



REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE

# Competency-Based Assessments

2019

Authorizing legislation: [RCW 28A.655.070](#)

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary ..... 3

Introduction ..... 4

District Competency-based Assessments and Competency Credits..... 5

Smarter Balanced Interim Assessments and Digital Library ..... 8

World Languages Competency-based Assessment Model Policy Exemplar ..... 9

Recommendations..... 10

Conclusion and Next Steps ..... 11

## Appendices

Appendix A: Comparison by Student Group of Credit Earned in 2018–19 through National Tests, Local Tests, and Non-instructional, District-determined Options ..... 12

Appendix B: Sample High School Competency-based Assessments Used Locally by Content Area..... 15

## List of Tables

Table 1: Competency Credits Earned in Washington: 2017–18 School Year ..... 6

Table 2: Content Areas for Competency-based Credits ..... 6

Table 3: 2017–19 Changes in District Offering Competency-based Credits ..... 7

## Executive Summary

The 2018 Legislature directed the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) to review available and appropriate options for competency-based assessments that meet the state learning standards. OSPI focused its review on competency-based assessments that enable students to earn credit without seat time and leveraged Comprehensive Education Data and Research System (CEDARS) data to provide a statewide picture of credit earned through assessment. OSPI also collected examples of competency-based assessments school districts are currently using. A model school district policy and procedure developed for world languages is highlighted as an example of a systemic approach that supports local implementation.

Based on its review, OSPI recommends the state consider the following strategies to promote more opportunities for competency-based learning:

- Incentivize districts to provide professional learning that promotes assessment literacy and incorporates the International Association for K–12 Online Learning’s (iNACOL) quality design principles for competency-based education.<sup>1</sup>
- Leverage state investment in the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) to support districts’ use of interim assessments as competency-based measures to evaluate student skills and knowledge.
- Address in state law the best way for competency-based programs to claim funding in a non seat-based time environment.
- Build on the collaborative process established for world language competency-based credit to create content-specific model policies and procedures for districts to adopt.

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<sup>1</sup> [Quality Principles for Competency-based Education](#). Chris Sturgis and Katherine Casey. October 2018.

## Background

House Bill 2824 (2018) directed the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) to review available and appropriate options for competency-based assessments that meet the essential academic learning requirements.

For the purpose of this report, competency-based assessment is defined primarily as “A performance-based or criterion-referenced test, portfolio, or project that determines the level of proficiency in a subject area necessary to earn credit without seat time.”<sup>2</sup>

The report will also review elements of the Smarter Balanced Assessment system that enable classroom-based assessment (specifically, interim assessments) to be used for instructional purposes to understand students’ growing competencies.

## Introduction

Washington is one of 36 states in the country that allows students to earn high school credit based on demonstrating subject area competency instead of completing hours of classroom instruction.<sup>3</sup> Washington law (Revised Code of Washington [RCW] 28A.230.090) delegates to the State Board of Education (SBE) the responsibility of establishing graduation requirements or equivalencies. The SBE<sup>4</sup> enables school districts to award credit based on written district policy, placing the responsibility on districts to establish a process that meets the state’s learning standards. Selection of competency-based assessments is a local district decision.

The state assumes responsibility for selecting and determining proficiency levels on state assessments that are aligned to the state’s learning standards. The Smarter Balanced Assessment (SBA) for English language arts (ELA) and mathematics, and the Washington Comprehensive Assessment of Science (WCAS) are the state’s competency-based assessments in content areas included in the basic education goals and for which state learning standards have been established (RCW 28A.150.210).

The intersection of these two policies—local control of decision-making authority and the process for awarding competency-based credit, and state control of state assessment selection

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<sup>2</sup> Issue Brief: Competency-Based Advancement, US Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development, January 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Re-thinking Seat Time: State Approaches to Earning Credit in Out of School Time: A Policy Brief. National Conference of State Legislators, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> WAC 180-51-050 states: High school credit shall mean...1(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).

and proficiency determination—plays out in different ways. For instance, some districts award credit when students demonstrate proficiency on summative state assessments. Others take advantage of non-summative components of the Smarter Balanced Assessment *system*, interim assessments which can be used as part of classroom instruction to inform teachers about students’ mastery of concepts. While the interim assessments may be under-utilized as competency-based assessments at this time, ongoing improvements in the assessments will increase the likelihood that they will be used more widely by districts in the future.

