to college entrance for students who are college ready but who do not perform well on standardized tests. Additionally, such requirements might create an incentive for students to participate in apprenticeships.

There are two potential benefits of this policy. First, because work-based learning opportunities provide students the opportunity to learn real world, practical competencies in the industries where they work and develop soft skills such as collaboration, critical thinking, and communication which are needed to succeed in postsecondary education and life, Colorado students could enter postsecondary education ahead of their peers in other states. Second, students could self-fund part of their postsecondary education through gainful employment by working during high school.

How can such changes be made? The Colorado Department of Education (CDE) could initiate an expansion of



the requirements for the endorsed diploma and seek the State Board's approval. Alternatively, the legislature could direct the CDE and the State Board to adopt the expanded requirements following some of the same principles identified in House Bill 19-1236 that recently passed and established the Workforce Diploma Pilot Program.

Although the pilot program is only for individuals ages 21 and older, it required the CDE to allow dropout recovery candidates to count completion of an employability skills certification program or industry-recognized credential as a portion of the coursework required to earn a high school diploma. Similarly, the work-based learning experiences of all high school students could also be formally recognized and counted towards diploma requirements.

What are the costs of making this change?

No monetary costs would be associated with expanding requirements of the endorsed diploma. It would simply be a policy and mindset shift away from awarding credit solely for seat-time to granting credit based on learning competencies and experiences.

4 Supporting Agile Learners by Updating Measures of Student Success

The state's current accountability system includes measures for proficiency and growth rates, PSAT/ SAT assessments, graduation rates, and matriculation into CTE postsecondary programs, alongside matriculation into two- and four-year institutions. Beginning in 2020, school and district frameworks will include industry certificates within the postsecondary matriculation rate.

Unfortunately, the postsecondary and industry certificate measures are combined into a single reported score. This single score masks important programmatic and equity factors. Programmatically it isn't possible to tell whether students are encouraged to become ready for either college or career, or to attain both types of readiness. And, in terms of equity, there is no way to know whether certain groups of students are encouraged to become college ready while others are encouraged to become career ready.

The good news is many school districts are starting to test supplemental accountability measures and more will be given this opportunity with a newly created pilot (SB19-204), creating more proof points that could be scaled. As the pilots are implemented, the state could also consider some legislative changes including:

- The state could separate the certificate attainment and add additional career readiness measures from the matriculation rates and use the separated data to create new incentives. Kentucky used to give school systems one point for college readiness, one point for career readiness, and a bonus point each time a student demonstrated both to encourage college and career preparation which maximizes the agility of graduates. The state could also identify attainment by subgroup for certifications awarded overall and within specific career pathways to encourage diverse participation across pathways.
- Colorado could also consider two layers of assessment data feeding into the accountability system. The first layer comprised of basic measures for the purpose of identifying fundamental quality or equity issues. This would be the current state accountability framework, which could include the current matriculation measure and/or a different measure. The second layer would be unique measures based on local goals or priorities. The state could require that one locally identified goal always related to career exploration and preparation, so that each local community would collect and report data relevant to their locally created goal and strategy in this area each year.

³ https://www.cde.state.co.us/postsecondary/gg_diplomaendorsement

⁴ <https://www.cde.state.co.us/coscience>

Conclusion


The opportunity for students to earn high school credit and college credit for work-based learning experiences changes the entire paradigm for how we view “school”. With the current pace of change, it is not the fault of schools that they can’t keep up. With these policies in place, the days when students are confined to only performing grade-level work in their high school buildings will someday be a thing of the past. The lines between high school and college will be blurred, and new doors will open building multiple pathways to high-skilled jobs and fulfilling careers.

In all policies, the major challenge will be standardizing what experiences and work-based learning opportunities would be considered creditworthy by the intermediary organizations, CDE, and the four-year higher education institutions. Deciding what will “count” as course credit will be no easy task.



Questions?

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