State Policies to Support Competency-Based Education for Overage, Under-Credited Students

Introduction

In recent decades, the demand for growing numbers of highly skilled workers to fulfill the needs of employers has grown exponentially. In response to this demand, the K–12 education system is increasingly turning an eye toward ensuring that all students are prepared for college and careers. Despite these efforts, approximately 2.6 million youth between 16 and 24 years of age are off track for even graduating from high school (Stark & Noel, 2015).[1] Research suggests that there may be a variety of reasons that a student is not on track to complete a high school diploma (Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison, 2006). One of the biggest challenges is that students may not be able to complete high school in a traditional setting, or they may not be motivated to do so. This is particularly true for students who are overage and behind in credit hours.

> **OA/UC students** are students who do not have the appropriate number of credits for their age and intended grade and who are at risk of falling behind, dropping out, or aging out of school.

This brief provides an overview of one strategy aimed at addressing the challenges faced by these students: competency-based education (CBE). CBE may improve college and career readiness outcomes for overage, under-credited (OA/UC) students by allowing them to develop at their own pace the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed in the workforce. This brief highlights state policies and emerging CBE strategies for helping OA/UC students graduate from high school better prepared for postsecondary education and work, and it includes policy actions that states can take.

Why Use CBE to Support OA/UC Students?

CBE is a student-centered strategy that relies on the core elements of mastery, pacing, and personalized instruction (Blumenthal & Rasmussen, 2015) to meet the needs of OA/UC students. In CBE settings, students progress at their own pace to the next level or grade level once they have demonstrated mastery of specified content knowledge and/or skills. Learning objectives are measured through content or skill-specific assessments aimed at determining proficiency in a particular area. This differs from the traditional means of awarding credit based on a predefined, uniform pace in terms of the amount of time that a student must spend in a course combined with achieving a passing course grade. Because traditional

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[1] This is the number of 16- to 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in high school and who have not yet received a high school diploma or equivalent.

seat-time requirements do not allow students to acquire credit without taking a full course and sitting for the required instructional time, students may fall behind and become disengaged with their learning. For students struggling in a traditional school setting or for those who are failing to keep up with their graduation cohort, CBE can be part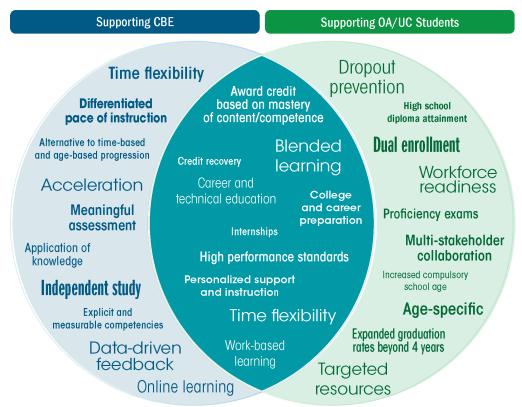icularly helpful. Research suggests that a "significant barrier to getting these students back on track is the amount of time they are required to spend in class engaged in credit recovery" (Rath, Rock, & Laferriere, 2012), making the personalized pacing of CBE an appealing option for students.

Indeed, CBE strategies are often used to address the needs of at-risk youth. According to researchers, CBE is a promising strategy for addressing the needs of at-risk youth because it (1) increases the likelihood of graduation for students at risk of dropping or aging out by offering an alternative, self-paced system of instruction for reaching graduation; (2) ensures mastery of specific skills, as opposed to completed courses, that are directly related to skill sets necessary to make a successful transition to postsecondary education and work; (3) addresses issues related to student motivation by providing measurable learning objectives that are directly related to skills assessed through formative assessments; and (4) provides an alternative to repeating full courses for students who are behind in their education (Sturgis, Rath, Weisstein, & Patrick, 2010). In short, CBE can offer OA/UC students more flexible credit accrual and recovery options based on demonstrated mastery of knowledge and skills, alternative pacing though courses, and personalized instruction and assessment.

CBE is a personalized system of instruction, assessment, and academic reporting based on student demonstration of mastery of learned knowledge and skills as they progress through their education at their own pace (commonly referred to as *standards-based, outcomes-based, performance-based, proficiency-based*, or *mastery-based*).

For more information, see the Ask the CCRS Center brief on CBE.

State Policy Elements

| Supporting CBE | Supporting OA/UC Students |

Time flexibility

Differentiated pace of instruction

Alternative to time-based and age-based progression

Acceleration

Meaningful assessment

Application of knowledge

Independent study

Explicit and measurable competencies

Data-driven feedback

Online learning

Award credit based on mastery of content/competence

Credit recovery

Blended learning

Career and technical education

College and career preparation

Internships

High performance standards

Personalized support and instruction

Time flexibility

Work-based learning

Dropout prevention

High school diploma attainment

Dual enrollment

Workforce readiness

Proficiency exams

Multi-stakeholder collaboration

Increased compulsory school age

Age-specific

Expanded graduation rates beyond 4 years

Targeted resources

State Policies That Utilize CBE to Support OA/UC Students

Although CBE is often implemented at the local level, a growing number of states are using CBE or elements of CBE (e.g., utilizing time in school flexibility when awarding course credit) (Carnegie Foundation, 2014). Some states are even using CBE explicitly to improve high school graduation outcomes of OA/UC students. The following overview provides examples of some of these states' policies.

