

Learn Anytime, Anywhere:

Rethinking How Students Earn Credit Beyond School Hours

It's time to incorporate into every student's standard high school education the chance to earn credit for learning experiences beyond traditional classrooms.

This is both to attack the drop-out crisis that in some communities sends half the young men of color into the world without a high school degree, but also to provide all students with an appropriate 21st century education. Students need more ways to pursue knowledge and interests beyond their schools' curricula. They need more real world learning applications and opportunities to develop advanced, interactive skills that can't be out-sourced to computers. Working together, schools and community partners such as youth-serving organizations and science or cultural institutions can develop educationally sound credit-bearing opportunities that meet the needs of a range of high school students from the most accelerated to those who are under-credited and at high risk to quit school.

The possibilities for blending classroom and experiential learning are limitless and growing. Technical and alternative high schools already incorporate many approaches. Bringing these opportunities to scale for students who attend regular high schools, however, will require greater coordination between schools, districts and many partners to ensure all students meet core learning standards and requirements. The same kind of cooperative effort will be required to enact policy changes that reduce bureaucratic barriers to non-traditional learning, while ensuring these experiences are as rigorous as in-school learning or more.

President Obama has called for the United States to lead the world in college completion by the end of the decade, but students continue to drop out of high school at rates that threaten our democracy.¹ A growing body of research shows that drop-outs are bored, disengaged from adults, and find school-work irrelevant. Others fall behind in accumulating high school credits for a host of personal, social, and economic reasons, leading them to decide that they simply can't catch up.²

To help more students exit high school prepared for college-level work and careers, educators and policymakers need to re-think the traditional system of credit accumulation. In this brief, TASC offers an overview of how some states and districts are re-inventing credit-bearing opportunities and expanding learning to happen anywhere, at any time. Much of the relevant policy is made at the state and local level. So while our recommendations to policymakers and school leaders may have broad application, they are tailored to current policy and practice in New York State.

To be clear, we are not recommending an expansion of credit recovery, where students make up required classes they failed. We are arguing for more of the types of learning opportunities that include workshops run by community organizations or museums, internships, courses offered online or independent studies that help students recognize they're building skills and mastery that lead to the future they want for themselves. These personalized learning opportunities have been shown to increase students' acquisition and application of skills and knowledge while boosting engagement in learning, self-confidence and school-day attendance.³

Examples from the States

Currently, more than half of all states have policies that provide schools some flexibility in awarding school credit, allowing students to earn credit based on content mastery, rather than hours spent in the classroom.⁴ The following is a map to a few of the many ways students can earn credits through learning experiences tailored to their individual needs and interests, and pursue alternative pathways.

Ohio

In 2007, the governor of Ohio signed into law the Ohio Core Curriculum Act, which requires districts to broaden the ways that students can earn high school credit. Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, the “Credit Flex” policy allows schools and teachers to experiment with different credit-bearing models, including online courses and internships that provide real-world experiences and customize learning to meet individual students’ needs.⁵ Teachers use tools such as state performance-based assessments to inform decisions about whether to award credit for a learning experience. There is no limit to the kind of course work or number of credits that students may earn outside the classroom.

New Hampshire

New Hampshire has fully embraced proficiency-based learning, meaning the state requires all high schools to assess students based on their ability to demonstrate mastery of core competencies.⁶ In addition, New Hampshire high schools have the flexibility to award credit for “Extended Learning Opportunities” (ELOs) in areas such as journalism, technology and social studies that occur outside the classroom and the school day. These learning experiences include apprenticeships, community service projects and independent studies. Four schools that began piloting credit-bearing expanded learning opportunities in 2008 have shown success in increasing student engagement and persistence in school.⁷

Rhode Island

In 2003, the Rhode Island Board of Regents, which governs education in the state, passed regulations requiring “graduation by proficiency” as a component of Rhode Island’s Diploma System. Rather than completing a certain number of course hours to earn a high school diploma, all high school students are required to demonstrate academic mastery by successfully completing a variety of assessments, including exhibitions and portfolios. With a focus on demonstration of mastery, several districts have started broadening opportunities for students to earn credit. For example,

the Providence After School Alliance and Providence Public School Department have been working together to establish a credit policy and model for expanded learning opportunities that allows students to earn credit for project-based learning and other work they complete through collaborations with local partners, such as community organizations and universities.⁸ In the spring of 2012, students are piloting credit-bearing opportunities such as learning to build a website using Drupal.

Maine

In early 2012, Maine’s education commissioner released his strategic education plan, which promotes personalized learning and multiple pathways for learner achievement. Through a proficiency-based system, students will be able to choose how they learn and can earn credit for demonstrating mastery of standards in multiple ways, including traditional classes, internships, and online learning. Assessments will also be adjusted to measure both academic and non-academic skills, including problem-solving and critical thinking.⁹

Massachusetts

The Massachusetts High School Program of Studies, an initiative of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, recommends a rigorous course of study for high school students that includes traditional core coursework as well as “additional learning opportunities” in which students can earn credit for out-of-school learning such as online courses and service or work-based learning opportunities.¹⁰ Massachusetts, however, has yet to provide detailed guidance on how schools and districts should implement additional learning opportunities or how credit should be assigned.

