



# **Giving Credit Where Credit is Due:**

**Report and recommendations of the High School Credit Flexibility Task Force**

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**Task force convened by:  
State Board of Education of the District of Columbia**

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## Introduction

The primary purpose of public education is to prepare all young people to reach their full potential as scholars, professionals, and engaged citizens in a democratic society. While the District of Columbia has made progress in improving educational outcomes along some measures, the opportunity chasm between poor and minority students and well-resourced white students inexcusably remains massive, illustrated most recently by the 2015 Partnership for Readiness for College and Career (PARCC) scores where the gap between these populations of students ranged between 44 and 58 percent.<sup>1</sup> The District needs improved ways to help each and every student master academic course standards that set her up for success in life. In today's competitive global economy, a high school diploma – and the core knowledge and skills it represents – often is a baseline requirement for success.

Washington DC remains one of the few jurisdictions in the country where students may earn high school credit solely through Carnegie units, which are defined as receiving a passing grade in a course where the student spent a minimum of 120 hours in class (or 150 hours for a lab course). Most DC high school course schedules are organized by Carnegie units. While such an approach ensures that each student is offered a standard minimum number of hours of course content, in some circumstances, the Carnegie unit may present an obstacle to learning, such as when:

- Students need to more time to understand course material and/or catch up and are advanced to new topics before they are ready;
- Students gain knowledge outside of the classroom that leads to mastery of course content standards or master the standards quickly within class time, but are required to sit through class for 120 hours to receive credit;
- Subjects traditionally taught in separate courses could be delivered more effectively as one course in less time because of the interconnectivity of the subjects' content.

The DC State Board of Education approves high school graduation requirements for DC students. As such, it convened a cross-city task force of 25 representatives<sup>2</sup> from the education

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<sup>1</sup>OSSE report on PARCC, grades 3-8

[http://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/publication/attachments/OSSE%20PARCC%203-8%20ReleasePresentation\\_finalv14.pdf](http://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/publication/attachments/OSSE%20PARCC%203-8%20ReleasePresentation_finalv14.pdf) and OSSE report on PARCC, high school

<http://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/publication/attachments/2015%20District%20of%20Columbia%20PARCC%20High%20School%20Results.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> High School Credit Flexibility Task force Members: Brian Contreras (Student Representative; State Board of Education); Rick Cruz (Board Member; Public Charter School Board); Elizabeth Davis (President; Washington Teacher's Union); Naomi DeVeaux (Deputy Director; Public Charter School Board); Laura Fuchs (Social Studies Teacher; Woodson High School); Cara Fuller (Principal; Ballou STAY High School); Morgan Hall (Deputy Chief of Assessment; DC Public Schools); Jessie Harteis (Deputy Chief of Staff; Office of State Superintendent of Education); Cosby Hunt (Social Studies Manager; Center for Inspired Teaching); Tierra Jolly (Ward 8 Representative; State Board of Education); Nicole Hanrahan (Chief Strategy Officer; Latin American Youth Center); Mary Lord (At Large Representative; State Board of Education); Taneka Miller (Policy Advisor; Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education); Elizabeth Morse (Deputy Assistant Superintendent for Policy, Planning & Charter Support; Office of the State Superintendent for Education); Tiffany Oates (Policy Attorney; Office of State Superintendent of Education); Colleen Paletta (Vice President of Workforce Development; Goodwill of Greater Washington and Goodwill Excel Center Public Charter School); Thomas Penny (General Manager; Courtyard by Marriott Convention Center); Richard Pohlman (Executive Director; Thurgood Marshall Academy); Javaris Powell (Assistant Principal; Columbia Heights Education Campus); Cathy Reilly (Executive Director; Senior High Alliance of Parents, Principals and Educators); John Rice (Director of Blended Learning; DC Public Schools); C. Michael Shaffer (Policy Director; Committee on Education, Council of the District of Columbia); David Tansey (Math Teacher; Dunbar High School); Heather Wathington (Chief Executive Officer; Maya Angelou Schools and See Forever Foundation); Ruth

and workforce sectors from August 2015 to December 2015 to consider whether and how to supplement the Carnegie unit with additional means for DC students to earn high school credit. The following report outlines the recommendations and findings of the task force.

