

Mastery-Based Crediting Handbook 2.0: An Implementation Guide for School Districts

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Introduction

This handbook is designed to serve as a resource for school districts developing and implementing policies and procedures for establishing mastery-based crediting (MBC) opportunities for students in accordance with Washington State law. This guide is targeted towards school and district educators who are interested in implementing or expanding opportunities for mastery-based crediting in their district; both as an innovative way of awarding credit, and as a way of ensuring that students have the opportunity to earn credit where they are able to demonstrate mastery of content. For mastery-based crediting to be implemented well, educators across the district, including classroom teachers, school and district administrators, and school board members, should have some understanding of mastery-based learning and mastery-based crediting.

Information from the Washington State Board of Education’s (SBE’s) annual Basic Education Compliance Survey (reported in the Mastery-based Work Group 2021 Report) indicates that the

number of districts using mastery-based crediting has increased over the past few years, perhaps in response to new graduation requirements and the new model policies and procedures in place for mastery-based crediting. The subjects most commonly credited through mastery-based policies are world languages, math, and English.

SBE and the Washington State School Directors' Association (WSSDA) jointly developed guidance (released April 2020, updated in June 2021) on the use of WSSDA subject specific model policies for mastery/competency credit in English Language Arts, Math, Science, Social Studies, Art, and Health and Fitness. This Handbook expands on the guidance document to provide more context and details for implementing mastery-based crediting and expanding mastery-based crediting opportunities.

Definition of Terms

It is important to establish a common understanding of the term "mastery-based learning" as it is used in this handbook. "Mastery-based learning" or "mastery-based education" is characterized by the strategies listed in the box below. Ideally, some or all of these strategies should be incorporated into every student learning experience. In general, "competency-based learning" is synonymous with "mastery-based learning." This guidance will generally use the term mastery, to align with Washington State's definition in legislation ([E2SHB 1599](#), Sec. 301), unless referring to places where another term is used.

Washington's definition of mastery-based learning:

- Students advance upon demonstration of mastery.
- Competencies include explicit, measurable, transferable learning objectives that empower students.
- Assessments are meaningful and a positive learning experience for students.
- Students receive rapid, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs.
- Learning outcomes emphasize competencies that include the application and creation of knowledge along with the development of important skills and dispositions.

([E2SHB 1599](#), Chapter 252, Laws of 2019, Section 301, and [WAC 180-51-051](#))

While "mastery-based learning" encompasses strategies that are characteristic of good instruction and might be employed throughout K-12 education, "mastery-based crediting" is a specific high school crediting opportunity. Mastery-based crediting is an option for students to earn high school credit for performance on district-specified assessments that are clearly aligned to learning standards. The assessments may be state or national standardized tests or may be district-specified assessments. Such assessments do not have to be standardized tests and could

include performance assessments such as a portfolio of student work or a hands-on demonstration of skills and knowledge. In addition, mastery-based credit may be awarded when students demonstrate their mastery of learning standards in ways that are not directly associated with specific assessments. For example, students may be awarded mastery-based credit for a lower-level course when they successfully complete a higher-level course in a sequence. (In this case, the district must have a policy in place that permits the awarding of such credit, and, working with their content experts, identifies sequences of courses that allow credit to be awarded in this way.)

Through mastery-based crediting, students may be awarded credit for a variety of learning experiences that could take place in school settings or could take place largely outside of traditional classroom instruction. These could include Alternative Learning Experiences (ALE), Work-based Learning, and equivalency courses of study (Table 1 summarizes different types of credit-earning opportunities).

The Importance of Mastery-based Learning

Washington State has the aspiration that all students who graduate from high school will be ready for whatever post-secondary pathway they wish to pursue. State statute specifies the following:

“The purpose of a high school diploma is to declare that a student is ready for success in postsecondary education, gainful employment, and citizenship, and is equipped with the skills to be a lifelong learner.” ([RCW 28A.230.090](#).)

To help ensure that student learning is broad and deep enough to support these aspirations, the state has adopted learning standards and the 24-credit graduation requirements. In addition, the [Mastery-based Learning Work Group](#) developed the Washington Profile of a Graduate.

Washington State | Profile of a Graduate



As supports are implemented to help all students develop the skills and knowledge of the Profile of a Graduate, mastery-based crediting may become a more important and perhaps a more commonly utilized option for students.