STATE POLICY Examples

Georgia
Rule 160-4-8-.12: Alternative/Non-Traditional Education Programs (2010)

In Georgia, legislation permits local education agencies (LEAs) to award course credit for students in grades 9–12 based on **demonstrated competency** on course examinations for coursework completed, instead of on clock hours of instruction. The legislation requires LEAs to provide an alternative or nontraditional education program for students in Grades 6–12 who have been suspended from the traditional classroom or who are eligible to remain in a traditional classroom but are more likely to succeed in a nontraditional setting. All alternative or nontraditional programs must provide a curriculum aligned to the Georgia Performance Standards and permit the curriculum to be delivered through computer-assisted instruction and online courses, allowing for personalization of both how and when course content is instructed (SBOE 160-4-8.12, 2010).

Illinois
S. B. 1796: Illinois Hope and Opportunity Pathways through Education (IHOPE) Program (2009)

Illinois state law sets student **performance-based goals and outcomes** for students who participate in dropout prevention programs. IHOPE, administered by the State Board of Education, establishes comprehensive systems of support to reenroll high school dropouts in programs that will enable them to earn a high school diploma in a variety of settings beyond the traditional school environment. Programs may include year-round programming, evening school, summer school, community college courses, online programs, dual-enrollment programs, adult education, vocational training, work experience, programs to enhance self-concept, or parenting courses; must maintain high standards for student learning by integrating work experience and education; and must collaborate with school districts, public community colleges, and key community programs that work with dropouts. In addition to setting student **performance-based goals and outcomes**, programs must include measures of enrollment, attendance, skills gained, credits, graduation, and the transition to college, training, and employment. IHOPE requires that programs have experienced leadership and staff in these alternative instructional approaches who are provided with ongoing professional development (S. B. 1796, 2009).

Nevada
S. B. 312: Dropout Reporting, Exit Exam Alternatives, Competency-Based Credits (2007)

In Nevada, a student may be granted credit for a course without attending the entire course if the student is able to pass an examination **demonstrating competency** in the course subject area. The law requires the State Board of Education to prescribe alternative graduation criteria that a student may satisfy to receive a standard high school diploma. If a student passes the mathematics and reading subject areas of the high school proficiency examination—but not the examination in its entirety—after taking the examination at least three times before twelfth grade, the student may earn a high school diploma by completing an essay, senior project, portfolio of work, or any combination of these that **demonstrate competency** in the subject areas on the high school proficiency examination that the student was unable to pass (S. B. 312, 2007).

Ohio
S. B. 311: Students in Dropout Prevention and Recovery Program (2006)

According to Ohio state law, a student in a dropout prevention and recovery program may graduate from high school by completing a **competency-based instructional program** approved by the State Board of Education, in consultation with the Ohio Board of Regents and the Partnership for Continued Learning. These CBE programs allow students to earn high school credits based on **demonstration of subject area competency** either instead of, or in combination with, completing hours of classroom instruction. Dropout prevention and recovery programs enroll students between the ages of 16 and 21 who are at least one grade level behind their age (or graduation) cohort or who experience crises that prevent them from continuing in a traditional academic program. Programs must demonstrate how academic content standards will be taught and assessed under the CBE instructional program. Programs must develop individual career plans for students that specify matriculating to a 2-year degree program, acquiring a business or industry credential, or entering an apprenticeship certification program and must provide counseling and support related to those career plans for the duration of a student's high school experience (Am. Sub. S. B. 311, 2006).

CBE for OA/UC Students in Action

The following programmatic examples demonstrate how a CBE approach can support college and career readiness and success outcomes for OA/UC students.

Academic Performance Excellence Academy, East Hollywood, California

The Academic Performance Excellence Academy (APEX) enrolls OA/UC students and is a Diploma Plus® school. The Diploma Plus model combines high expectations for every student; a rigorous, **competency-based and standards-aligned approach**; student-centered instructional practices in a small, personalized learning environment; and use of technology and data to enhance teaching and learning.[2] APEX provides counseling and programming that allow students in need of extra time and courses to graduate and attain higher education and/or career training. With flexible

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[2] http://www.diplomaplus.net/model.html

programming, the charter school has successfully graduated students in 3, 4, and 5 academic years.[3] In a Diploma Plus school, APEX teachers and administrators participate in ongoing professional development opportunities for implementing personalized, competency-based instruction and assessment and enhancing their college and career readiness structures.[4]

Boston Day and Evening Academy, Roxbury, Massachusetts

Boston Day and Evening Academy (BDEA) is an alternative, public charter school open 10 hours a day that serves OA/UC Boston Public School students. BDEA is a **student-centered, competency-based school** that does not use Carnegie Units, grades, or traditional grade levels to measure academic progress. Academic content areas are divided into modules, and students progress from module to module based on their ability to demonstrate mastery in each content area. As a charter school, BDEA has been granted flexibility to create an environment that blends academics with social and emotional supports, gives youth the tools they need for postsecondary success, and fosters critical thinking, independent learning, and active citizenship.[5]