## Overview of recommendations

Various opinions were expressed by task force members over the course of the four months via meeting and online input to documents with regard to how credit flexibility could move the city closer to the vision the group established that “all DC students graduate demonstrating the agency, skills and knowledge to thrive as active citizens in a global economy and democracy.” **The majority of the group agreed that creating alternative pathways to earning credit toward a high school diploma represented an important first step toward recognizing that not all students learn at the same pace nor demonstrate understanding of content best in a traditional classroom setting for the minimum amount of time for a credit-bearing course, as specified by the 120-hour Carnegie Unit.**

A minority of the group expressed doubt that adding pathways beyond the Carnegie unit would improve educational outcomes for the majority of District of Columbia students and worried that the focus on new approaches could potentially divert attention away from the interventions that would make a difference. They expressed concern that credit flexibility might be used to lower expectations for students, inflate graduation rates, and narrow students’ exposure to content. Still, the minority of the group also expressed openness to considering the positive difference alternatives could create.

The task force agreed to three recommendations for earning high school credit and one recommendation associated with course timing.

1. **Create a waiver process** for schools wishing to pursue competency-based learning (CBL)
2. Allow students to receive **credit for demonstrated prior knowledge** in world language and mathematics
3. **Maintain Carnegie units** as the default means for earning credit where neither of the two above conditions apply
4. In consistency with our recommendation for student self-paced learning associated with competency-based learning, **remove the requirement that students enroll in Algebra I by 9<sup>th</sup> grade**

The following summarizes the group’s recommendations and rationale in greater detail, with minority opinion noted where applicable. Supplemental discussions of the task force, together with remaining questions from the group, follow this executive summary in the Discussion section.

## Recommendations

The task force reached consensus on four elements for high school diploma graduation requirements. Following each recommendation, the report includes the rationale for adopting this recommendation and the perspective of the minority opinion, which, in all cases, reflects less than 25 percent of the group.

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Wattenberg (Ward 3 Representative; State Board of Education); Karen Williams (Ward 7 Representative; State Board of Education); Laura Wilson Phelan (Task Force Chair and Ward 1 Representative; State Board of Education)

### **Recommendation 1: Create a waiver process for schools wishing to pursue competency-based learning (CBL)**

The Office of the State Superintendent for Education (OSSE) should establish a rigorous application and evaluation process, including relevant rubrics, for a waiver to Carnegie units to which schools may apply to their authorizing body -- either DC Public Schools (DCPS) or Public Charter School Board (PCSB). In the waiver, educational institutions must describe for which course or series of courses the waiver applies, the method for determining competency within those courses, and the level of performance or achievement that will constitute mastery of state standards for each course or series of courses that will not be using Carnegie units. DCPS and PCSB shall submit evidence of the progress and quality of implementation on each waiver to OSSE annually. This evidence shall be posted publicly and be reported annually to the State Board of Education (SBOE).

#### *Rationale*

When implemented in its true form, CBL offers a promising pathway for student achievement and life outcomes for the following reasons:

- Students pace their own learning, and move on only after mastering the competency; this could enable students to feel more engaged, motivated and accomplished in their learning and allow them to “right-size” the time they spend on content
- Students own their learning – they must direct their pace and demonstrate mastery, leading them to develop important life skills that they will need after high school
- Teachers may offer unique courses that combine topics usually found in separate courses, and tailor the exposure to content according to the standards of those courses vs. a fixed amount of time

Task force members expressed support for appropriate review of the progress and implementation of waivers, and expect that OSSE will analyze, evaluate and transparently share with the public the information it collects from DCPS and PCSB to assess whether CBL is improving outcomes for students.

#### *Minority opinion*

The problems with the Carnegie unit are not adequately identified and may not be the reason many of our students are failing. Many students who face difficulty with instructional time-based courses need additional support and would need that even if the course was competency-based. Moving away from a designated minimum time requirement in courses could lead to exposing students to *less* content than they are currently receiving. As well, there is a chance the bar for proving “mastery” of a concept will be set too low, leading to a “race to the bottom” and lead high school staff, who are under great pressure to increase graduation rates, to pass along students who have not mastered academic standards.