A core aspect of mastery-based learning is that students acquire knowledge and skills, with the support of teachers, at their own pace unrelated to seat time. This de-linkage of credit acquisition to classroom time makes mastery-based crediting an attractive option for individualizing student learning. Mastery-based learning may also be an important tool in keeping students on track to becoming career and college ready, as well as on track to graduate while maintaining career- and college-ready standards. In the face of the disruptions in learning experienced by many students either due to challenges in individual student's lives, or widespread challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, mastery-based learning may also help recover lost learning or recognize learning acquired outside of a traditional classroom.

Mastery-based learning is a way to incorporate more culturally responsive learning. Students are able to take ownership of their own education and collaborate with educators to create a rich educational experience that is more flexible, individualized, and meaningful. It provides an opportunity for authentic, deeper learning by students that will build and reinforce critical skills, build mastery of learning standards, and recognize each student's contribution to their own education and their educational community. At its best, mastery-based learning fosters the skills and dispositions important for success in college, career, and citizenship.

Implementing Mastery-based Crediting (MBC) Opportunities

State Regulations Defining High School Credit and Mastery-based Credit

The state defines “high school credit” in connection to learning standards ([WAC 180-51-050](#)). A student can earn high school credit either by successful completion of courses taught to the state learning standards or through a student’s satisfactory demonstration of mastery/competency, as defined in written district policy, of the state’s learning standards. If no state learning standards exist for a subject area, districts may adopt local learning standards, and students may earn credit through courses or mastery-based crediting of the local learning standards.

The state also articulates procedures for granting mastery-based credit ([WAC 180-51-051](#)). Students may demonstrate mastery of learning standards and be awarded credit based on:

- State assessments in math, English, and science,
- Nationally recognized assessments,
- Locally created assessments, which could include a written or oral test, a student report, a portfolio of student work, a student presentation or oral defense of student work, or a hands-on demonstration by the student,
- Equivalency course of study—learning experiences outside of school that align to state learning standards, in accordance with WAC [392-410-300](#), or
- Completion of the next highest-level course in a sequence of courses that includes a natural progression of the state learning standards from the previous course.

Awarding mastery-based credit does not permit the awarding of credit for the same learning twice. For example, awarding credit for the math Smarter Balanced Assessment (SBA) may be considered for students who were not successful in earning credit in their math course (Algebra 1 or Integrated Math I). However, students should *not* be awarded credit for meeting standard on the math SBA *and* be awarded credit in a course for the same math learning standards.

Model Policies and Procedures for Mastery-based Credit (MBC)

As directed in rules ([WAC 180-51-051](#)), districts must adopt a written district policy to award mastery-based credit. The policy must identify the subjects and courses for which mastery-based credit (MBC) is available and the method or methods through which students may demonstrate mastery. The policy must also include a provision that details how the district will ensure cultural responsiveness and equity in awarding of mastery-based credit. Districts must maintain disaggregated student data and periodically review which subgroups of students are receiving mastery-based credit. (WSSDA Model Policies include an annual review of student information.) If the district finds disproportionality among student groups receiving mastery-based credit, the district should be prepared to take appropriate actions to ensure equitable access to mastery-based crediting opportunities.

WSSDA Model Policy No. 2409: Credit for Mastery/Proficiency was available for districts to adopt since 2010. It was designed for mastery/proficiency credit in world languages; however, a district could expand the policy to multiple subjects. More recently, WSSDA created additional [model policies](#) in specific subject areas.

In establishing procedures for implementing mastery-based credit, some key questions to consider are:

- Are students equitably offered the opportunity to earn mastery-based credit?
- How transparent is the process and how will it be communicated to students and parents?
- How will the school or district track and monitor the progress of students engaged in earning mastery-based credit?
- What supports are available to students and which personnel will provide these supports?
- Who will monitor student progress and direct students to supports when needed?
- How will the credit be transcribed? What graduation requirements and College Academic Distribution Requirements (CADR), if any, will it meet?

Demonstration of Mastery/Proficiency

Accurate, credible, useful, and meaningful student assessment information is essential to mastery-based crediting. Assessment addresses the equity risk in a mastery-based system by allowing students to demonstrate their learning and by holding the system accountable for providing the individualized learning necessary for successful mastery-based crediting.

Assessments that support mastery-based learning do the following:

- Allow students to demonstrate their learning at their own point of readiness,
- Contribute to student learning by encouraging students to apply and extend their knowledge,
- Require students to authentically demonstrate their learning, and
- Where possible, provide flexibility in how students demonstrate their learning (e.g., through a presentation, research paper, video, etc.)

