

PERSONALIZED LEARNING POLICY PLAY #12: WAIVE OR ELIMINATE SEAT- TIME REQUIREMENTS TO ENABLE IMPLEMENTATION OF COMPETENCY- BASED LEARNING MODELS

CONTEXT

Most schools and states award students credit toward graduation or grade advancement based on completion of “seat time,” or actual hours spent in the classroom. This practice reflects an outdated assumption that students learn at the same pace and that the amount of time needed to complete a course should be standardized. In reality, students may not need the same amount of time: some students may be able to master content quickly, while others may need more time than standardized courses provide.

Rather than holding time constant and allowing learning outcomes to vary—as traditional models do—some schools are experimenting with new models that vary the time students spend in a course or grade so that all students can achieve proficiency. These models can be particularly helpful for “over-age and under-credited” students who are behind on earning credits toward a high school diploma and need access to accelerated learning opportunities in order to graduate within a reasonable time frame. They can also benefit advanced students who may be ready to tackle content above their current grade level. But traditional seat-time requirements may pose a barrier to these innovative models. In addition to general seat-time requirements, some states and districts have established policies—such as a mandate that all eighth graders take algebra—that require students to complete certain courses at certain times. These requirements are in direct conflict with personalized learning models. Seat-time requirements also pose a barrier to personalized learning models that call for instructional time outside of school. For instance, students in some blended learning programs may receive instruction using computers at home or at a library. Students who enroll in dual-credit programs or participate in project-based learning opportunities may also spend less time in a school setting.

PLAY IN ACTION

States can eliminate these barriers by offering seat-time waivers to districts and schools that seek to implement personalized learning opportunities. These waivers would allow schools to award credit based on content mastery rather than seat time. To receive a waiver, schools and districts would have to demonstrate that they have a rigorous and valid way to assess students' competency, as well as clear criteria for awarding credit.

Creating these waivers would allow more schools and districts to implement innovative personalized learning models. Colorado's Adams 50 district has developed a standards-based system in which students are grouped together according to skill level rather than age or grade. Students advance to the next academic level after demonstrating proficiency at their current level. Meanwhile, students in Lindsay Unified School District in California, while still grouped by grade level, are also grouped by content level and can progress to the next level before the end of a semester.

The majority of states give districts and schools some flexibility to award credit to students based on content mastery rather than seat time. As of 2013, 29 states allow districts to choose seat time or another measure to award credit, 10 states allow the use of other measures under certain circumstances, and one state had abolished seat-time requirements entirely.

Michigan, for example, allows districts to waive the minimum hours and days of pupil instruction if students participate in online or blended learning programs approved by the state. States that want to go beyond seat-time waivers can require districts to have multiple credit pathways, including ones that award credit based on content mastery. Under Ohio's Credit Flex program, districts must implement multiple pathways—such as online courses and internships—for high school students to earn credit.

In 2005, New Hampshire, a national leader in competency-based education, moved beyond waivers to become the first state to abolish seat-time requirements altogether. Instead, the law requires all districts to establish policies so that students earn credit by demonstrating mastery of required competencies at the course level. Vermont and Maine have also made progress by implementing graduation requirements based on student proficiency in certain content areas.

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

As states relax seat-time requirements, they must establish other quality-control mechanisms to ensure students are truly achieving competency before receiving credit for a subject. While seat-time requirements are a poor way of ensuring that students receive a quality education, they do provide protection against some potential abuses. To limit potential for abuse, states should either develop rigorous

statewide measures and indicators of student knowledge and content mastery, or require districts, schools, and providers to demonstrate that they have valid and rigorous mechanisms for assessing student competency.

States should also identify any financial barriers to implementing competency-based systems. Districts may have little incentive to establish these systems if they will receive less funding for advanced students who progress through high school requirements in fewer than four years, so secondary schools whose enrollment declines as a result of the progression of advanced students should not be penalized.

In addition, districts seeking to move away from seat-time requirements must be able to provide assurance to high school students that competency-based credit will be accepted by higher education institutions. States can address this concern by requiring public institutions of higher education to accept high school credits awarded by schools with state-approved seat-time waivers. States can also engage pre-K–12 and postsecondary stakeholders to create common standards for translating competency-based credits into Carnegie units, the time-based measure of academic credit commonly used by higher education institutions in the college admissions process. Regional advocacy organizations can play a role in increasing public knowledge and acceptance of credit received based on content mastery. For

example, the New England Secondary Schools Consortium advocates proficiency-based credit by asking colleges and universities in its five member states to sign a pledge endorsing competency-based education. To date, 55 colleges and universities have signed the pledge, which declares that applicants with competency-based credit or transcripts will not be disadvantaged in any way. This approach can ensure that students are able to use competency-based credits at private, as well as public, institutions.

LEGISLATION

Maine, Title 20-A Statute 4722-A (proficiency-based diploma)

Ohio, S.B. 311 (established the Ohio Core Curriculum and credit flexibility)

Vermont, S.B. 130 (flexible pathways to graduation)

Michigan, amendment to State Aid Act (seat-time waiver)

CONTACT FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Scott Benson, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation: scott.benson@gatesfoundation.org

Michael Horn, Christensen Institute: mhorn@christenseninstitute.org

RESEARCH AND RESOURCES

For examples of state and local efforts related to **flexible seat-time requirements**, see: <http://www.ed.gov/oii-news/competency-based-learning-or-personalized-learning>

A guide to **competency-based education** for state policymakers can be found at: http://www.competencyworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/inacol_cw_issuebrief_building_mastery_final.pdf

An article on **state policies related to seat time and content mastery** can be found at: <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/03/07/23biz-state.h31.html>

Learn about **Ohio's Credit Flex** program at: <http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/School-Choice/Credit-Flexibility-Plan>

The **National Governors Association** released a set of recommendations for state policy changes to implement a **competency-based system**. See: <http://www.nga.org/cms/home/nga-center-for-best-practices/center-publications/page-edu-publications/col2-content/main-content-list/state-strategies-for-awarding-cr.html>

For a discussion on the need for **higher education institutions** to accept competency-based diplomas, see: <http://mainedoenews.net/2013/11/13/colleges-commit-to-accepting-proficiency-based-diploma/>

View the list of colleges and universities that have signed the **New England Secondary Schools Consortium pledge** at: <http://newenglandssc.org/resources/endorsements>