



Policy Brief

At-Risk

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Beyond the GED: State Strategies to Help Former Dropouts Earn a High School Diploma

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Bored in his high school classes, “Jeffrey” had mentally checked out of high school long before he stopped going to class at age 15. After four years working at low-wage jobs and unable to make ends meet, he realized he wanted to earn a high school diploma and go to college. But at 19, Jeffrey would feel awkward sitting in high school classes, surrounded by kids much younger than him. And why would he want to go back to his local high school, where none of the teachers had seemed to care about him, and courses seemed completely unrelated to the real world? Not to mention the fact that his work schedule would make it impossible to attend a full schedule of classes during the regular school day. Besides, quitting his job was not an option. Jeffrey felt stuck.

Jeffrey is not alone. Seventy-four percent of the high school dropouts age 16-25 surveyed for a 2006 report said that, if they could do it all over again, they would have stayed in school. Seventy-six percent of the survey respondents said that if they could, they would definitely or probably enroll in a high school program for people their age. The authors add, “At the time of their decision to leave high school, fifty-three percent [of the dropouts in the survey] had planned to go back and graduate. Since that time, however, only 11 percent have actually gone back and graduated.”¹

And the situation is particularly serious, considering the low graduation rates in many states and communities, combined with the educational, economic and employment challenges that high school dropouts face. As Adria Steinberg and Cheryl Almeida point out in a 2004 report:

Since the 1970s, wages of high school dropouts have fallen further and further behind those of high school graduates and, particularly, those with college credentials. Young people who exit the educational pipeline in high school are much less likely than their peers to attain valuable postsecondary credentials, even if they eventually obtain a GED. While many more GED recipients (30 percent) than dropouts (8 percent) obtain some postsecondary credits, less than 2 percent of GED holders compared to 36 percent of high school graduates complete four or more years of postsecondary education. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that 60 percent of jobs created between now and 2010 will require at least some postsecondary education. In the emerging economy, a high school dropout or a young person who earns a GED but no further postsecondary credential has extremely few opportunities for a family-supporting career.²

Clearly, options are needed to help young adults earn a high school diploma.

While many programs to help young dropouts earn a high school diploma are local initiatives launched by forward-thinking districts and community-based organizations, few states have launched larger-scale efforts to help young people reenter the education system. This policy brief provides information on various state policy components that can facilitate former dropouts’ ability to earn a high school diploma:

- Increasing the upper statutory age
- Offering flexible means to accelerate learning and demonstrate course competencies

- Providing flexible (not less rigorous) credit recovery options
- Offering flexibility in course scheduling and courseloads
- Making clear connections to postsecondary education and/or the workforce
- Communicating the availability of options for dropouts to earn a high school diploma.

This policy brief also addresses finance elements state policymakers must consider when developing new education options.

Increasing the upper statutory age

Why it's important: State education funding is generally tied to student age. Therefore, districts serving students who are older than the state-set upper statutory age are not eligible to receive state funds for those students. This creates a disincentive for districts and schools to serve older students, particularly during tight fiscal situations. Recognizing this fact, 31 states set the upper statutory age at 21, and nine states set it at 20.³

Highlights: **Texas** legislation enacted in 2007 authorizes districts to admit resident students up to age 26 who wish to earn a high school diploma. A student older than 21 who has not attended school in the last three years must have separate classrooms from high school students age 18 and younger.⁴

Offering flexible means to accelerate learning and demonstrate course competencies

Why it's important: Many dropouts were poorly served by the traditional textbook-and-blackboard class structure. They are also more likely to have work or parenting obligations that prevent them from attending class on a regular schedule. Offering accelerated learning or the ability to demonstrate course competency provides students with an alternative route to gaining enough credits to earn a high school diploma.

Highlights: Some states have met this need by establishing state policies that offer returning dropouts the opportunity to complete required credits by demonstrating proficiency in required knowledge and skills.

Texas legislation passed in 2007 authorizes students with attendance rates between 75% and 90% to earn course credit if the student completes a plan (approved by the principal) that provides for the student to meet the class instructional requirements.⁵ Furthermore, an increasing number of states allow students to circumvent seat-time course requirements by demonstrating proficiency in the course content. (For more details, see the "[Proficiency-based credit](#)" section of the ECS graduation requirements database.)

While some states' proficiency-based credit options were adopted long ago to accommodate gifted students, more recent state policies make clear that such options must be made available to at-risk or returning dropout students. To better serve at-risk students and returning dropouts, **Louisiana** repealed an earlier provision in 2007 that barred students from taking a proficiency test to earn credit for a course they had previously failed.⁶

Ohio students entering grade 9 in the 2010-2011 school year will be required to complete the rigorous Ohio core curriculum. Students age 16-21 may enroll in a "dropout prevention and recovery program" to allow students to complete a competency-based instructional program instead of the Ohio core curriculum. Eligible students must be "at least one grade level behind their cohort age groups or experience crises that significantly interfere with their academic progress such that they are prevented from continuing their traditional programs." Programs must indicate how the state content standards will be taught and assessed (and these means must be approved by the state department of education). Participating students must still pass the Ohio graduation tests.⁷

Providing flexible (not less rigorous) credit recovery options

Why it's important: Returning dropouts are best served when they can use flexible, alternative means to acquire knowledge and skills they struggled with in the traditional classroom setting.

