



Policy Brief

High Schools

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Helping Students Get a Head Start on the "Real World": State Strategies for Early High School Graduation

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May 2010

The senior year of high school is a bone of contention in states and districts nationwide, for various reasons:

- Policymakers and school staff have long bemoaned the wasted senior year, in which many students, needing to complete few if any courses to fulfill high school graduation requirements, mentally (if not physically) check out of school.
- Some states are seeking solutions to the facilities and staffing challenges posed by concurrent growing high school student enrollments and class-size limitations at the high school level.
- Some speculate that the volume of recent high school graduates needing remediation upon college entry is partly due to the fact that, having taken a year off from rigorous English and math courses, students' reading, writing and numeracy skills have fallen slack.

As stated in the 2001 summary of findings by the National Commission on the High School Senior Year, "Examining how American high schools use time is another issue that merits attention. Why does everyone have to go to high school for four years? ... If [students] can master the material in less time, why not let them move on?"¹

States are beginning to explore means by which students may put their senior year of high school to better use — by finishing graduation requirements early, and getting a jump start on postsecondary education or a career. This brief considers several policy approaches to facilitate (or incentivize) early graduation and provides caveats and essential policy components for these various approaches:

- Proficiency-based credit
- Virtual high schools
- Completion of high school-level material before grade 9
- "Dual enrollment plus": Programs that allow students who may have completed high school graduation requirements early to enroll full-time in postsecondary or career/technical courses
- Scholarship incentives for early graduation.

Proficiency-based credit

Allowing students to earn credit based on their demonstration of proficiency is motivating — students know that as soon as they are able to show attainment of a state-set benchmark of knowledge and skills, they will be able to move on. However, such opportunities are not just for academically-oriented, "self-starter" students — proficiency-based credit policies benefit at-risk students who didn't pass a particular course the first time, and are loath to sit through the entire course again. Providing these students with the chance to earn credit by showing proficiency allows them to make up for lost time, and prevents them from becoming frustrated by having to enter the same situation in which they did not succeed before.

According to the ECS [database](#) on "Additional High School Graduation Requirements and Options," some 34 states allow students to complete Carnegie units by demonstrating proficiency in coursework requirements.² State policies range from a narrow focus (e.g., allowing non-native English speakers to earn foreign language credit for fluency in their native language), to broader provisions that require districts to award credit in a number of subject areas to students who are able to demonstrate proficiency.

The widest-reaching policies (for example, **New Jersey's**) allow districts to require students to complete some or all of their graduation requirements by demonstrating proficiency.

Caveat: It's important to ensure that students are required to demonstrate knowledge and skills aligned with state standards — that students are not held to a higher or lower standard. In addition, if the goal is to improve efficiency by allowing students to accelerate high school completion, it is not logical to insist that students who have demonstrated competency in required courses complete additional courses in the same subject area.

Best practices

Opportunities for students are maximized when provisions help ensure consistency in expectations, make credit options available in a variety of subject areas, motivate learners who might have been disengaged at one time and publicize proficiency-based credit options to *all* families and youth.

Clear definitions of proficiency or measures of proficiency: A number of states with high school end-of-course assessments specify that such tests are for students either completing *or* seeking credit for the related courses. **South Dakota** has developed “course equivalency exams” expressly for students seeking credit without completing a course. A student may receive course credit for a score of at least 85%, and must pass the test on the first attempt for credit to be issued. If a student is seeking credit for a content area for which a course equivalency exam is not available, the district may create an exam, although the test must be standards-based (if applicable) and approved by the department before it is administered.³

Other states identify a number of assessments in addition to end-of-course assessments students may use to demonstrate proficiency. For example, **Indiana** specifies that students may demonstrate proficiency by any of the following methods:

- (1) Receiving a score that demonstrates proficiency on a standardized assessment of academic or subject area competence that is accepted by accredited postsecondary institutions
- (2) Receiving a high-proficiency-level score on an end-of-course assessment for a course without taking the course
- (3) Successfully completing a similar course at a postsecondary institution through the postsecondary enrollment program (dual enrollment)
- (4) Receiving a score of at least “3” on an Advanced Placement (AP) exam
- (5) Other methods approved by the state board.⁴

Similarly, **Utah** allows students to earn proficiency-based credit through such means as

- (1) AP exams
- (2) ACT or SAT scores that meet or exceed levels set by the local board
- (3) State- or district-level end-of-course assessments
- (4) Demonstrated proficiency as assessed by the local board
- (5) College Level Examination Program (CLEP) tests.⁵