Sharing the opposite view from others in the minority opinion, some members expressed the desire for more flexibility and lower barriers to entry than a waiver process would provide. They expressed that educational institutions should be trusted to set up their own systems for awarding credit, so long as credit was robustly defined.

## **Recommendation 2: Allow students to receive credit for demonstrated prior knowledge in world language and mathematics**

Students may receive credit for prior knowledge in world language and mathematics provided that they pass a state-approved exam that “meets or exceeds career and college readiness standards.”

### *Rationale*

Students who have prior knowledge in certain subjects should not have to sit through the course to receive credit for their knowledge, and DC schools should have a state-level standardized way of assessing that knowledge and awarding credit. The courses for which this should apply are those where prior mastery of the course’s academic standards means the student would gain little from sitting through the course and where thoroughly vetted assessments exist for proving mastery. The task force recommends that two subjects fall under this category – math and world language. OSSE would need to establish which exams are approved for credit and establish a process for administering the exams so that all students across the city benefit equally from this provision.

### *Minority opinion*

Reducing course knowledge to a single exam would limit students’ exposure to content and the social benefits of learning in a class. Further, allowing students to test-out of courses risks sending the signal that time spent in class is not valuable if students are allowed to receive credit with only an exam. Given that at-risk, poor and minority students traditionally perform lower than their affluent peers on standardized tests, opportunities should be provided to take standardized assessments beyond only written tests. Given the current lack of standardization across DC schools for what level of mastery of content equals passing in each course, the content of exams used for passing out of courses needs to be highly scrutinized. As well, for new and small schools, allowing students to test out of subjects ordinarily provided by cohort (e.g. where all 9<sup>th</sup> graders take Algebra I) may force the school to provide more advanced courses that it is not resourced to offer.

Some task force members who supported the idea of rewarding prior knowledge wanted to extend this provision to include the opportunity for students to test out of all subjects given that colleges award students credit for passing Advanced Placement exams in many subjects.

## **Recommendation 3: Maintain Carnegie units as the default means for earning high school credit where neither of the two above conditions apply**

Except in cases outlined by recommendations one and two above, educational institutions shall continue to award credit based on a student receiving a passing grade in a course through the Carnegie unit, which is 120 hours of instructional time (150 hours for lab-based courses).

### *Rationale*

Given DC’s high school educational system is structured according to Carnegie units, and given the volume of content and administrative work associated with implementing alternatives to the Carnegie unit, for the time being, the system should continue to default to this means of operating.

### *Minority opinion*

Some members of the task force supported the replacement of the Carnegie unit with the term “credit.” They promoted complete flexibility for schools to set up their own systems for awarding credit, so long as credit was clearly defined.

#### **Recommendation 4: Remove the requirement that students enroll in Algebra I by grade 9**

Remove the language from graduation requirements that all students enroll in Algebra I by 9<sup>th</sup> grade.

##### *Rationale*

The content and standards of Algebra I represent a critical foundation to understanding all math courses that follow. Requiring students to enroll in Algebra I before they have mastered the pre-requisite academic standards is counterproductive. DC is one of only three states that currently requires Algebra I to be taken at a specific grade level in high school.<sup>3</sup> This recommendation allows the timing of the decision to enroll in Algebra I to be based on data indicating student readiness; it does not remove Algebra I as a high school graduation requirement. The recommendation maintains Algebra I as the minimum math course for which students are permitted to earn high school credit.

##### *Minority opinion*

While largely supportive of the idea that enrolling in Algebra I should not be time-based, but rather, in keeping with later recommendations of the task force that learning be sequenced according to a student's readiness as based on mastery of pre-requisite standards, some members expressed concern that the task force had insufficient research to ensure against possible unintended consequences of eliminating the requirement that students enroll in Algebra I by 9<sup>th</sup> grade.

#### **Discussion**

While the above recommendations of the task force represent the areas of consensus with regard to regulation, each of the pathways to earning credit, as well as related topics, garnered significant discussion. The task force shares the content of these discussions with the intent of advising implementation of the competency-based waiver and clarifying and improving the consistency and quality of how credit is awarded across DC schools.

#### **Competency-based waiver**

Several elements of the competency-based waiver recommendation were discussed in depth. The following themes emerged.