Local and state policies share a common need for assessment literacy. “Assessment literacy is important for practitioners but it is also important for policymakers and stakeholders throughout the system to understand the roles that different types of assessment play in student learning, how assessment and moderation are used to comparatively and fairly judge student mastery, and how the information generated by assessments can be used toward a cycle of continuous improvement in teaching and learning.”<sup>5</sup>

This report will:

- Summarize what we know about competency-based assessments used by Washington school districts and competency-based credits earned by students.
- Describe the Smarter Balanced interim assessments for English language arts and mathematics, which are available statewide and can be used as competency-based assessments.
- Provide an exemplar of a competency-based assessment model policy.
- Offer recommendations about strategies that will build more robust understanding and use of competency-based assessments and improve assessment literacy.

## **District Competency-based Assessments and Competency Credits**

### **Statewide Data (CEDARS)**

Earned credits are reflected on students’ high school transcripts and in the information that districts submit to the state through the Comprehensive Education Data and Research System (CEDARS). CEDARS categorizes three sources of competency-based credits: National Competency Test, Local Competency Test, and Non-instructional, District-determined Option.

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<sup>5</sup> [CompetencyWorks](#). Threshold Concept: Assessment Literacy. Susan Patrick, Maria Worthen, Natalie Truong, and Dale Frost. June 22, 2017.

**Table 1: Competency Credits Earned in Washington: 2017–18 School Year**

Evidence of Competency	Number of Students
National Competency Test	8,432
Local Competency Test	1,618
Non-Instructional, District-Determined Option	28,719
<b>Total (unduplicated; students may be in multiple categories)</b>	<b>33,311</b>

**Source:** CEDARS, 2017–18 school year. Pulled October 2019.

Table 1 illustrates that 33,331 *students* earned competency credits in the 2017–18 school year, most through a non-instructional, locally-determined competency credit option. While CEDARS provides definitions for each of the three categories, **students may be reported in multiple designations** and the distinction between these categories may not be exact. The Local and National Competency Test designation codes within CEDARS are to be used when a student takes a competency test in place of taking an actual class. The Local designation is used when the test is administered only locally or within Washington and the National designation is used when the test is administered in multiple states. Similarly, the Non-Instructional designation is used when credit is awarded but there isn't an actual course or instruction provided by a teacher.

When the CEDARS data was analyzed by student group, higher percentages of Hispanic, migrant, and English-learner students earned credit through national competency assessments than would be expected based on their representation in the grades 9–12 population. This phenomenon may be related to the prevalence of world language assessments among competency assessments. Appendix A contains more detailed charts and the exact CEDARS definitions of the three categories.

Table 2 shows the most common content areas for competency-based credits.

**Table 2: Content Areas for Competency-based Credits**

Course Content Area	Total Credits Earned	Number of Districts Reporting
Foreign Language and Literature	19,020	92
Miscellaneous	10,624	113
English Language and Literature	1,758	57
Social Sciences and History	1,735	24
Life and Physical Sciences	886	37
Mathematics	878	55
Physical, Health, and Safety Education	737	36
Computer and Information Sciences	439	8

Course Content Area	Total Credits Earned	Number of Districts Reporting
Fine and Performing Arts	146	13
Other	601	16

**Source:** CEDARS, 2017–18. “Miscellaneous” is a course content code within CEDARS; for the reported competency credits in that area, the courses were varied and included “Aide” and “Tutorial.” “Other” content areas include human services, engineering and technology, health care sciences, and business and marketing.

