

Giving Students the Space for Meaningful Career Preparation and Exploration

Proposal

To prepare students for the jobs of the future, our high schools need to prepare all students for both college and career. States should allow high school students to opt out of elective credits and instead earn competency-based state and industry-approved career-readiness credits.

Introduction

State and local economies are shifting rapidly with the advent of new technologies like artificial intelligence. By [some accounts](#), more than 50 percent of today's jobs will [face a high degree of automation](#). Many jobs will disappear altogether, and new jobs will be created. Whether these profound technological shifts result in better opportunities for social mobility and overall standards of living or widespread unemployment and income inequality depends on [whether we can prepare students for the future](#) world of innovation and work.

Most economists believe that high-paying jobs of the future will continue to require some form of higher education — [even if they do not require bachelor's degrees](#). Thus high school must continue to strive to ensure every student is college-ready, with strong exposure to a liberal arts education. But increasingly, students will also need to be career-ready, with earlier exposure to the work world, and the opportunity to develop interests and skills aligned to those interests. As the cost of higher education rises and as [students take on more debt](#), there is also increased urgency to find ways to allow students to build their resumes and skills to find less expensive and time-consuming routes to employment.

For these reasons, states like Colorado have created ambitious career-preparation and apprenticeship programs, but because of state-mandates, [participating students are forced to decide between career training and a full-time high school schedule](#), a decision that in the past has resulted in low-income students being “tracked” into a vocational pathway that may close off other higher education avenues. [The ever-increasing demand for skills](#) means students from every background will need opportunities to explore career avenues before high school graduation without sacrificing the rigors of college-preparatory coursework.

Indeed, applied, career-focused courses in subjects like information technology [can help reinforce academic content](#) in subjects such as math, particularly for students with learning disabilities. However, it is difficult for conventional high schools to offer a full complement of academic courses, as well as applied courses, as well as internships or apprenticeships that may complement those applied courses, in a way that students can readily accommodate in a conventional six-credit format.

Imagine a student, Ben, who has talent and interest in music production, but is in a typical comprehensive high school requiring students take six courses a day. Ben has the opportunity to apprentice with a film scoring company, but he still is required to take a full load at his high school. The high school would consider granting credit for the apprenticeship, but would lose their state funding allocation if Ben took less than six courses at school.

Most states [impose elective-course requirements that force](#) students into a box that isn't working for them, [contributing to disengagement and dropouts](#).

What if there were a way to allow kids to develop and pursue their career interests, still earn full credit toward graduation with their core academic classes, and possibly even get a head start on college credits, reducing their reliance on loans? A simple change to state law and funding streams could make this possible, creating a dramatically new set of possibilities for students of all backgrounds who want to get a jump start on preparing for their careers.

Idea Description

In lieu of traditional elective classes, students would be able to earn “career-ready” credits that count toward a standard high school diploma. To be eligible credits, they would have to be earned via a state-approved selection of apprenticeships or personalized Individual Career Plans (ICPs) approved by their school or district. The courses would be competency-based, freeing students from seat-time requirements so that their work and school schedules can become more manageable. Ideally, some courses would also lead to post-secondary credits or industry credentials.

State law would ensure that the sending high school would receive the proportionate share of funding for the courses taken at the school. The remaining courses could be eligible for public funding to follow the student to their career-education provider, but as in Colorado, the majority of apprenticeships would be independently funded by approved industry partners and non-profit organizations.

Considerations for Policymakers

Who determines eligible credits. Educators and industry might have differences of opinion about which lines of study should qualify for high school credits, or how much credit to award for each apprenticeship or course sequence. In many cases, state-level policymakers would need to determine what constitutes a course, what constitutes course success, and how that would align with other high school conventions such as student letter grades. They would also need to ensure that, [to the greatest extent possible](#), courses taken in secondary school articulate to credentials that employers recognize and post-secondary institutions accept.

Funding incentives. Florida provides funding bonuses to schools and teachers for students who complete industry credentials, with greater financial rewards for course completions that articulate to

postsecondary credits.¹ Such incentives could encourage schools and districts to offer lines of career-focused study that lead to post-secondary credentials, and thus provide more rigorous coursework and give students a way to ease their future debt burdens.

Diploma incentives. States could consider creating [diploma designations](#) that signal to post-secondary institutions or prospective employers that students have completed an apprenticeship program or earned an industry credential.

Expected Outcomes

More students graduating “career-ready” without sacrificing college readiness. Allowing students to opt-out of high school electives not suited to their interests in exchange for internships or apprenticeships with non-profits or businesses will build their resumes, professionalism, and [skills](#) in their area of interest and give them a better sense of what they want to do in the future. [Giving students the opportunity to earn multiple credits toward meaningful credentials](#) helps prevent “[tracking](#)” and [stigmas](#) associated with existing career training programs.

Increased participation in apprenticeship programs, and credentials, geared toward high-paying jobs. Apprenticeships in Switzerland [are believed to contribute to a very strong economy and low unemployment rate](#) because students receive structured training and credentials in highly marketable jobs, such as health care, advanced manufacturing, and information technology. As employment opportunities shift over time, so too do the apprenticeship opportunities.

Reduced student debt burdens. Enabling more students to receive career-relevant training and post-secondary credentials before high school graduation will reduce their costs of obtaining college degrees or career training after high school.

¹ Florida Statutes [1011.62\(1\)\(o\)](#)
http://www.leg.state.fl.us/statutes/index.cfm?App_mode=Display_Statute&URL=1000-1099/1011/Sections/1011.62.html