



Postsecondary Support for Competency-Based High School Transcripts

Lessons from the Competency-Based Transcripts Postsecondary Convening

Washington, DC | May 29–30, 2014



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A Call to Action

In December 2013, while attending Achieve’s Annual State Leadership Team Meeting in Alexandria, VA, leaders from Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont issued a call to action to create a national movement for postsecondary leaders to signal their support for proficiency-based and competency-based high school diplomas and transcripts. Achieve has been working to support 12 states, including the five New England states, in advancing their policy and practice through the Competency-Based Pathways (CBP) State Partnership. In response to this call to action, Achieve partnered with The Learning Accelerator and the Center for Innovation in Education to plan an initial convening of leaders and stakeholders from K–12 and postsecondary education — a convening designed to build guidance and recommendations for what it would take for postsecondary education to signal its support. The conversation that took place on May 29–30, 2014, in Washington, DC, was a first step in building this movement.

By partnering with The Learning Accelerator and the Center for Innovation in Education, Achieve was able to bring the best and most current thinking to support the states’ call to action. The Learning Accelerator, as part of its mission to pave the way forward for districts in implementing blended learning, was already exploring the issue of postsecondary endorsement of competency-based high school transcripts. The Center for Innovation in Education at the University of Kentucky, as part of its work to support Innovation Lab Network states, was already convening K–12 and postsecondary leaders to discuss a range of cross-cutting issues, including transcripts, that are pertinent to the transition to competency-based education.

Momentum for CBP

Across the nation, schools and districts that are transitioning to competency- or proficiency-based approaches to learning have faced a common challenge: concern from parents that their children will be disadvantaged in the college admissions, placement or scholarship process if their transcripts do not follow the traditional format, including standard grade point averages and letter grades. New England states, among the pioneers in promoting competency- or proficiency-based approaches to learning, have been working together through the New England Secondary Schools Consortium (NESSC) to address this concern and provide evidence to parents that their children will not be disadvantaged when they transition to college. Through the Collegiate Endorsement of Proficiency-Based Learning process, NESSC states drafted endorsement language and secured signatories from all public colleges and

universities in Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont as well as several private colleges. While these endorsements have been very beneficial in easing parents’ concerns, districts and schools continue to face questions from parents whose children aim to attend college outside of New England or in private colleges. The five New England states, therefore, have strong interest in finding a way for public and private colleges and universities across the nation to indicate that competency- or proficiency-based transcripts will not disadvantage students in the admissions, placement or scholarship process. Other states outside of New England that are working to advance competency-based pathways, such as Colorado, Delaware, Kentucky, Michigan, Ohio and Oregon, share this interest.

Building the Foundation of Awareness and Understanding

The intent behind the convening was to have state leaders from K–12 and postsecondary education, as well as national leaders and experts on postsecondary education, provide guidance and recommendations about what would be needed for postsecondary education to signal its support for competency- or proficiency-based transcripts. For instance, participants would answer a number of questions such as:

- What information would postsecondary leaders need about CBP and transcripts?
- Who are the postsecondary leaders in systems or institutions that need to be engaged (e.g., admissions officers, registrars, provost or deans), and who would need to sign on to an endorsement?
- Who are the best people to be sharing information with postsecondary leaders for an endorsement?
- Should the endorsement language be neutral, expressing that students will not be disadvantaged if they have a competency- or proficiency-based transcript, or should it indicate a preference for competency- or proficiency-based transcripts and learning?
- Should the endorsement process scale out institution by institution, state by state and expand beyond New England to other regions, or is there a way to leverage existing national postsecondary groups to gain endorsements?

To begin the process of answering these questions, it was clear that the convening would need to raise awareness and understanding of competency- or proficiency-based learning among participants, clarify why high school transcripts may not follow traditional formats, and share what lessons have been learned through the NESSC Collegiate Endorsement process. To inform the agenda for the meeting, the partner organizations conducted interviews with postsecondary leaders familiar with the issues and the NESSC process, as well as K–12 leaders and educators who had been addressing the issues directly with parents and students. Based on information gleaned from the interviews, the organizations invited participants from a school district in Maine (Virgel Hammonds, superintendent, and Steve Levoie, principal, Richmond Middle/High School, Regional School Unit 2) to illuminate what proficiency-based learning and transcripts look like and their experiences communicating

with parents. Leaders from the Great Schools Partnership, which supports the NESSC (Mark Kostin, associate director, and J. Duke Albanese, senior policy advisor) were joined by a postsecondary leader who signed on to the endorsement and is transforming her own institution to proficiency-based learning (Linda Schott, president, University of Maine at Presque Isle) to share their lessons learned from the Collegiate Endorsement process.

Following these presentations, Scott Ellis and Jennifer Wolfe from The Learning Accelerator led the group in reflecting on what they had learned so they could begin to provide guidance and recommendations to inform the next steps in the process.