### Basic Education Compliance Reporting

The State Board of Education’s annual Basic Education Compliance reporting collects data from all 295 school districts on whether competency-based crediting is allowed in each district. Results over the past three years have shown increases in the number of districts that allow for competency-based crediting. Over the past three years, the percentage of school districts with high schools allowing competency-based crediting has increased from 36% to 55%. Competency-based crediting requires a district to have a written policy that allows for students to earn credit through an assessment that aligns to the learning standards for the content area. The Class of 2020 reporting will identify the content areas in which districts allow competency-based crediting and will link to each district’s competency-based crediting policy.

**Table 3: Districts Offering Competency-based Credits from 2017–19**

Class	Number of Districts that Allow Competency-Based Crediting	Number of Districts that Don't Allow Competency-Based Crediting	Number of Districts that Offer High School	Percentage of High School Districts that Allow Competency-Based Crediting
Class of 2017	89	160	249	36%
Class of 2018	121	130	251	48%
Class of 2019	138	114	252	55%

**Source:** Washington State Board of Education, 2019.

### Survey Information

To add to the student-level information about competency-based credits that districts report to the state through CEDARS, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) surveyed school districts about the specific competency-based assessments they use.

OSPI received feedback from 91 districts, including from district assessment coordinators, learning and teaching staff, and special programs staff. The most frequently named

assessments were the statewide assessments: Smarter Balanced for both English language arts (ELA) and mathematics and Washington Comprehensive Assessment of Science (WCAS) for science. The complete list of competency-based assessments noted by districts are included in Appendix B.

Survey respondents also provided information about the purpose of the competency-based assessments that are administered within their district. Earning credit, course-completion, graduation alternative, or accelerated learning opportunities were most commonly noted.

## **Smarter Balanced Interim Assessments and Digital Library**

Smarter Balanced was most frequently cited by districts as the specific assessment they used for determining student competencies. In addition to the summative assessment, other resources educators can use to gather information about students' skills include the Smarter Balanced interim assessments. Closely connected to the interim assessments are instructional resources in the Smarter Balanced Digital Library. Washington's membership in the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium provides all Washington educators with free access to interim assessments and the Digital Library.

Smarter Balanced summative and interim assessments are aligned to the Washington K–12 learning standards in mathematics and ELA. Interim assessments can be used in classrooms throughout the school year to give teachers an understanding of students' knowledge and academic performance and provide teachers with precise next steps for instruction. Interim assessments can be administered when teachers feel students are ready to demonstrate their skill and knowledge.

There are three types of interim assessments: Interim Comprehensive Assessments, Interim Assessment Blocks, and new Focused Interim Assessment Blocks. Interim Comprehensive Assessments (ICAs) measure a similar breadth of content as the end-of-year assessment. Interim Assessment Blocks (IABs) test smaller bundles of content than the Interim Comprehensive Assessment. The IABs may be helpful for determining the knowledge and skills of students after a few weeks or months of instruction. Focused Interim Assessment Blocks (Focused IABs) concentrate on an even narrower set of skills than IABs. The Focused IABs may be helpful for determining the knowledge and skills of students after a few days or weeks of instruction.

In addition to the interim assessments that are part of the Smarter Balanced assessment system, the Smarter Balanced Digital Library supports student learning by providing nearly 3,000 resources aligned to college- and career-ready standards to help educators improve teaching and learning.

These two resources—the interim assessments and the Digital Library—support day-to-day instruction and classroom assessment, align with the standards and expectations set on the end-of-year summative assessment, and provide educators with actionable feedback on student knowledge and skills they can use to move student learning forward throughout the year.

## **World Languages Competency-based Assessment Model Policy Exemplar**

The most common content area in which Washington high school students earn credit by passing a competency-based assessment is in “World Languages.” In the 2017–18 school year, 6,432 students earned over 19,000 competency credits in the area of foreign language or literature. In the 2018–19 school year, 3,097 students earned the Seal of Biliteracy, which affords awardees up to four years of high school world language credit when qualified through competency testing. In 2019, over two-thirds of students earned this award and credit by meeting a national proficiency standard of Intermediate-Mid (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language [ACTFL] rating scale) on world language competency tests. Since the enactment of the Seal of Biliteracy in the 2015 school year, more than 9,000 students have qualified for the Seal award. The credit earned can be applied toward the world languages graduation requirement and meets college admission requirements.