Student demonstration of mastery/proficiency of the state's learning standards need not be limited to standardized assessment results. As mentioned above, authentic assessments used in mastery-based crediting may include student presentations, student portfolios, hands-on demonstrations of student skills and knowledge, and other methods that are locally created. This section includes descriptions and information about the use of some common methods for demonstration of mastery used for mastery-based crediting.

Critical questions concerning assessment and mastery-based credit are:

- What is “mastery” for a particular credit offering? For example, what level of mastery must be demonstrated over the learning standards—80%? More or less?
- What are the best assessment vehicles through which students can demonstrate their skills and knowledge?
 - Assessments for mastery credit need not be limited to standardized tests.
 - Interim as well as summative assessments may be an important part of the assessment system for mastery-based credit.

State Assessments

Some districts already have a policy for providing mastery-based credit for students who have met standard on the state assessment but have not been successful in their English Language Arts or mathematics course. For instance, if a student meets standard on the high school Smarter Balanced mathematics assessment but had failed their Algebra 1 or Integrated Math 1 course, the student could be awarded mastery credit based on their Smarter Balanced Assessment score. Districts that have this policy typically award .5 to a full credit for meeting the standard in math.

Next Highest-Level Course

Districts can also choose to include a provision in their policy for awarding students mastery-based credit for courses they were previously unsuccessful in after they have successfully completed the next higher-level course. One example might be a student who passes Algebra II but had failed Algebra I. After the student completes Algebra II, they could then be awarded mastery-based credit for their Algebra I course.

Districts should use the state learning standards as their guide when making decisions regarding what courses should qualify for retroactive mastery credit based on successful completion of the next higher-level course. If the next higher-level course includes a continuation/building upon the state learning standards from the previous course, then mastery credit for the previous course is both appropriate and encouraged. Districts should involve content experts in determining which courses are eligible for next higher-level mastery-based credit.

If the next higher-level course is *not* a continuation/building upon state learning standards from the previous course, then awarding mastery credit is *not* appropriate. For example, if English 9 is based upon composition, whereas English 10 is based upon literature, these courses may not have a natural progression of study, as described in SBE rule ([WAC 180-51-051](#)), and it would not be appropriate to add a mastery-based credit for English 9. A district’s policy and procedures should give guidelines to make such assessments. Districts that are moving forward with mastery-based credit should create procedures for recognizing and grouping courses together to create a natural progression. (For instance, see [Highline School District’s backfill policy: 2409 P3](#).) This also ensures that students are mastering all necessary concepts and skills in the subject area for which the student is being awarded credit. The district’s content experts should be able to make these connections to ensure credits are being applied accurately.

Nationally and Locally Recognized Tests

Some subjects have nationally recognized assessments aligned with state learning standards. Such assessments are available for many world languages. Districts that have adopted a policy that allows students to earn the [Washington State Seal of Biliteracy](#) (the “Seal”) should be awarding mastery-based credit to students passing tests to earn the Seal. The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) has identified [approved providers](#) of world language assessments and identified the number of credits that should be awarded to students who score at a particular proficiency level. In addition, all Tribal Languages are eligible for mastery-based credits and the Seal. The Tribes determine the type of assessment and proficiency level for the student and language.

State statute requires that for students who are in or released from an institutional education facility, school districts must provide students with access to world language proficiency tests, American Sign Language (ASL) proficiency tests, and General Education Development (GED) tests (RCW 28A.320.192). School districts must award at least one high school credit to students upon meeting the standard established by the SBE on a world language or ASL proficiency test or a GED test. The statute states that additional credits may be awarded by the district if a student has completed a course or courses of study to prepare for the test, and if the school district has a local policy for awarding mastery-based credit on state or local assessments, the school district must apply this policy to students in or released from an institutional education facility.

Some districts have policies that allow students to challenge courses. Students may earn credit for courses by successfully passing a summative exam in the course. If the exam is created locally, this would be an example of a locally recognized test providing the basis for awarding mastery-based credit.

Credit awarded for nationally or locally recognized assessments may be noted on a student’s transcript using an “L” or an “N” course designation. See the section on Transcription, below.

Funding

The funding available for support of credit for mastery-based learning depends on the type of credit-earning opportunity being offered (see Table 1). All learning that is claimed for general apportionment and that takes place largely outside of a school or a school schedule is likely to be considered ALE. An ALE course:

- Is delivered partly or fully outside of a regular classroom or schedule,
- Is supervised, monitored, assessed, evaluated and documented by a certificated teacher employed or under contract by the district, and
- Is provided in accordance with a written student learning plan.