Broad options: New Hampshire requires districts to have competency assessments in place for all courses offered through the high school.⁶

A means to make up for past mistakes: Proficiency-based measures that are aligned with state standards and meet the learning expectations of traditional courses can be a great motivator for students who have failed a traditional “seat-time” course or dropped out of school and returned. **Louisiana**, for example, amended state regulations in late 2007 to allow students to take proficiency exams in courses they had previously failed.⁷

Knowledge of available options: Mechanisms should be in place to inform students of the opportunity to complete credits by demonstrating proficiency. **Oklahoma** is a rare state that requires districts to disseminate materials to students and parents each school year, explaining the opportunities of proficiency-based promotion. Proficiency criteria for each core curriculum area must be made available on request.⁸

Virtual high schools

Given that today's students are "digital natives," accustomed to using computers to access online content, anytime, anywhere, virtual courses are a potentially valuable mechanism to accelerate course accumulation for high school graduation. According to the ECS [database](#) on virtual high schools, 28 states have established statewide programs allowing students to earn credit toward high school graduation online.⁹

While local programs are good, statewide programs provide several benefits. Although online coursework offered by individual districts may be high-quality, they may provide limited access to students outside district boundaries. In contrast, statewide programs typically allow students in any public high school in the state to enroll, provided course prerequisites are met. In addition, it is more likely that courses offered through a state-level virtual high school will be aligned with state standards, supports will be available to help online teachers and funding will stay at consistent levels.

Best practices

State-level virtual programs achieve their potential when policies ensure courses are accessible to underserved students and students with disabilities, curricula are aligned with state standards, instructors are prepared to teach in the virtual setting, programs are evaluated, and checks and balances are in place so that students are held to the same expectations as their peers in brick-and-mortar classes.

Broad access: States should ensure that funds are available to help low-resource schools (often urban and rural schools) acquire and/or install the hardware and software they may need to make virtual high school courses available to students. According to the ECS [database](#) on virtual high schools, 16 of the 28 states with virtual high schools make such support available.¹⁰

Online courses may be less accessible (or inaccessible) to certain students with disabilities. State policies should ensure that technological access and curriculum adaptations are in place for students who require the use of assistive technologies or auxiliary aids. At least seven states appear to provide supports for such students to participate in virtual high school courses.¹¹

States that have set caps on the number of courses students may take through virtual high schools, or that charge student fees, should examine the purpose of these caps and/or fees and evaluate whether they create undue obstacles for qualified students to complete high school early. Students who failed courses during the regular school year may wish to retake such courses online during the summer months. While it is reasonable to charge fees to students who may not have taken a course seriously the first time around, states may wish to reconsider policies that charge course fees to summer-session students who, in an effort to get a leg up on graduation, are enrolling in a virtual course they have not taken before (either in a brick-and-mortar classroom or online). Similarly, charging class fees to students who wish to take a virtual high school course outside the regular school day may unduly limit capable students seeking to graduate early. States should seek to offer virtual high school courses outside the regular school day or year at no charge to students.

Rigor that's been validated: State-level virtual high school offerings should be aligned with state standards. This alignment appears to be in place in virtually every state that has established a virtual high school.¹²

Preparing teachers for a different type of instructional setting: Policies should ensure that educators are adequately prepared to meet the unique challenges of teaching virtual courses. Twenty-two states require virtual high school instructors to have completed appropriate training for teaching online classes. One of these states, **Georgia**, has created an online teaching endorsement for individuals teaching virtual courses. The Peach State's requirements for online teaching endorsement programs specify that programs must address three areas of standards: (1) Information technology (IT) skills and concepts (such as using synchronous and asynchronous tools effectively — discussion boards, chat tools, electronic whiteboards, etc. — troubleshooting software and hardware problems); (2) Online learning and teaching methodologies (i.e., actively engaging students in the learning process; facilitating and monitoring appropriate interaction among learners; leading online instruction groups that are meaningful, project-based and inquiry oriented; modeling and demonstrating effective moderator techniques to

facilitate active student participation; differentiating instruction, etc.); (3) Effective online assessment of teachers, students and course content.¹³

Evaluating for program quality: Regular evaluation of virtual high school programs is critical. Twenty-two states require virtual high schools to be evaluated.¹⁴

Checks and balances: Students in virtual high schools should not get a “free pass” from participating in state-level assessments. Ensuring such participation is another means of ensuring quality. Twenty-five states require students enrolled in virtual courses to take statewide assessments.¹⁵

Completion of high school-level material before grade 9

Some state policies allow courses completed by students in grades 7 and 8 to count toward high school graduation.