#### Schools with high percentages of at-risk, poor and minority students will need additional support to implement CBL in ways that benefit all students

The task force worked ardently to understand the research and evaluation associated with mastery or competency-based pathways to earning credit. They found that specialty and alternative schools that are focused on over-aged and under-credited students are reporting better career outcomes with CBL approaches, although research-based evaluations linking improved student outcomes to CBL is both sparse and inconclusive.<sup>4</sup> The few studies that exist

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<sup>3</sup> Minnesota requires algebra I by 8<sup>th</sup> grade. West Virginia requires algebra I by 10<sup>th</sup> grade, and explicitly explains that because algebra I is a cornerstone course, explaining that students should not be rushed through such a cornerstone course, but rather should master the concepts within. See

<https://wvde.state.wv.us/teach21/documents/RecommendingHighSchoolMathematicsCourseSequences-SchoolCounselors.ppt> Arizona requires a sequence of math concepts be taken "beginning in 9<sup>th</sup> grade," some of which appear to include pre-algebra, but it is difficult to tell based on the way the standards are written. An outline of state requirements may be found at <http://mb2.ecs.org/reports/Report.aspx?id=735>. Accessed December 5, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Steele, Jennifer, et al. "Competency-Based Education in Three Pilot Programs: Examining Implementation and Outcomes" RAND Corporation. [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR700/RR732/RAND\\_RR732.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR700/RR732/RAND_RR732.pdf), p. xvi.

on CBL are not longitudinal, and those that describe a CBL approach in places with student demographics similar to those of DC (high levels of at-risk, poor and minority students) did not report out consistently strong success. For example, while the CBL model emphasizes prompt assessment of and attention to mastery gaps, possibly limiting social promotion that allows some students to end up in high school far behind grade-level, in districts similar to DC where elements of CBL were implemented, students who were behind grade-level in some cases fell further behind students in Carnegie unit-based courses.<sup>5</sup> Among other recommendations, these studies point out that for at-risk students to succeed in CBL courses, teachers must be expert in differentiated instruction, as well as provide individualized counseling and support to students.<sup>6</sup>

#### Competency-based learning courses best applied with “whole school” or “whole subject” approach

Research notes that building reliable and valid competency systems requires mapped “learning progressions” that outline how students should progress through a course along levels of comprehension.<sup>7</sup> Because those pathways may cross over traditional course groupings, if only one course in a school is using CBL, students may not be able to move on to the next competency (if it is “housed” in a separate course) at his/her own pace. Because CBL requires that students progress at their own pace, a school would have to have a system in place for students to either stay in or move on from a particular class or subject upon mastery, depending on his/her individual pace. This is an important consideration for OSSE in developing the waiver process and rubric. Likewise, CBL requires an aligned way of assessing mastery, beyond just exams; so schools would need to create competencies and associated assessment tools. It is unlikely that one teacher would have the resources to do this alone. More likely, groups of teachers, supported by a cross-school institution, such as OSSE, the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education or RaiseDC, might develop one or more collections of courses that could be adapted and used by individual schools, as has been done in other districts that have seriously implemented CBL.<sup>8</sup> One educator on the task force expressed concern that creating such rubrics would “over standardize” the approach to teaching, thereby limiting a teacher’s ability to be creative.

#### For consistent implementation of CBL and standardization of student outcomes across courses in the city “mastery” must be defined

The task force discussed the need to standardize what is considered “mastery” of course standards across the city. A passing grade in one school does not equal a passing grade in another school. Schools lack guidance about how to establish a common base level of “mastery.”

#### A pilot could address equity of access to competency-based learning and the need to define “mastery”

Given the barriers to entry in establishing CBL, such those described above, the task force discussed that it was unlikely that schools serving the most at-risk, poor and minority students would feel they had the resources to implement CBL well, even though the case could be made that the students in those schools would benefit most from CBL. This raised an important equity

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, xvii, 65.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.49.

<sup>7</sup> Patrick, Susan and Chris Sturgis. (2013). “Necessary for Success: Building Mastery of World-Class Skills”. [http://www.competencyworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/inacol\\_cw\\_issuebrief\\_building\\_mastery\\_final.pdf](http://www.competencyworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/inacol_cw_issuebrief_building_mastery_final.pdf), p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> Scheopner Torres, Aubrey, et al. (2015). “Competency-Based Learning: Definitions, Policies, and Implementation” Regional Educational Lab at EDC. <http://www.relnei.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/4.1.5.3-NCCRA-CBL.pdf>, p.16.

concern for us, as our common vision was to create pathways that would benefit all learners. We believe that education leadership DC must lower the barriers to entry for under-resourced schools to participate in CBL, such as through a well-planned and resourced pilot that would include a diverse set of high schools across the city.

