

Competency-Based Crediting Handbook 1.0: An Implementation Guide for School Districts

July 2016

Introduction

Purpose

This handbook is designed to serve as a resource for school districts initiating and implementing policies and procedures for establishing competency-based crediting opportunities for students in accordance with Washington State law. This guide is targeted for district school board members, district administrators, and district leadership teams who are interested in implementing or expanding opportunities for competency-based credit in their district.

Definition of Terms

It is important to establish a common understanding of the term “competency-based learning” as it is used in this toolkit. “Competency-based learning” or “competency-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.**

Achieve’s Definition of Competency-based pathways:

- Students advance upon demonstration of mastery.
- Competencies include explicit, measurable, transferable learning objectives that empower students.
- Assessment is 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.
- The process of reaching learning outcomes encourages students to develop skills and dispositions important for success in college, careers and citizenship.

From Achieve’s Competency-Based Pathways Working Group, which met in 2012-2013 and was comprised of representative from 11 states, including Washington, and 11 state and national organizations.

While “competency-based learning” encompasses strategies that should be broadly employed throughout teaching and learning, “competency-based crediting” is a specific crediting opportunity. Competency-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. In addition, students may be awarded credit for a variety of competency-based learning that takes place largely outside of traditional classroom instruction. These could include Alternative Learning Experience (ALE), Work-based Learning, and equivalency courses of study (Table 1 summarizes different types of credit-earning opportunities).

The Importance of Competency-based Learning

Washington state has the aspiration that all students who graduate from high school will be career- and college-ready—that they will be ready for whatever post-secondary pathway they wish to pursue. State statute specifies “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 support these aspirations, the state has adopted new learning standards and new 24-credit graduation requirements.

As the state transitions to these new requirements, competency-based credit may become a more important, and perhaps a more commonly accessed option for students. A core aspect of competency-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 competency-based credit an attractive option for individualizing student learning. Competency-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

Competency-based learning, at its best and as defined above, fosters the skills and dispositions important for success in college, careers and citizenship. It provides an opportunity for authentic, deeper learning by students that will build and reinforce critical skills and build mastery of learning standards. It engages students by individualizing their learning and giving them ownership over their educational experience.

Credit-earning Opportunities

Washington State rules and statute permit a range of credit-earning opportunities. Table 1 summarizes the ways that districts can offer students the opportunity for earning high school credit. Actual credit-earning opportunities provided by districts may fall into more than one category. For example, a learning experience could be credited through equivalency course of study and 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 awarded is usually aligned with a locally-specified number of instructional hours.
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	Chapter RCW 28A.232 WAC 392-121-182	ALE Common Questions Digital Learning Department Alternative Learning Experience webpage

Exhibit F

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	Worksite Learning Manual 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 Directors Association Model Policy and Procedure 2410 High School Graduation Requirements addresses the Equivalency Course of Study WAC in a section titled "Alternative Program"
Competency-Based Credit	Demonstration of skills and learning standards through student performance on a district-determined assessment or assessments.	If claimed for state general apportionment, must comply with ALE requirements, WAC 392-121-182	WAC 180-51-050 WAC 392-410-340	WSSDA Model Policy and Procedure 2409 for Competency/Proficiency Based Credit OSPI webpage on Competency Testing and Credits for World Languages
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 392-269 .	RCW 28A.600.310 WAC 392-269	Student 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).
Online Learning	Online courses or online school programs	The course or program must meet the conditions in WAC	Chapter WAC 392-502 Chapter RCW 28A.250	Digital Learning Department website

Exhibit F

		392-502-080 . Programs that are also part of an ALE program must comply 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, must comply with ALE requirements, WAC 392-121-182	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 pay tuition. Some state subsidies are available for small and rural schools and low-income students.	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