In addition to the invited presenters, leaders from K–12 and postsecondary education from 10 states as well as representatives from 11 national organizations and foundations participated and actively contributed to the conversation, bringing their own experiences and insights to bear on guidance and recommendations (see participant list below).

Key Points from the Discussions

There were several key lessons that presenters shared and findings that emerged from discussions:

- Postsecondary leaders in attendance agreed that their institutions review a wide variety of high school transcripts. They also agreed that competency- or proficiency-based transcripts do not present a concern and may be preferable given their increased transparency about what students know and are able to do.
- Postsecondary leaders find that it is helpful when high schools include school profiles with their transcripts to explain their school's program, the organization of course/standards content and the grading system. Great Schools Partnership has designed an exemplar school profile and transcript to assist schools in doing so.
- The process of seeking endorsements from postsecondary systems or institutions can be challenging as it is often unclear which leaders within a system or institution are the right ones to engage. To address this challenge, it is helpful to have champions who open doors to the right people in a system or institution who need to learn the information and sign on. Relationships within and across New England states were instrumental in the endorsement process, so as the scale grows it will be imperative to find ways to maximize existing relationships and networks.

- In securing endorsements, it is helpful for postsecondary leaders to see sample school profiles and transcripts and to hear directly from school district leaders or school principals.
- As postsecondary institutions themselves move toward competency-based approaches, there are opportunities to partner with K–12 education to build seamless competency-based pathways across the continuum, capitalizing on specific connection points such as building competency-based dual enrollment or teacher preparation programs.
- Administrators and counselors from school districts and high schools who participated in the discussion have developed close relationships with staff from postsecondary institutions in their regions who have then attended college fairs and other events to ease parents' concerns.
- In terms of informing a movement across states and regions, there is a tremendous need to raise awareness and understanding about the issue among postsecondary system and institution leaders. Sharing information at national conferences of postsecondary leaders was suggested as a promising next step. In addition, states requested that the partner organizations formally publish a synthesis of the meeting to help build and maintain momentum.

In addition to clear findings regarding postsecondary endorsement of competency- or proficiency-based transcripts, the conversations also revealed strong interest within states for leaders to work more closely together across K–12 and postsecondary to advance competency- or proficiency-based learning across the continuum and to address issues of teacher preparation and professional learning.

Participants

Presenters

Duke Albanese, *Great Schools Partnership*
Virgel Hammonds, *Regional School Unit Two, Maine*
Mark Kostin, *Great Schools Partnership*
Steve Lavoie, *Richmond Middle and Richmond High School, Maine*
Linda Schott, *University of Maine at Presque Isle*

State Leaders

Elliott Asp, *Colorado Department of Education*
José Aviles, *University of Delaware*
Chris Baldwin, *Michigan Center for Student Success*
Paula Barney, *Rhode Island Department of Education*
Theresa Bennett, *Delaware Department of Education*
Rashell Bowerman, *Michigan Department of Education*
Sue Cain, *Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education*
David Cook, *Kentucky Department of Education*
Nicole Dalton, *Oregon Department of Education*
Suzanne D'Annolfo, *University of Hartford, Connecticut*
Gregg Dionne, *Michigan Department of Education*
Rhonda Epper, *Colorado Department of Higher Education*
Steve Gratz, *Ohio Department of Education*
Rebecca Holmes, *Colorado Department of Education*
Paul Leather, *New Hampshire Department of Education*
Sharon Lee, *Rhode Island Department of Education*
Frank Novotny, *Adams State University, Colorado*
Cindy Parker, *Kentucky Department of Education*
Kathleen Pickering, *Colorado State University*
Misti Ruthven, *Colorado Department of Education*

June Sanford, *Connecticut State Department of Education*
Rachelle Tome, *Maine Department of Education*
Rachel Wiggins, *Rodel Foundation of Delaware*

National Organizations and Foundations

Julie Ajinkya, *Institute for Higher Education Policy*
Mariana Haynes, *Alliance for Excellent Education*
Cassius Johnson, *Carnegie Corporation of New York*
Sharmila Mann, *State Higher Education Executive Officers*
Tia McNair, *Association of American Colleges and Universities*
Kate Nielson, *National Governors Association*
Jesse O'Connell, *National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators*
Iris Palmer, *National Governors Association*
Adriana Martinez, *Council of Chief State School Officers*
Patricia Shea, *Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education*
Holly Zanville, *Lumina Foundation*

Achieve Staff and Partners

Anne Bowles, *Achieve*
Mike Cohen, *Achieve*
Cory Curl, *Achieve*
Alissa Peltzman, *Achieve*
Jennifer Taylor, *Achieve*
Scott Ellis, *The Learning Accelerator*
Jennifer Wolfe, *The Learning Accelerator*
Linda Pittenger, *Center for Innovation in Education*