Highlights: Emerging state approaches include strategies such as are developing options to allow returning dropouts to catch up on just the skills and knowledge they lack, or providing online and other methods that allow for flexible scheduling, but still require demonstration of mastery of state-level standards.

An **Alabama** state board rule authorizes districts to develop credit recovery programs to provide students with opportunities to master concepts and skills in one or more failed courses. The rule requires course content for credit recovery courses to be composed of standards in which students proved deficient rather than all standards of the original course, and allows these courses to be provided via computer software, online instruction, or teacher-directed instruction. However, this does not set a lower standard for earning graduation credit — the curriculum of credit recovery courses must align with the state board content standards in which students are deficient.⁸

Louisiana specifies that any credit recovery course districts choose to offer must be “self-paced and competency-based,” and that districts cannot impose attendance requirements on participating students in such courses as long as the attendance requirement was met when the student first failed the course. Like Alabama, Louisiana requires credit recovery courses to be aligned with the state’s content standards and grade-level expectations. Students in a credit recovery course may earn Carnegie units either by (1) completing the course requirements for a computer-based credit recovery program approved by the state department of education, or (2) passing a department-approved exam, which may be a state-approved end-of-course exam or a locally-developed final exam approved by the state department of education.⁹

One of the stated purposes of the **Kentucky, North Carolina** and **South Carolina** virtual high school programs is to offer credit recovery options.¹⁰

Caveat: Time should be the variable (less time as well as more). Standards and high expectations should be the same for all students, regardless of whether they’re following an alternative route or traditional path to high school graduation.

Offering flexibility in course scheduling and courseloads

Why it's important: The regular 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. school day can make returning to school a challenge for returning dropouts who have jobs or young children. Therefore, offering flexible course scheduling and course loads provides non-traditional students more opportunities to earn a high school diploma.

Highlights: State approaches include such strategies as allowing students to take courses at unconventional hours — during evenings, weekends, summers, and vacation sessions — and allowing for attendance either in brick-and-mortar classrooms or online.

Texas legislation allows a district to apply to the state to offer a flexible school day program for students who have dropped out of high school. An approved district may offer flexibility in the number of hours in the school day or in the number of days in the school week, or may allow students to enroll in less or more than a full course load. In calculating average daily attendance for students participating in a flexible school day program, the state department of education must “allow accumulations of hours of instruction for students whose schedule would not otherwise allow full state funding.” Funding must be prorated based on hours and/or days of instruction, including time spent in class during the summer or vacation session.¹¹

Twenty-eight states have established statewide virtual high schools, which in most cases allow students to take courses outside the regular school day and school year. In 27 states, courses must be aligned with state standards.¹²

Making clear connections to postsecondary education and/or the workforce

Why it's important: Going to college and/or improving one's lot in the workforce can be prime motivators for dropouts to return to school. Some programs provide explicit guidance and support. Those offering postsecondary credit make clear that students are working toward a credential that matters. Those programs that provide training in technical skills in an area of student interest offer opportunities for graduates to apply for living-wage jobs with career potential. Workforce training additionally provides the "real-world" learning environments in which many at-risk students thrive. Dual enrollment programs situated on postsecondary campuses spare older returning students the embarrassment of taking courses on a high school campus and can be good exposure for students who are the first in their family to attend college.

Highlights: Some states have developed options allowing returning dropouts to earn a high school diploma on a postsecondary campus. In some cases, students may earn high school as well as college credit.

Indiana's Fast Track to College program offers young people the opportunity to earn a high school diploma while getting a leg up on earning a postsecondary degree. Programs at [Ivy Tech Community College](#) (which has campuses across the state) and [Vincennes University](#) (a multi-campus two-year public university that also awards baccalaureate degrees in seven areas) may allow students to complete credits toward an associate's degree or certification program. Programs also may be established at a public colleges and universities and offer credit toward a four-year degree. At all locations, eligible students must be either at least 19 years old and not enrolled in high school, or 17 years old and have permission from the high school most recently attended.

To complete diploma requirements, students must (1) pass the state exit exam, an approved exit exam equivalent, the GED exam or an exam that demonstrates the student is ready for college-level coursework (i.e., COMPASS, SAT, ACT); and (2) complete high school and postsecondary course requirements. The postsecondary institution awards the high school diploma, which notes that the recipient earned the diploma at the institution.