South Brooklyn Community High School, Brooklyn, New York

South Brooklyn Community High School (SBCHS) is a Good Shepherd Services Transfer School that works with OA/UC youth between the ages of 16 and 21 who have dropped out or who have been excessively truant to help them explore postsecondary opportunities and graduate from high school. For more than 3 decades, Good Shepherd Services has partnered with the New York City Department of Education to provide alternative pathways to graduation by offering full-day, year-round academic programming that integrates intensive support services and youth development practices with **personalized, standards-based instruction** (Good Shepherd Services, 2015). The SBCHS curriculum is designed to be hands-on, aligned with New York state academic standards, and relevant to students' life experiences and practical needs. Students' **competency levels** are assessed, and differentiated instruction, assignments, and supports are provided to accommodate individual learning styles and competency levels (Good Shepherd Services, 2007). SBCHS staff members participate in ongoing professional development, including opportunities for teacher training on personalized curriculum and pedagogy and youth development (Good Shepherd Services, 2007).

State Policy Recommendations

The following recommendations are derived from the state policy and programmatic examples highlighted in this brief, along with other important considerations for utilizing CBE to support OA/UC students.

Developing Knowledge and Capacity

States may want to consider completing both policy and programmatic scans of their state to learn what current policies exist for meeting the needs of OA/UC students. As with the examples in this brief, policies are unlikely to use the language "overage, under-credited" to describe this population.

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[3] https://apex.diplomaplus.net/

[4] http://www.diplomaplus.net/professional-development.html

[5] http://www.bacademy.org/

Rather, states may need to search for policies on dropout prevention, credit recovery, or alternative graduation requirements, for example, to find relevant policies that utilize CBE for these students. States may also want to scan for effective programs in their state that serve OA/UC youth and/or utilize elements of CBE to determine practices that are effectively serving students in their local context. If states are not already doing so, they may want to collect demographic data on OA/UC students to better understand the population and to support their needs accordingly.

States may also consider ways to support school leadership and teacher professional development and capacity building (e.g., Illinois) at the state, district, school, and program levels (including the programmatic examples discussed earlier) to provide CBE. Because CBE is an emerging instructional strategy, teachers and other school personnel may need training on how to implement elements of mastery, pacing, and personalization into their instruction, assessment, and academic reporting to ensure that students are receiving an adequate education under this flexible school design.

Seat-Time and School Design Flexibility

States may explore supporting a variety of learning and assessment options that use elements of CBE that allow students to advance to the next level or grade based on mastery of academic goals or competencies, rather than on seat time and traditional performance requirements. For example, Georgia and Nevada use proficiency examinations, whereas Ohio uses competency-based instructional programs tied to state standards. Seat-time flexibility is an important consideration for serving OA/UC youth to help prevent them from potentially falling further behind and becoming disengaged in school.

States can support flexible school designs to encourage "anytime, anywhere" learning for OA/UC students. These school designs may include blended and online learning opportunities (e.g., Georgia, Illinois); concurrent and dual enrollment (e.g., Illinois); and schools that are open throughout the day, evening, weekend, and summers (e.g., Illinois) to accommodate diverse learning needs and nontraditional schedules.

Student Retention and Credit Recovery

Many states have already raised their compulsory school attendance age to prevent students from dropping out of school at younger ages (e.g., age 16), including Nevada. States can also change accountability parameters for schools regarding graduation rates, by extending them beyond the traditional 4 years of high school. Finally, states can create incentives for school districts to retain or reenroll OA/UC youth in school, thereby allowing more time for students to complete high school and earn a diploma.

In cases in which students have not met the traditional proficiency requirements, states may explore the development of opportunities for credit recovery and alternative graduation criteria, including proficiency examinations (e.g., Georgia, Nevada); online courses (e.g., Georgia, Illinois); or essays, senior projects, or portfolios of work (e.g., Nevada), which students can satisfy to receive a high school diploma. Credit recovery options are an important consideration for serving OA/UC students who are already behind in course credits to get them back on track for graduation.

Targeted Support

OA/UC students are a population who often need a great deal of support to successfully complete high school prepared for college and career. CBE is one instructional strategy that may help meet the needs of OA/UC students, but other supports are important for these youth as well. States may also consider incorporating social and emotional, college and career planning and exploration (e.g., Illinois, Ohio), and other wraparound supports (which are included in some of the programmatic examples) that specifically target OA/UC students, truant students, dropouts, or those at risk of dropping out.

Conclusion

In the pursuit of preparing all students for college and careers, CBE is one instructional strategy of growing interest that could effectively support the success of OA/UC students. Whereas more states and communities are using CBE to help improve student outcomes, we still have more to learn about the most effective CBE elements for helping OA/UC students in particular. Fortunately, a growing number of states and communities are trying different policy and programmatic approaches, which will help inform and build the knowledge of the field.

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