Funding

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

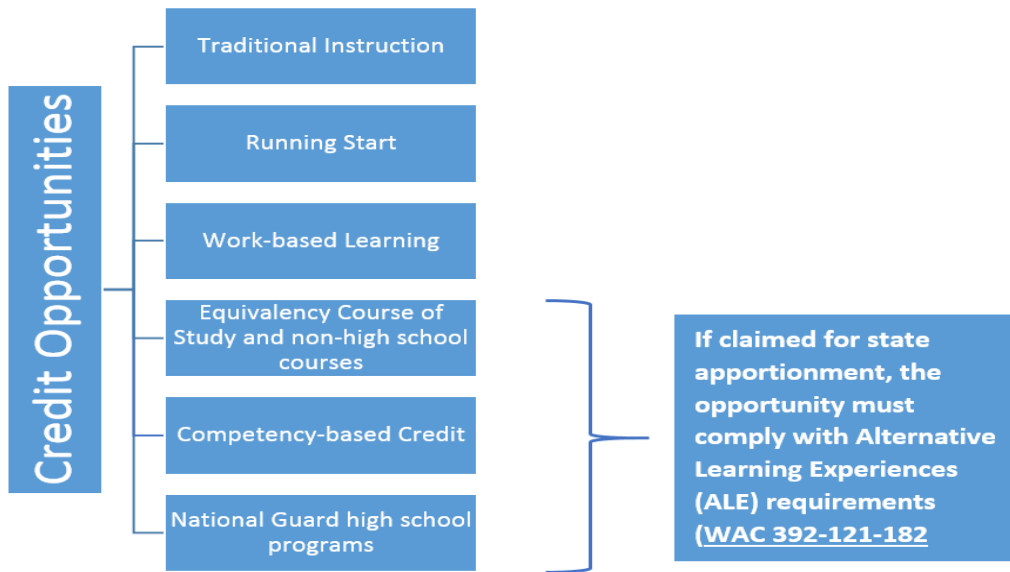
- Is delivered partly or fully outside of a regular classroom or schedule
- Is supervised, monitored, assessed, evaluated and documented by a certificated teacher employed or under contract by the district
- Is provided in accordance with a written student learning plan

Figure 1 illustrates how several credit-earning opportunities can also be ALE. If the credit-earning opportunity takes place largely outside of school, but is not claimed for state apportionment, such as for

Exhibit F

a competency-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. Note: students may not be charged for courses claimed for state funding or for courses that are considered part of the student’s basic education.

Figure 1 Credit-earning Opportunities and ALE.



Competency-based Credit and Equivalency Course of Study

Two major ways that credit may be offered are Competency-based credit, and Equivalency course of study. Table 2 below summarizes the differences and characteristics of these two credit opportunities. (Work-based learning, credit for National Guard programs, and ALE may also fall under the definition of competency-based learning or equivalency course of study, however, these learning experiences also have specific rules that apply. See [WAC Chapter 392-410](#).)

“Competency-based credit”(CBC) is when a district awards credit for knowledge and skills a student demonstrates on a standardized test or other district-recognized assessment. The subject area for which the student receives credit is defined by state-adopted learning standards and the test must be aligned to these standards.

“Equivalency course of study” is the earning of high school credit, as permitted by [WAC 392-410-300](#), for planned learning experiences conducted outside of a school or by educators who are not employed by a district.

Table 2: Competency-based Credit and Equivalency Course of Study

	Competency-based Credit (CBC)	Equivalency Course of Study

Exhibit F

Basis for Credit	Existing knowledge and skills of the student as demonstrated by performance on a standardized test.	Knowledge and skills acquired through planned learning experiences approved by the district and monitored by the school.
Subject Areas	Core subjects with state learning standards.	Core subjects with state learning standards or non-core subjects with locally determined standards if there are no state-adopted learning standards for the subject.
Learning Standards	State learning standards.	State learning standards or locally determined standards if there are no state-adopted learning standards for the subject.
Assessment	Standardized test aligned to the specific learning standards.	Locally determined assessments that align to learning standards.
Rules	WAC 180-51-050 High school credit—Definition	WAC 392-410-300 Equivalency course of study—Credit for learning experiences conducted away from school or by persons not employed by the school district.
Policy	WSSDA Model Policy 2409 or a similar written district policy.	A written district policy that addresses at least the provisions specified in WAC 392-410-300 .
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> World Language credit for proficiency on a standardized test such as STAMP 4S. Credit in Algebra 1 for proficiency on the Math Year 1 End-of-Course exam. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Arts credit for musical lessons and performance outside of the school. Credit for a non-district educational program such as Washington Aerospace Scholars.

Standards

Washington State Learning Standards currently exist for the subject areas of English Language Arts, Math, Science, Social Studies, the Arts, Health and Fitness, Integrated Environmental and Sustainability Education, and World Language. CBC may be awarded in core subject areas for success on standardized tests aligned to the standards in the subject areas. Not all subjects have well-recognized standardized tests that are closely aligned to the learning standards, and CBC would not be possible for these subjects.

[WAC 180-51-050](#) authorizes districts to determine learning standards in subject areas for which there are not state-adopted learning standards. In subjects for which there are no state-approved learning standards, or where state-adopted learning standards exist but not well-recognized, well-aligned tests, the type of competency-based learning that can be offered is an equivalency course of study.