Caveat: Without external validation of the level of content being taught (particularly when all students in the class are in grade 7 or 8), such courses might not pass muster of the next level of education — high schools and/or postsecondary institutions.

Best practices

End-of-course exams or other external validation: It’s important to ensure that common expectations are held for course content, regardless of the grade in which students complete courses. States should allow students to earn high school credit for courses completed before grade 9 only when students in those courses must pass end-of-course exams or some other form of external validation. For example, **South Carolina** awards high school graduation credit to middle school students who (1) complete a high school course with an end-of-course exam *and* (2) pass the related end-of-course exam.¹⁶ **South Dakota** has not developed end-of-course exams for general high school courses, but specifies that high school credit may be awarded for courses provided to students below grade 9 upon passage of a state-approved end-of-course exam.¹⁷

Examining pass rates on end-of-course exams also can provide valuable insight into whether teachers of courses delivered to middle grades students are prepared to teach at a level to ensure student success, and identify where certification or professional development can address such areas of need.

“Dual enrollment plus”

Traditional dual enrollment policies allow students to earn some postsecondary credit before high school graduation. However, a small but growing number of states have developed programs, referred to here as “dual enrollment plus,” that permit students to enroll full-time in postsecondary courses their final semester or year of high school. Though technically not an early graduation approach (since seniors in dual enrollment plus programs may be earning needed high school credit), such programs provide students who *have* completed all graduation requirements before the end of grade 12 an opportunity to accrue postsecondary credits and keep their academic skills sharp — making better use of the senior year of high school, and reducing the likelihood that such students will need to enroll in remedial courses upon their “official” entry into college.

Caveat: As with some high school courses taken before grade 9, students in most dual enrollment classes are not required to pass an end-of-course exam or other means to demonstrate acquisition of the same knowledge and skills expected of students in a traditional postsecondary course. As a result, some state policies allow postsecondary institutions to deny transfer credit for dual enrollment courses, resulting in a rude awakening for students who may need to retake a course for which they previously were awarded credit (and for students and parents who have to pay tuition for that course the second time around).

Best practices

Ensuring course quality: Twenty-eight states have embedded instructor/course quality components into state dual enrollment policies. (These policies may be more geared to courses provided at a high school, whereas “dual enrollment plus” students are more likely to take courses on a postsecondary campus.) Nevertheless, such course quality policies may (1) require high school instructors teaching dual

enrollment courses to meet additional criteria, such as supplemental training or appointment as adjunct faculty at the partner postsecondary institution, or (2) require course syllabi or other materials to undergo review by postsecondary faculty, or (3) put other measures in place to ensure the content of dual enrollment courses is equivalent to that of courses taught to traditional postsecondary students.¹⁸

Incentivizing early graduation through scholarships

A small number of states provide scholarships to students who complete all high school graduation requirements prior to the end of grade 12. Such programs typically provide a maximum scholarship award amount at the end of a student's junior year of high school, and incrementally reduce the award amount during each subsequent quarter of the student's senior year.

Caveat: States should not lower graduation requirements to allow students to graduate early, but hold early completers to the same credit and competency expectations as students graduating in four years. Why? A student earning a high school diploma by completing fewer credits may have difficulty gaining admission to a more competitive postsecondary institution, may be less prepared for postsecondary coursework and/or may have trouble securing admission as a transfer student should the student decide not to stay at the college he/she initially entered after high school graduation.

Best practices

While early graduation scholarship policies are relatively new and found in only a small number of states, the following section highlights key elements of some existing state-level programs. (The following states are listed in no particular order. Section below does not include state programs offered on limited or pilot-only basis.)

Texas Early High School Graduation Scholarship Program

Significant enough to motivate: Rules governing the **Texas** Early High School Graduation Scholarship program specify that one of the purposes of the program is to increase the efficiency of the Foundation School Program. The program provides varying credit amounts toward tuition and fees depending upon the number of consecutive semesters in which a student completed the Recommended [default] or Advanced high school curriculum:

- \$2,000 for those who complete either curriculum in 36 consecutive months or less, plus an additional \$1,000 for tuition and fees if the individual completed 15 hours or more of college credit
- \$500 for those who complete either curriculum in 37-41 consecutive months, plus an additional \$1,000 for tuition and fees if the individual completed 30 hours or more of college credit
- \$1,000 for those who complete either curriculum in 42-46 consecutive months with at least 30 hours of college credit.