If the credit-earning opportunity takes place largely outside of school, but is not claimed for state apportionment, such as for a mastery-based crediting opportunity or an equivalency

course of study opportunity, then the district must decide how to address associated costs. The cost could be covered by local or federal funds (subject to applicable federal requirements), or the cost could be covered by the student.

Transcription

Mastery/Competency-based Credit Assessment Course Designation

The standard transcript ([Chapter 392-415 WAC](#)) allows for course designation for mastery-based credits based on the type of assessment used for demonstration of mastery. The designation identifies whether it is a Local Competency Test ("L") or a National Competency Test ("N"). The OSPI Transcript FAQ defines each type of test ([HS Transcript FAQ 2020-21 School Year Special Edition 8.0](#)):

99. What is the Local Competency Test designation?

Answer: Use this designation when a student takes a Local Competency Test in PK-12 schools in lieu of taking the actual class and passes via the score of that test. A Local Competency Test is a test only used in Washington State (i.e., with a local teacher).

Courses designated as a Local Competency Test cannot also be Running Start. Running Start students take actual courses and not competency based assessments.

Courses that are listed as Local Competency Test (L) cannot also be any of the following types of courses because of proprietary rights, funding, and other participation requirements: • Advanced Placement (A) • Cambridge International (K) • College in the High School (C) • Honors (H) • International Baccalaureate (I) • National Competency Test (N) • Running Start (R) • CTE Dual Credit (Tech Prep) (T)

100. What is the National Competency Test designation?

Answer: Use this designation when a student takes a National Competency Test in PK-12 schools in lieu of taking the actual class and passes via the score of that test. A National Competency Test is a test that is used in Washington State and in one or more other states (i.e., STAMP, ACTFL OPI, OPIc, and WPT and LinguaFolio Collection of Evidence, or SLPI for ASL).

Courses designated as a National Competency Test cannot also be Running Start. Running Start students take actual courses and not competency based assessments.

Courses that are listed as National Competency Test (N) cannot also be any of the following types of courses because of proprietary rights, funding, and other participation requirements: • Advanced Placement (A) • Cambridge International (K) • College in the High School (C) • Honors (H) • International Baccalaureate (I) • Local Competency Test (L) • Running Start (R) • CTE Dual Credit (Tech Prep) (T)

Grades for Mastery-based Credit

[WAC 392-415-050](#) specifies that the grade for a competency/mastery-based credit may either be a locally determined grade, or a “pass,” “fail,” or “no pass.” District policies should specify the type of grade awarded for each mastery-based crediting opportunity available in the district.

College and university admissions may treat a course with a “pass” grade differently than a course with a letter grade. If the mastery credit being earned is for a course that is a college academic distribution requirement ([CADR](#)), a letter grade may be preferable to a “pass” grade. CADRs are designated with a “B” course designation code on the high school transcript.

Credit for Passing a Higher-Level Course in a Sequence

When students are awarded mastery-based credit, the best practice is not to change previously transcribed records but to create a new record. For example, if a district has an appropriate mastery-based crediting policy and has determined that passing Algebra II demonstrates mastery of Algebra I learning standards, and a student failed Algebra I but successfully completed Algebra II, the student is eligible for earning credit in Algebra I. Rather than changing the previously recorded “fail” for Algebra I, it would be preferable to represent the student attempting Algebra I again and earning credit successfully, in addition to earning credit for Algebra II. Showing a student attempted Algebra I twice and was successful the second time more accurately represents the student’s academic history than changing the “fail” to a “pass.” The student may earn a grade or a “pass” for Algebra I on the transcript according to the district’s policy for mastery-based credit.

The second Algebra I on the transcript may have a “Z-Non-instructional” course designation. When this designation is used, schools should make sure course titles and state course codes are as specific as possible. (A state course code of “other,” without a subject area specified, should be used rarely and only as a last resort.) See [OSPI’s Transcript FAQ](#) #112 for more information about using the course designation “Z-Non-instructional”.

Mastery-based Credit and Career and Technical Education (CTE)

CTE program requirements generally preclude awarding of mastery-based credit. CTE courses are taught to approved frameworks by teachers with specific CTE qualifications. While mastery-based learning strategies are often used in CTE classrooms, awarding mastery-based credit that meets a CTE graduation requirement could be problematic since CTE credit generally requires a CTE learning environment, an approved framework, and a qualified teacher.