Exhibit F

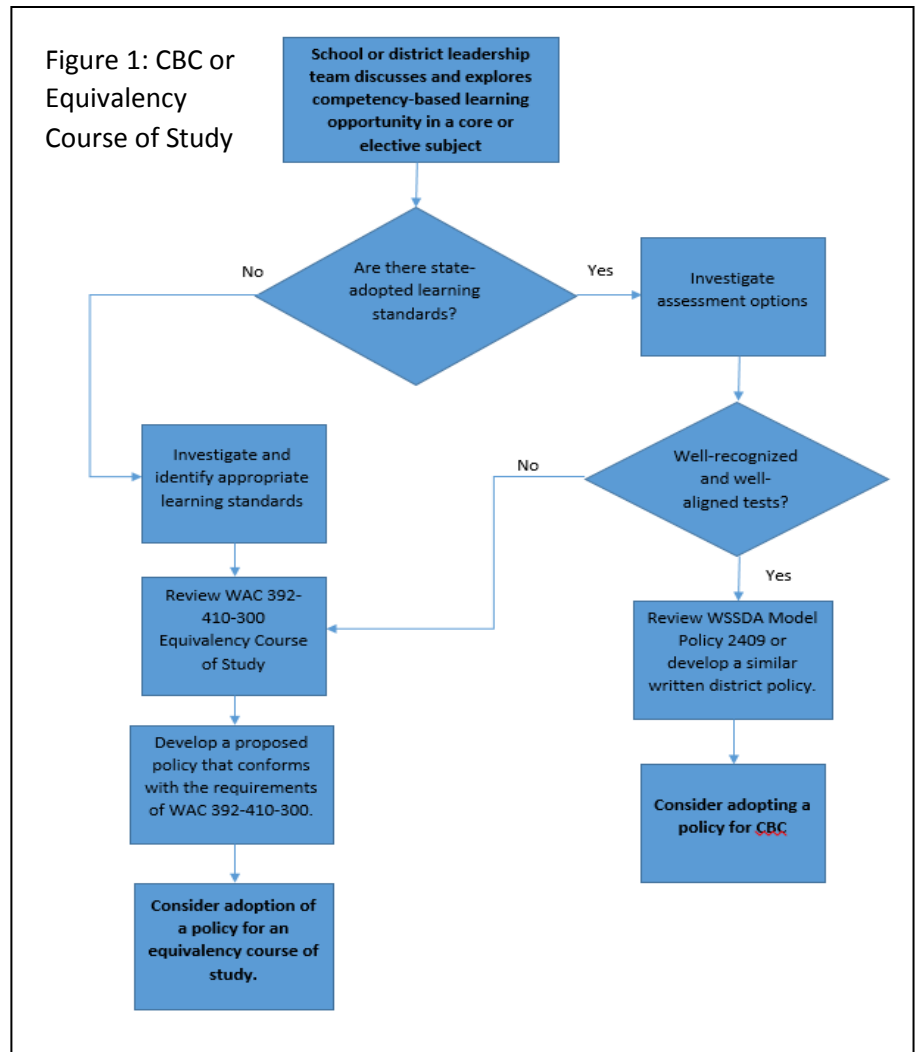
In an equivalency course of study, the range of standards and the particular standards for which credit is awarded through competency-based learning should be approximately the same as would be addressed in a corresponding classroom-based course in the same subject. A school or district may offer credit for competency-based learning in an area where there is not a corresponding classroom-based course in the district, but great care should be taken that the expectations and scope of standards covered are fully worthy of high school credit. Students engaged in competency-based learning should be exposed to all the critical learning standards so they can seamlessly transition to their next educational experience and avoid gaps in their learning.

Procedures

In establishing competency-based learning opportunities, one of the first steps is to identify which type of competency-based learning could apply. The flow chart in Figure 1 illustrates a process for considering a CBC or an equivalency course of study.

In establishing procedures, some key questions to consider are:

- Are students equitably offered the opportunity to earn competency-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 competency-based credit?
- What supports are available to students and what personnel will it take to provide them?
- Who will monitor the student progress and direct students into supports when needed?
- How will the credit be transcribed? What graduation requirements and CADRs (College academic distribution requirements), if any, will it meet?



Assessment

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

- 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 actually demonstrate their learning
- Where possible, provide flexibility in how students demonstrate their learning (e.g. through a presentation, research paper, video, etc.)