Such a pilot could create the optimal circumstances for building foundational tools for CBL to scale effectively across many schools, in addition to establishing a common way of defining “mastery” of course content standards. For example, Algebra I could be established as a CBL course for all schools with resources developed to: (1) define Algebra I competencies aligned to state standards; (2) define mastery of the competencies together with the associated rubric for assessing mastery; and (3) support teachers in implementing the course and assessments with relevant materials and coaching. Once the pilot is evaluated and approaches improved, the resources and training created by the pilot could be made more broadly available.

#### Administration of standardized assessments needs reconsideration

CBL and alternative credit pathways require a rethinking of current accountability structures. For example, currently, students must take the algebra and geometry PARCC tests the spring they enroll in those courses. In a competency model, students would wait until they mastered the academic standards assessed by the test before taking it. Administering state tests on varied timelines could create perverse incentives for schools and make it difficult to compare school outcomes. OSSE will need to address this promptly for schools to feel safe trying CBL or other alternative credit pathways.

#### Evaluation of implementation and outcomes of course waivers and pilots should be built into the policy implementation process

As indicated in the recommendations section, the task force expressed support for capturing, sharing, reflecting upon and evolving policy and practice for all of the changes included in its recommendations. While DC would be following other jurisdictions in allowing for multiple pathways toward earning high school credit, the task force learned that few districts or states have captured and/or shared what they have learned from initiating flexible pathways to credit. As in any serious policy implementation, it is imperative to study and transparently share the outcomes for students who took competency-based courses and received credit from passing exams. Annual collection of evidence of implementation quality should be aggregated in a summative report no later than three years after initial implementation of CBL.

#### **Additional pathways to earning credit**

##### Schools award partial and transfer credits inconsistently across the district and could benefit from guidance

The task force uncovered significant confusion related to what is permitted and practiced across the city related to the awarding of partial credit and transfer credit, including for courses taken in middle school, such as algebra and world language. The task force agreed that awarding partial credit for mastery of course standards could represent an opportunity for students, especially mobile and at-risk students, to earn credit in both CBL and Carnegie unit courses for what they have learned. Partial credits could also represent an opportunity to break up year-long courses into smaller elements that students could pass at their own pace (related to competency-based learning). However, the task force did not feel its membership was best-positioned to work out details related to how partial credit for courses could or should be designed. Instead, those with intimate knowledge of credit accumulation, such as registrars and course content experts, should inform the creation of such guidance, including answers to questions such as:



- Would all schools need to adopt a specific sequencing of course material so that transferring students benefit from a logical flow between partial credits?
  - If so, how could this fit in with CBL, which requires that students progress at their own pace?
  - What type of coherence is important to consider across the city?
- What subset of credit makes sense? 0.5? 0.25? In which contexts?
- How would partial credit fit in with administration of PARCC?

Of note, a minority of members felt that it was not necessary to provide guidance on partial credits, as the law is silent on this topic and should remain so.

Schools vary in awarding credit based through credit recovery.

The task force discussed that credit recovery is applied inconsistently in schools across the city. Students would benefit from written guidance that would apply to all educational institutions, with regulatory adjustments where necessary.

### Conclusion

The High School Credit Flexibility Task Force discussed a number of important issues through the course of its meetings as related to its vision: **All District of Columbia students graduate demonstrating the agency, skills, and knowledge to thrive as active citizens in a global economy and democracy.** The diverse and deep education experience brought by the 25 task force members led to energized discussion about the challenges and possible solutions associated with meeting all students’ needs in the District of Columbia so that they may live fulfilling and prosperous lives. While **the majority of the group agreed that creating alternative pathways to earning credit toward a high school diploma represented an important step toward achieving this vision,** all agreed that there is much more to be done. The recommendations and discussion of this task force call for thoughtful immediate action and future consideration of additional pathways for earning high school credit.