All postsecondary institutions offering Fast Track must report to the state's P-16 coordinating entity, the [Education Roundtable](#), the number of program participants and diplomas granted.¹³ However, the fact that many students 19 years old and older must bear the financial burden for tuition, fees, books, and other costs has proven an obstacle to greater Fast Track participation among adults.¹⁴

While not explicitly geared to serving returning dropouts, **Oregon** legislation on alternative education programs has led to the development of high-quality programs that allow students to earn their diploma, (along with postsecondary credits) on postsecondary campuses. Districts may run their own programs or contract with approved private alternative education providers. All programs must undergo evaluation at least annually. Evaluations of private alternative education programs must review whether programs are providing the opportunity for students "to make progress toward achieving state academic content and performance standards."¹⁵

Through this legislation, Portland Community College developed the [Gateway to College](#) program serving 16- to 20-year-old dropouts. Gateway to College is now available in 12 states. **Pennsylvania** statute makes clear that for purposes of reimbursing districts and postsecondary institutions, "Gateway to College" programs are considered concurrent enrollment programs.¹⁶

A **Louisiana** pilot program focuses on offering students age 16-21 access to technical training. Legislation enacted in 2006 establishes a pilot encouraging high schools and community or technical colleges to forge partnerships allowing students to earn Carnegie units toward graduation and articulated postsecondary technical college credit. By the 2010-2011 school year "or as soon as funding is made available," the state aims to make the program available to any eligible student.¹⁷ The only drawback is that legislation specifies that eligible students (even

those over age 18) must be enrolled in a public high school. It is unlikely that dropouts will be eager to re-enroll in a traditional high school to access the program.

Regardless of program location, returning dropouts may need help setting a plan for future education and career goals. School staff are responsible for developing individual career plans for students in the **Ohio** dropout prevention and recovery program. These plans must specify that a student will ultimately enroll in a two-year postsecondary program, earn a business and industry credential, or enter an apprenticeship. The program must provide counseling and support based on the plan during the remainder of the student's high school experience.¹⁸

Getting the word out

Why it's important: In policy, it isn't always true that "If you build it, they will come." State policymakers should think about effective marketing and communications so that young people eligible for participation in dropout recovery programs are aware of such opportunities and the benefits of program completion.

Highlights: Some states, for example, require districts to notify students of the availability of high school programs for potential or returning dropouts.

When a student's attendance pattern is so erratic that the student is not benefiting from the educational program, **Oregon** districts are required to notify students and parents of the availability of alternative education programs. The notification must specify a program recommended for the student based on student's learning styles, and needs and procedures for enrolling the student in that program. Districts must also ensure that parents speaking a language other than English receive the notification in a language they can understand.¹⁹

Thinking differently about schools = thinking differently about funding

Why it's important: New education programs, especially those run outside of traditional school districts, may require adjustments in the way that states distribute their funding. In certain cases, the funding system may require only a tweak, while in others, a major revision in funding might be necessary. It is important for state policymakers to make sure that before any new education program is implemented, appropriate changes to the state funding system have been made.

Highlights: School finance policies in some states take into account the flexible scheduling and structure of programs serving returning dropouts.

Contractors who provide approved alternative education programs in **Oregon** receive either the full cost of educating a student or 80% of the school district's average cost of educating a student, whichever is less. Administrative rule allows funding to support activities such as tutorials, small and large group instruction, personal growth and development instruction, cooperative work experience, supervised work experience and other activities provided by any accredited institutions.²⁰

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- ⁴ TEX. EDUC. CODE ANN. § 25.001
- ⁵ TEX. EDUC. CODE ANN. § 25.092
- ⁶ LA. ADMIN. CODE tit. 28, § 2323
- ⁷ OHIO REV. CODE ANN. § 3313.603(F)
- ⁸ ALA. ADMIN. CODE R. 2903-1-.02
- ⁹ LA. ADMIN. CODE tit. 28, § 2324
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- ¹¹ TEX. EDUC. CODE ANN. § 29.0822
- ¹² ECS database, "Virtual High Schools," last updated December 3, 2007; accessed 20 August 2008: <http://mb2.ecs.org/reports/Report.aspx?id=1781>
- ¹³ IND. CODE ANN. § 21-43-6-1 through -6, 21-43-7-1 through -6, 21-43-8-1 through -6
- ¹⁴ Cyndi Stout, Ivy Tech Community College – Central Indiana, personal communication
- ¹⁵ OR. REV. STAT. § 336.615 through 336.675
- ¹⁶ 24 PA. CONS. STAT. § 16-1602-B
- ¹⁷ LA REV. STAT. ANN. § 17:187.1 through 187.5
- ¹⁸ OHIO REV. CODE ANN. § 3313.603(F)
- ¹⁹ OR. REV. STAT. § 336.645; OR. ADMIN. R. 581-021-0071
- ²⁰ OR. REV. STAT. § 336.635; OR. ADMIN. R. 581-023-0008