Critical questions concerning assessment and competency-based credit are:

- What is “mastery” for a particular credit offering?
- What is the best assessment vehicles for students to demonstrate their skills and knowledge?
 - Assessments for competency credit need not be limited to standardized tests
 - Interim as well as summative assessments may be an important part of the assessment system for competency-based credit
- What level of achievement on the assessment constitutes a demonstration of mastery?

Transcription

[WAC 392-415-050](#) specifies that the grade for a competency-based credit may either be a locally determined grade, or a “pass,” “fail,” or “no pass.”

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

The standard transcript allows for course designations for students who earn credit through a competency test. 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 v.3.0 January 2016 OSPI – Student Information Page 40 of 52):

64. 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.

[WAC 392-415-050](#) Grade reporting and calculation system.

(3) If high school credit is awarded on a competency basis as authorized under state board of education policy WAC 180-51-050(2), the district may use either of the following options for noting the students' performance on the state standardized transcript under WAC 392-415-070:

- (a) Determine locally the equivalent passing mark/grade as listed under subsection (1) of this section; or
- (b) Designate "pass" or "fail" or "no pass" in the appropriate manner on the transcript.

65. 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

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Can credit be awarded to students for passing state assessments?

Yes. A number of districts do this, most commonly for students who attempted but failed a course associated with an End-of-Course exam, but who score ‘proficient’ or higher on the exam. Typically, the student is awarded .5 credits.

Awarding credit for an established assessment that is well-aligned to state learning standards is a straight-forward example of competency-based crediting.

A written district policy that identifies the learning standards to be addressed and the assessment(s) that will allow students to demonstrate proficiency or mastery of those learning standards is needed for awarding competency-based crediting. The [WSSDA](#) has a model policy (Policy #2409) for competency-based crediting in World Languages that could be modified for other subjects.

2. Does an assessment used for competency-based credit need to be a summative test?

No. The assessment could be a summative test, but interim tests, a series of unit tests, or other formats that could include papers, presentations, videos, that allow the student to demonstrate mastery of a skill or set of knowledge could be an assessment that supports competency-based credit. Assessments should be a meaningful learning experience for students, provide rich information to educators so they can provide targeted support to students, and send students and parents clear signals about students’ readiness for next steps. Assessments should address all learning standards for the course.

3. A student, because of transferring between schools or from a different state, failed to complete a full year of Algebra 1 or Geometry. The student is successful in Algebra 2 or Pre-calculus. Is the student required to complete the lower level math courses to meet graduation requirements, or could a district award competency-based credit for the missing math credit?

The district could have a policy to award credit for the missing math credit, with success in the higher level course constituting demonstration of mastery of the lower level content. It would be a best practice for districts to allow students who have been successful in their higher level math courses and would find a lower level math course repetitive and unchallenging to move forward in their math studies. However, the policy should address the definition of “success” (ie. a student who earns an “A” in the higher level course is different from a student who earns a “D”) and should be carefully applied to ensure students avoid major gaps in their math knowledge.

4. Can districts award credit to students for educational trips?

Yes—but the district should consider the district’s policy, the standards being addressed, and how the learning will be assessed. The plan for credit should be proactive, and for the expectations to be fully described and communicated to students. Students simply having the experience of an educational trip is not sufficient for credit. Demonstration of mastery needs to involve assessment that cover the full range and depth of learning standards for which credit is being awarded. The policy permitting such credit should comply with WAC 392-410-300 Equivalency course of study (see Appendix A). If the credit is being claimed for state apportionment, the course also needs to comply with ALE rules [WAC 392-121-182](#).

5. Could a district award credit to a student who took a family trip over the summer that included educational activities?

Generally no—while such trips can be enriching for students, simply having the experience of an educational trip is not sufficient for credit.

6. Can a student be awarded more than one credit in one class? For example, in a Career and Technical Education course approved for course equivalency a student can meet two graduation requirements with one course; could they also earn two credits?

No. One credit should be awarded for one high school course. [WAC 180-51-050](#) defines a high school credit. In high schools, earning a credit indicates successful completion of a course taught to state learning standards, or locally determined standards if there are no state learning standards for that subject.

There is not a minimum hour requirement associated with a high school course or high school credit. Districts have local control over the curricula, the design and the delivery of the class.

[WAC 180-51-067](#) and [WAC 180-51-068](#) articulates the “two for one policy,” that allows student to earn two graduation requirements for one credit.

