



Guidance on Competency/Mastery Crediting

Background

The State Board of Education (SBE) and the Washington State School Directors' Association (WSSDA) have jointly developed guidance surrounding the use of new¹ WSSDA subject specific model policies for competency/mastery credit in English Language Arts, Math, Science, Social Studies, Art, and Health and Fitness. The use of competency/mastery-based crediting is a way schools may award credit that may be critical for students whose schools have closed in response to the novel coronavirus.

This extended guidance document was created to assist school district staff with the implementation of the new WSSDA model policies for subject-specific competency/mastery crediting.

WSSDA Model Policy No. 2409: Credit for Competency/Proficiency has been available for districts to adopt for over a decade. It was designed for competency/proficiency credit in world languages, however, a district can expand the policy to multiple subjects.

Information from the State Board of Education's annual Basic Education Compliance Survey (reported in the [Mastery-based Work Group Interim Report](#)) indicates that the number of districts using competency-based crediting has increased over the past few years, perhaps in response to new graduation requirements. The subjects most commonly credited through competency-based policies are world languages, math, and English. Math and English credit is most often awarded through using the high school state assessments in math and English (the Smarter Balanced Assessment). While there is growing interest in competency/mastery-based education, many districts are reluctant to award competency credit, offering it rarely, and only to a few students.

This guidance is provided to help districts offer competency/mastery credit more widely according to the needs of their students and their schools—as an innovative way of providing instruction and 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.

Definition and Usage of Terms

The WSSDA model policies use the terms competency/proficiency interchangeably.

In 2019, the state legislature passed a law ([E2SHB 1599](#)) that created a mastery-based learning work group. The legislation defined the term “mastery-based learning” to mean when the strategies below are used:

- a) Students advance upon demonstrated mastery of content;

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

This guidance will generally use the term mastery, to align with the state's definition in legislation ([E2SHB 1599](#), Sec. 301), unless referring to places where another term is used (e.g. in WAC, where the term "competency" is used instead).

Additionally, while mastery-based learning applies to specific learning and teaching strategies, mastery-based crediting is a specific crediting opportunity. Mastery-based crediting is an option for students to earn high school credit for demonstration of learning on 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 may be non-standardized tests, such as a portfolio of student work or a hands-on demonstration of skills and knowledge.

Awarding Competency/Mastery Credit

In SBE [rule](#) regarding definition of a credit, there is provision for awarding a credit based on a student's satisfactory demonstration of competency, as defined by written district policy, of the state's learning standards.

SBE basic education compliance data from the Class of 2019 shows that the most common subject offered by districts for competency credit is world language.² However, districts are able to award competency/mastery credit in as many subjects/courses as they choose. A district's written policy for awarding mastery credit should specify which subjects/courses are eligible for mastery-based credit.

Additional guidance around competency-based crediting can be found in [SBE's Competency-Based Crediting Handbook](#).

Awarding competency/mastery credit does not permit awarding credit for the same learning twice. For example, awarding credit for the math SBA should be considered for students who were not successful in earning credit in their math course (Algebra 1 or Integrated Math I). But 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.

Additional information on how to transcribe credits earned through competency/mastery-based learning may be found in [Washington State's Standardized High School Transcript's FAQ](#).

² For the Class of 2019, 77% of districts allowed competency-based crediting in world language. 36% of districts allowed competency-based crediting only in world language, and 41% allowed it in world language among other subjects.



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Demonstration of Proficiency

Student demonstration of mastery/proficiency of the state's learning standards is not limited to standardized assessment results. Other ways of demonstrating proficiency by students could include through local assessments, portfolios, recorded presentations, and any other methods allowable within in the district's written policy.

Washington State has a [mastery-based learning work group](#), who has been tasked by the Legislature to provide recommendations by December 2020 around the expansion of mastery-based credits and development of mastery-based pathways to the earning of a high school diploma. In their [interim report](#), the work group notes: "within MBL, there is a role for authentic assessments that are tied directly to the learning standards. Demonstration of mastery would not be limited to standardized assessments. Demonstration of mastery of the standards could be through portfolios, demonstrations, and presentations."

State Assessment

Some districts already have a policy for providing competency/mastery 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 SBA score (districts that have this policy typically award .5 to a full credit for meeting the standard in math).

Successful Completion of Next Higher-Level Course

Districts can also choose to include a provision in their policy for awarding students mastery 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 English IV but had failed English III. After the student completes English IV, they could then be awarded mastery credit for their English III 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.