For more information contact the OSPI [Career and Technical Education Office](#).

Credit-earning Opportunities

Washington State rules and statute permit a range of credit-earning opportunities. Table 1 is provided here to provide information about a variety of credit-earning opportunities and to place mastery-based crediting within the context of the ways districts can award high school

credit. Credit-earning opportunities provided by districts may fall into more than one category. For example, a learning experience could be credited through mastery-based crediting and could also be an alternative learning experience.

Table 1: Credit Opportunities

Credit Opportunity	Description	Funding	Rules, Statute	Resources/Comments
Traditional Instruction	Teaching and learning in a class taught by district staff, primarily in a school setting.	Claimed for state general apportionment	WAC 392-121-107	Credit is awarded based on the student's successful completion of courses taught to learning standards.
Alternative Learning Experiences (ALE)	Learning experiences that take place primarily away from school in an alternative setting.	Claimed for state general apportionment, in compliance with WAC 392-121-182	WAC 392-550 Chapter RCW 28A.232 WAC 392-121-182	ALE Guide Digital Learning Department Alternative Learning Experience webpage
Work-based Learning (WBL)	A wide range of activities and instructional strategies related to cooperative, skills center, or state approved vocational education programming	If claimed for state general apportionment, must comply with WBL rules WAC 392-121-124	WAC 392-410-315	Work-based Learning webpage Work-based learning may be a component of ALE or Equivalency Course of Study, but Work-based Learning Credit must comply with WBL rules.
Equivalency Course of Study	Learning experiences that take place primarily away from school, or taught by non-district staff	If claimed for state general apportionment, must comply with ALE requirements WAC 392-121-182	WAC 392-410-300	Washington State School Directors Association Model Policy and Procedure 2413 Equivalency Credit Opportunities includes opportunities for Experiential Learning, CTE Course

				Equivalencies, and Mastery-based Credit.
Mastery-Based Credit	Demonstration of skills and learning standards through student performance on a district- determined assessment or assessments.	If claimed for state general apportionment for ALE, must comply with WAC 392-121- 182.	WAC 180- 51-050 WAC 180- 51-051 WAC 392- 410-340	WSSDA Model Policy and Procedures for Mastery-based Credit 2402 - English Language Arts Mastery-Based Credit 2403 - Math Mastery- Based Credit 2404 - Science Mastery-Based Credit 2405 - Social Studies Mastery-Based Credit 2406 - The Arts Mastery-Based Credit 2407 - Health and Physical Education Mastery-Based Credit 2408 - Integrated Environmental and Sustainability Education Mastery- Based Credit 2409 - World Language Mastery- Based Credit 3117 – Students In Or Released From Institutional Education Facilities OSPI webpage on Competency Testing and Credits for World Languages
Online Learning	Online courses or online school programs	The course or program must meet the criteria in WAC 392-502-080. Programs that are also part of an ALE program must comply	Chapter WAC 392- 502 Chapter RCW 28A.250	OSPI Online Learning Website

		with ALE requirements, WAC 392-121-182		
National Guard high school programs	Students earn credit through National Guard high school career training or Washington National Guard Youth Challenge	Basic education and Career and Technical Education funds, if applicable, are allocated to the military, in compliance with WAC 392-410-320	RCW 28A.150.310 WAC 392-410-320 WAC 392-410-327	
Courses taught by other institutions	Districts may award credit for courses from accredited or approved colleges or universities, or any other school or institution	If claimed for state general apportionment for an alternative learning experience, must comply with WAC 392-121-182 . Generally, students pay fees and tuition associated with these credit-earning opportunities.	WAC 392-410-340	
College in the High School	College courses taught in high school by high school faculty with oversight of a college. Students have the opportunity to receive both high school	Students pay tuition fees for college credit. State subsidies may be available.	Must comply with College in the High School rules in WAC Chapter 392.725	OSPI Dual Credit Program webpage Washington Student Achievement Council College Credit in High School webpage

	and college credit.			
Running Start	Students in grades 11 and 12 attend certain institutions of higher education and receive both high school and college credit	General allocation funds are split between the student's home district and the institution of higher education in compliance with RCW 28A.600.310 and WAC 392-169 .	RCW 28A.600.310 WAC 392-169	Students earn high school credit for the college courses based on WAC 180-51-050 (1 high school credit for 3 semester or 5 quarter hours).