Individuals are eligible to receive scholarship credits up to six years after high school graduation. Any public postsecondary institution in the state may participate in the program. Credits also may be used at a private institution if the institution agrees to match the state credit.

Minimizes district pain: A school district must be awarded a one-time credit of \$1,000 for each student who graduates in 36 consecutive months or less, and \$250 for each student who graduates in 37-41 consecutive months. However, the foundation payment to the district is reduced by an amount equal to $F \times A$, where "F" is the lesser of one or the quotient of the district's local share for the preceding school year divided by the amount of money to which the district was entitled for the preceding school year, and "A" is the amount of state tuition credits applied by institutions of higher education on behalf of eligible persons who graduated from the district that has not been used to compute a previous reduction.

Publicized: All high school freshmen and their parents (and every student and parent of a student who enrolls in a Texas high school after his/her freshman year but before the student's senior year) must receive information on the requirements of the Early High School Graduation Scholarship program. This information must include the number and type of high school course credits necessary to satisfy the eligibility requirements, and the appropriate order in which those high school course credits must be earned, including course credits related to the curriculum for the recommended or advanced high school program. State law also directs the state education agency to develop and post online a publication that includes this information, so that high schools may reproduce it to distribute to students and parents.¹⁹

Arizona Early Graduation Scholarship Program

Significant enough to motivate: Through the **Arizona** early graduation scholarship program, students who complete the requirements for a high school diploma at least one year early receive up to \$1,250 or the actual cost of tuition, books and fees (whichever is less) during the first year of college, plus up to \$750 (or the actual cost of tuition, books and fees) their second year of college. The award amount for students who graduate from high school one semester early equals as much as \$1,000 (or actual costs) during the first year of college, and up to \$500 (or actual costs) in the second year of college. In both cases, the first two years of college must be completed within 36 months of the student's graduation from high school. The award may be used at either an accredited public or private postsecondary institution, or an accredited vocational program.

Minimizes district pain: The district or charter school from which the student graduated must include the early graduate in the district's or school's student count until the student's class is scheduled to graduate and must continue to receive per pupil funding (minus \$2,200 for a student who graduates at least one year early, or \$1,700 for a student who graduates one semester early), until the student's class is scheduled to graduate.

Fairly distributed: If the number of eligible scholarship recipients exceeds the funds available, the scholarships must go to eligible students in the order in which the applications were received, with priority given to eligible students who received a scholarship grant in the previous fiscal year and who are still in good academic standing. All other applicants are put on a waiting list.

Addresses potential disincentives: State policy specifies that a student who receives an early graduation scholarship must be allowed to participate in extracurricular activities until the student's class graduates, and must be permitted to take part in the student's high school commencement exercises.

Publicized: All public high schools and charter high schools must promote the program to students.

Evaluation: The commission on postsecondary education is required to report annually on the program to the governor and leaders of the house and senate. The report must note:

- The number of students who graduated at least one year early and at least one semester early for each year of implementation of the program by each district and charter school
- The number of early graduation scholarships provided
- The average amount per early graduation scholarship
- The balance in the early graduation scholarship fund
- The number of students using a scholarship to attend a public or private postsecondary institution and the number of students using a scholarship to attend a vocational program
- A description of how the commission expended monies for administrative costs of the program.²⁰

Utah Centennial Scholarship Program

Significant enough to motivate: **Utah's** Centennial Scholarship provides an award of up to \$1,000 or a full year of tuition (whichever is less) to a student who graduates from high school at the end of grade 11. The award amount is reduced by 25% with each successive quarter of the student's senior year (so that students graduating in the third quarter of their senior year receive \$250). The award may be used at any Utah public college, university, community college, applied technology center, or any other institution in the state of Utah, accredited by the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges, that offers postsecondary courses of the student's choice.

Options for acceleration/requirements signaling student intent to participate: Administrative rule lists early morning or after school courses, and courses completed at the student's own rate based on performance, among the methods by which a student may earn additional credit toward high school graduation. As soon as a student establishes the intent to graduate early, the student must inform his/her school principal of this intent. To be eligible for early graduation, the student must have a current student educational/occupational plan (SEOP) on file at his/her high school.