World languages competency-based assessment and possible ensuing credit is, at the statewide level, the most mature and well-defined among competency-based assessments not required of all students. A state-level model district [policy](#) and [procedure](#) provides sufficient detail for districts to adopt local policies that can be consistently applied. Staff from three agencies (OSPI, State Board of Education [SBE], and Washington State School Directors’ Association [WSSDA]) collaborated with high school and college faculty to develop the model policy and procedure. The group identified competency-based assessments aligned to state learning standards and proficiency levels needed to earn varying numbers of credit. It recommended ways to proceed when national assessments were not readily available to assess achievement in languages that might have only an oral tradition or were simply less commonly used. It also addressed American Sign Language. WSSDA has maintained the model policy since it was developed in 2010.

Examples of several competency-based assessments that can determine student proficiency in world languages include the Standards-based Measurement of Proficiency, WorldSpeak, ALTA Language Testing, and American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) assessments such as, but not limited to: the Oral Proficiency Interview, Oral Proficiency

Interview Computer, and the Assessment of Performance toward Proficiency in Languages. American Sign Language is assessed by the Sign Language Proficiency Interview. Districts can work with local language communities, the World Languages Program at OSPI, and Washington Association for Language Teaching (WAFLT) Custom Testing to develop a collection of work and demonstrations such as LinguaFolio that are aligned with ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines to assist students seeking to show proficiency in a language that offers no nationally accepted proficiency test.

In 2019, there were 73 languages tested through competency testing in order to earn the Washington State Seal of Biliteracy. OSPI's World Languages Office and Office of Native Education are collaborating with Tribes interested in culturally-appropriate ways to assess proficiency in tribal languages.

Clear policy that designates assessments aligned with Washington learning standards, the skills/competencies students need to demonstrate, and the level of proficiency expected enables districts to provide equitable opportunities for students to earn competency-based credit.

## **Recommendations**

In the time that has elapsed since OSPI received this legislative assignment, additional legislation enacted in 2019 established a mastery-based workgroup led by the State Board of Education. The workgroup will be exploring barriers to mastery-based learning in Washington state. Among other goals, the legislation imagines an environment where "assessments are meaningful and a positive learning experience for students" (House Bill 1599, Sec. 301 [2019]). Competency-based assessment is likely to be one aspect of the SBE's work, and it is hoped that this report will provide useful information to inform the workgroup's discussions.

In the survey of district staff, OSPI also gathered input on areas in which districts could be supported to increase capacity and use of competency-based assessments. Financial resources, professional development, and examples/models were each cited by more than half of respondents, and that feedback is reflected in the recommendations below.

In addition, OSPI recommends the state consider the following strategies to promote more opportunities for competency-based learning:

- Incentivize districts to provide professional learning that promotes assessment literacy and incorporates iNACOL's quality design principles for competency-based education.

- Leverage investment in the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) to support districts' use of interim assessments as competency-based measures to evaluate student skills and knowledge.
- Address in statute the best way for competency-based programs to claim funding in a non seat-based time environment. Current statutory funding models have not adapted to practices being utilized by competency-based learning programs.
- Build on the collaborative process established for World Language competency-based credit to create content-specific model policies and procedures for districts to adopt.