New York State

While there is no explicit credit flexibility or “credit for proficiency” policy in New York State, the Board of Regents, in July of 2011, passed a new regulation on blended and online learning and clarified guidance for learning that takes place outside the traditional classroom and school day, helping to broaden students’ options for earning credit. Non-traditional learning experiences must be aligned with State standards and overseen by a certified teacher-of-record from the school the student attends. Students must demonstrate mastery of learning outcomes. These credit-bearing opportunities serve as alternate pathways for students to earn the 44 credits necessary to complete New York State’s general education and diploma requirements.¹¹

New York City

In New York City, a number of schools offer credit for learning that takes place beyond school hours. As TASC staff worked over the past year to develop alternative credit-bearing opportunities for high school students, we discovered that many principals — particularly those who run small schools with a limited variety of electives — were interested in partnering with community organizations to expand their curricular offerings and provide students with greater choice. Similarly, we found leaders of museums, institutions of higher education and community arts, technology and other youth-serving organizations eager to engage. Despite strong interest there are barriers to bringing these opportunities to scale. To mention three:

- Principals are often reluctant to award outside credits because they say they are unsure whether their decisions would satisfy state regulations.
- Current guidelines suggest that any outside course or learning opportunity must have oversight and sign-off by a certified teacher of record at the school the participating student attends. That teacher must be certified in the course content area and work with the partnering organization to co-design or approve the syllabus and curriculum, observe and monitor student progress, review assessments and award final grades. Involving teachers from multiple schools drives up these courses' cost and staffing burdens.
- Schools and community institutions that could offer credit-bearing opportunities have no easy way to find one another.

7 Recommendations

To encourage a wide range of credit-worthy experiences that engage and inspire young adults, city and state legislators, education leaders and funders can work collaboratively to:

- 1. Further Revise Legislation to Promote Credit Flexibility and Proficiency-Based Assessment** States, including the New York State Board of Regents, should formalize regulatory language that more broadly authorizes local education agencies to award credit for learning experiences that occur in a range of educational settings. As states evolve traditional notions of “seat time,” they should encourage school districts to evaluate student learning based on mastery of core competencies. In New York State, this would require adding a level of detail and clarifying current credit-accumulation rules to provide principals with clearer guidance. In New York City, this would require continuing and broadening the work of the Department of Education to guide school principals.

2. Clarify Teacher-of-Record Requirements

To facilitate off-site learning, the New York State Board of Regents should clearly allow models in which students from multiple schools take one approved course.

3. Build Incentives For Schools to Collaborate with Community Partners

Even if regulations are modified, principals and schools may still be wary. To ease concern and promote new, innovative approaches to learning, states and local education agencies can encourage schools to partner with community organizations, or cultural institutions such as art museums, to offer credit-bearing courses. By offering funds to stimulate course development and highlighting examples of high-quality credit-bearing courses and opportunities, states and districts would encourage schools to evolve more engaging and relevant learning pathways. (continued on pg. 4)

In the spring of 2012, TASC is helping high school students earn one elective arts credit through a 60-hour hands-on tutorial led by the education nonprofit Studio in a School. Students learn to teach a variety of media, such as print-making (see photo) to younger kids. TASC is helping other students earn an elective credit through the New York Hall of Science. They study the principles of evolution and learn to help younger kids think like scientists using the museum's exhibitions. Among the high school students' assignments is a paper in which they argue for why the meat of a T-Rex would or would not taste like chicken.



4. Help Schools and Outside Credit-Offering

Institutions Find One Another Cities and states can create databases and operate help-line services to help over-burdened principals — and community institutions that lack large marketing budgets — find each other and meet the needs and interests of high-risk and high-potential students. This will lead to more efficient use of public dollars spent on education through both kinds of institutions.

5. Support Joint Planning and Professional

Development Schools and community partners should work collaboratively to ensure all learning experiences are academically rigorous, engaging, and of high quality. Joint planning and professional development will enable teachers and community educators to align learning activities with academic standards and design multiple assessments that accurately measure students' mastery. It will also offer opportunities for two-way learning that brings to bear both educational and youth development expertise of teachers and community educators.

6. Encourage Coordination of Funding Streams to Support Credit Flexibility

Multiple youth development funds can be used to support these opportunities. However schools and community partners need to be able to blend and braid funds from different sources. To facilitate this coordination, efforts that support the activities of older youth — such as the Workforce Investment Act's In-School Youth and youth summer employment funds — could be explicitly linked to learning objectives. Similarly, schools should be encouraged, willing, and able to use their education funds to support standards-based learning experiences outside of school.

7. Incorporate Credit Flexibility Into High School

Turnaround Strategies Priority high schools undergoing turnaround should be encouraged to extend learning time by partnering with community organizations to provide additional opportunities for students to earn credits. This strategy can be an integral part of the plan to re-engage students in learning and boost their skills and academic performance.

About TASC

TASC's mission is to give all kids expanded learning opportunities that support, educate and inspire them. Since our founding in 1998 we have helped 375,000 kids, supported more than 450 New York City public schools, partnered with more than 300 community and cultural organizations and colleges and trained 16,000 community members to work in schools. For more information, please contact Saskia Trill, Vice President of Policy and Research, at strail@tascorp.org or (646) 943-8757.

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