

Education Commission of the States

Recommendation:

Move toward a proficiency-based system of education, beginning first with the secondary level (high school and middle school).

A growing number of states are requiring students to pass end-of-course (EOC) exams. These tests are used to assess students' mastery of the content and skills addressed in specific high school courses (e.g., English 9, Biology 1). In recent years, some states have moved to make EOCs mandatory, rather than optional, for all students, or to use EOCs instead of minimum-competency exit exams or subject-area tests that, while generally given in grades 10 or 11, often test content and skills geared to the grade 8 or 9 level (Ensuring Rigor in the High School Curriculum, ECS 2006). Ten states currently require passage of these tests in order to graduate high school (Dounay, ECS 2008).

However, implementing end-of-course tests does not necessarily allow students to test out of classes that traditionally have been based on seat time. That typically requires state action. Nor do exit EOCs represent the full spectrum of implementing a competency-based approach. Utah legislators, for example, defined competency-based education as “an education approach that requires students to acquire a competency and includes a classroom structure and operation that aid and facilitate the acquisition of specified competencies on an individual basis wherein students are allowed to master and demonstrate competencies as fast as they are able.” (Utah 53A-1-409)

For the near term, implementing mandatory passage of end-of-course assessments does represent one way to begin. Additional secondary-level options might include industry-based certifications, stackable certificates or assessments such as WorkKeys. A competency based approach similar to what is used in the United Kingdom warrants investigation.

Potential benefits of a proficiency-based system:

- Provides an acceleration option for students who:
 - Might have been disengaged in the past (and have not performed well in classes), but who nonetheless have a better grasp of the content than their earlier performance indicates
 - Have advanced skills in the content area
- Reduces the influence of teacher perception of student skills and knowledge
- Provides an objective means of ensuring reliably consistent content expectations across districts, schools and classrooms
- Allows identification of “holes” in student learning that can be addressed specifically instead of requiring a student to repeat an entire semester or year of a course

Potential downsides:

- Could generate controversy if assessment tools lack objectivity or are not reliable
- Requiring test passage for course credit could bring out the critics of high stakes assessments
- Could raise district hackles if allowing students to graduate more quickly reduces funding.