Minimizes district pain: The high school receives an amount equal to 1/2 of the scholarship awarded to each student graduating by the end of grade 11, or a proportionately lesser amount for any student graduating after grade 11 but before the end of grade 12. The program is funded by an annual legislative appropriation from the Uniform School Fund to the state board of education for the costs associated with

the Centennial Scholarship Program based on the projected number of students who will graduate before the end of 12th grade in any given year.²¹

Conclusion

Given the nexus of “senior slump,” the potential for knowledge loss during the senior year (and the resulting need for remedial college courses), the facility and other costs that must be accounted for even when senior-year students are in the building only a portion of the school day, and, in some states and districts, large and/or growing enrollments at the high school level, early graduation options may serve as a viable means to address these challenges. State longitudinal data systems — still under development in many states — will help policymakers determine which acceleration options are most successful in helping motivated traditionally underserved students get a head start on college and careers.

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¹ National Commission on the High School Senior Year, *The Lost Opportunity of Senior Year: Finding a Better Way*, National Commission on the High School Senior Year, 2001,).

http://www.admissionpossible.org/sites/f8fbff41-1a58-4318-914c-3f89068c11cc/uploads/Lost_Opportunity_of_Senior_Year.pdf(accessed October 22, 2008).

² Education Commission of the States, Graduation Requirements database, “Additional Coursework Options and Requirements,” last updated February 2007: <http://mb2.ecs.org/reports/Report.aspx?id=740>, (accessed October 21, 2008).

³ S.D. ADMIN. R. 24:43:01:01, 24:43:11:09

⁴ IND. CODE ANN. § 20-36-5-1

⁵ UTAH ADMIN. CODE R277-703-3(B)(2)

⁶ N.H. CODE ADMIN. R. ANN. ED. 306.27(i)

⁷ LA. ADMIN. CODE tit. 28, § 2323

⁸ OKLA. STAT. ANN. tit. 70, § 11-103.6(K); OKLA. ADMIN. CODE § 210:35-27-2

⁹ Education Commission of the States, Virtual High Schools database, last updated July 30, 2008, http://www.ecs.org/html/educationissues/HighSchool/highschooldb1_intro.asp?topic=vhs (accessed October 21, 2008 ;).

¹⁰ Education Commission of the States, Virtual High Schools database, “Virtual High Schools: Does the State Provide Support for Hardware/Software for Urban/Low-income/Rural Schools?” last updated December 3, 2007, <http://mb2.ecs.org/reports/Report.aspx?id=1385> accessed October 21, 2008).

¹¹ Education Commission of the States, Virtual High Schools database, “Virtual High Schools: Do Measures Exist to Ensure Access to Students with Disabilities?” last updated December 3, 2007, <http://mb2.ecs.org/reports/Report.aspx?id=1386> (accessed October 22, 2008).

¹² Education Commission of the States, Virtual High Schools database, “Virtual High Schools: Is the Virtual School Curriculum Aligned to the State’s Academic Standards?” last updated December 3, 2007, <http://mb2.ecs.org/reports/Report.aspx?id=1390> (accessed October 21, 2008).

¹³ GA. COMP. R. & REGS. r. [505-3-.85](#), [505-2-.162](#)

¹⁴ Education Commission of the States, Virtual High Schools database, “Virtual High Schools: Must the Virtual High School Program Be Evaluated?” last updated December 3, 2007, <http://mb2.ecs.org/reports/Report.aspx?id=1402> (accessed October 22, 2008).

¹⁵ Education Commission of the States, Virtual High Schools database, “Virtual High Schools: Are Students Required to Participate in Mandated State Assessments?” last updated December 3, 2007, <http://mb2.ecs.org/reports/Report.aspx?id=1403> (accessed October 22, 2008).

¹⁶ S.C. CODE REGS. 43-262.4(l)(B)

¹⁷ S.D. ADMIN. R. 24:43:01:01(53), 24:43:08:12; South Dakota Department of Education, *End of Course Exams Procedure Manual*, May 24, 2010,

<http://doe.sd.gov/octa/assessment/EOC/documents/EOC%20Procedure%20Manual.doc> (accessed May 24, 2010).

¹⁸ Education Commission of the States, Dual Enrollment database, “Dual Enrollment: Instructor and Course Quality Component,” last updated October 2008, <http://mb2.ecs.org/reports/Report.aspx?id=1316> (accessed October 23, 2008).

¹⁹ TEX. EDUC. CODE ANN. § 56.201 through .210; 19 TEX. ADMIN. CODE § 21.950 through .959

²⁰ ARIZ. REV. STAT. § 15-105

²¹ UTAH CODE ANN. § 53A-15-102; UTAH ADMIN. CODE R277-703-1 through -6