7. Can a district award credit for a High School and Beyond Plan?

Yes, a district could award credit for a High School and Beyond Plan, provided the district has the policies and procedures in place. Credit may be awarded for Advisory, which is a vehicle for work on high school and beyond planning. . As an example, some districts are awarding 0.25 credits per high school year for Advisory. Since there are no state-adopted learning standards for Advisory or for a High School and Beyond Plan, the local governing board or its designee should determine the learning standards for successful completion. [Career Guidance Washington](#) provides a program model design. [WAC 180-51-068](#) specifies the requirements of High School and Beyond Plans.

The requirements of the High School and Beyond Plan within the 24-credit graduation requirements is specified in [WAC 180-51-068](#):

“(10) Each student shall have a high school and beyond plan to guide his or her high school experience, including plans for post-secondary education or training and career. The process for completing the high school and beyond plan is locally determined and designed to help students select course work and other activities that will best prepare them for their post-secondary

Exhibit F

educational and career goals. Students shall create their high school and beyond plans in cooperation with parents/guardians and school staff. School staff shall work with students to update the plans during the years in which the plan is implemented in order to accommodate changing interests or goals.”

8. Can a district award credit for a student participating in a sports team?

Yes, a district could award credit for participation in a sports team, provided the district has the policies and procedures in place. However, consideration must be given to the learning standards being met. Physical education courses align to both fitness and knowledge [learning standards](#), and the policy and procedure for awarding credit for participation in a sports team should address how students will meet a full range of standards equivalent to a physical education course.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Rules on Competency Based Crediting

WAC 180-51-050

High school credit—Definition

As used in this chapter the term “high school credit shall mean:

- (1) Grades nine through twelve or the equivalent of a four-year high school program, or as otherwise provided in RCW [28A.230.090](#)(4):
 - (a) Successful completion, as defined by written district policy, of courses taught to the state's essential academic learning requirements (learning standards). If there are no state-adopted learning standards for a subject, the local governing board, or its designee, shall determine learning standards for the successful completion of that subject; or
 - (b) Satisfactory demonstration by a student of proficiency/competency, as defined by written district policy, of the state's essential academic learning requirements (learning standards).

WAC 392-410-300

Equivalency course of study—Credit for learning experiences conducted away from school or by persons not employed by the school district.

Exhibit F

(1) Credit, including high school graduation credit, may be granted for school planned or approved learning experiences primarily conducted away from the facilities owned, operated, or supervised by the district or conducted primarily by individuals not employed by the district.

(2) School planned or approved learning experiences such as, but not limited to, travel study, work study, private lessons, and educational programs sponsored by governmental agencies may be accepted for credit upon compliance with written policies established by the district.

(3) Written policies which permit the granting of credit for such out-of-school learning activities shall be adopted by the district board of directors and shall be available to students, parents, and the public upon request. Such policies shall include at least the following provisions:

(4) A proposal for approval of credit for such learning experiences shall be submitted to the personnel designated in the written policy for review, revision, and approval or disapproval prior to the experience and shall include at least the following information:

- (a) Name of program or planned learning experience;
 - (b) Length of time for which approval is desired;
 - (c) Objectives of the program or planned learning experience;
 - (d) Which one or more of the state learning goals and related essential academic learning requirements are part of the program or planned learning experience;
 - (e) Description of how credits shall be determined in accord with WAC [180-51-050\(1\)](#);
 - (f) Content outline of the program and/or major learning activities and instructional materials to be used;
 - (g) Description of how student performance will be assessed;
 - (h) Qualifications of instructional personnel;
 - (i) Plans for evaluation of program; and
 - (j) How and by whom the student will be supervised.
- (5) The reasons for approval or disapproval shall be communicated to the students and parents or guardians.

Appendix B: Links to Additional Resources

Achieve webpage on competency-based pathways: <http://achieve.org/CBP>

iNACOL, International Association for K-12 Online Learning, website: <http://www.inacol.org/>

U.S. Department of Education webpage on Competency-Based Learning or Personalized Learning: <http://www.ed.gov/oii-news/competency-based-learning-or-personalized-learning>

New Hampshire High School Transformation
webpage: http://www.education.nh.gov/innovations/hs_redesign/index.htm

Ohio Department of Education Credit Flexibility webpage: <http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Quality-School-Choice/Credit-Flexibility-Plan>

CompetencyWorks website: <http://www.competencyworks.org/about/who-we-are/>

Exhibit F

Innovation Lab Network, facilitated by the Council of Chief State Officers (CCSSO), online tool for guidance on implementing a competency-based system, Roadmap for Competency-based Systems: Leveraging Next Generation Technologies: <http://www.nxgentechroadmap.com/>