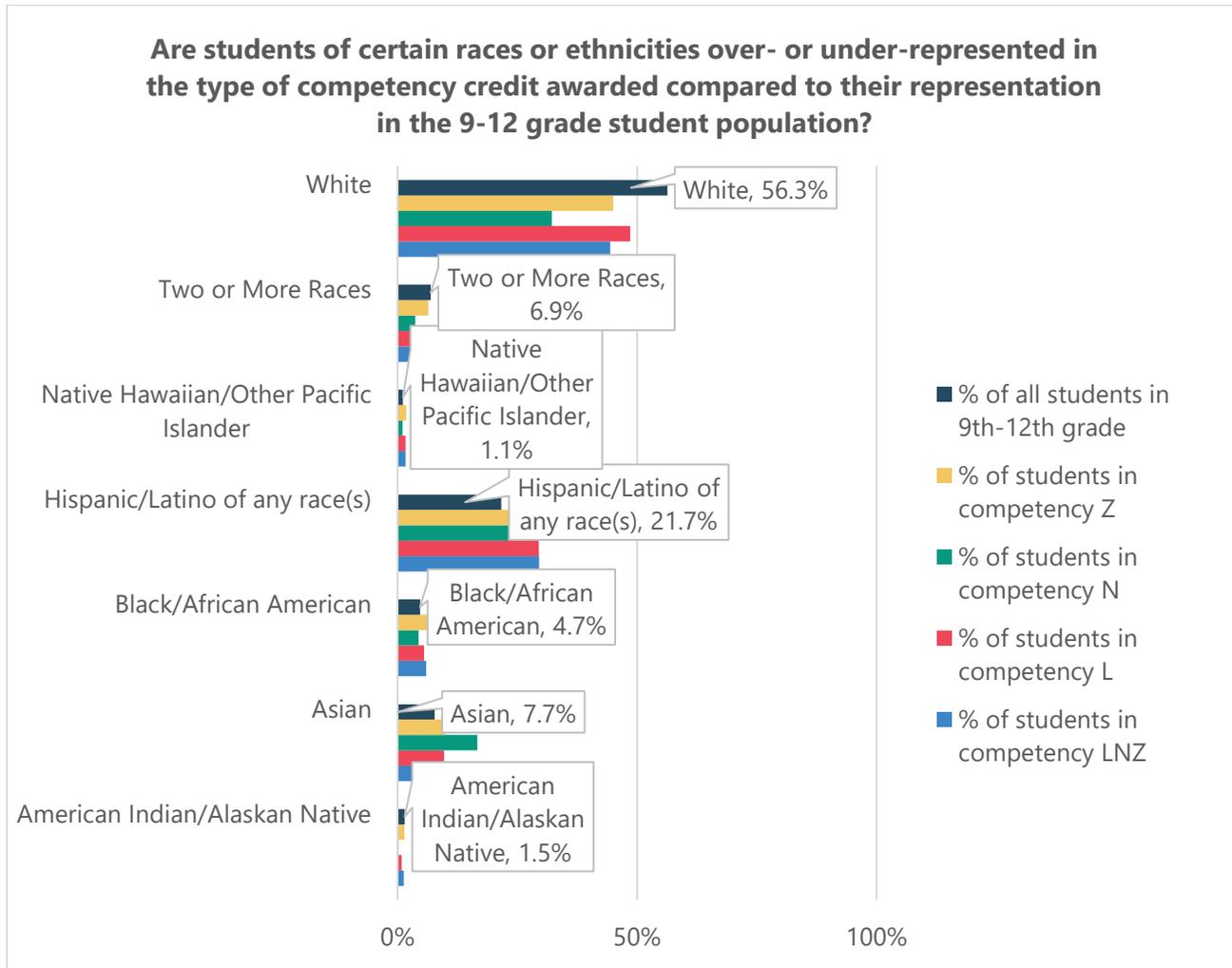
## **Conclusion and Next Steps**

Competency-based assessment can be a powerful tool to engage students and personalize learning by meeting students where they are in their knowledge and skills, and by providing them with an opportunity to show what they know and can do. Districts bear primary responsibility for selecting competency-based assessments that are aligned with state learning standards.

Anything the state can do to remove barriers to the use of competency-based assessment, reinforce the role of assessment as a positive tool for learning, and support districts to establish fair and equitable policies will reinforce the message that there are multiple pathways to meeting students' post-high school goals.

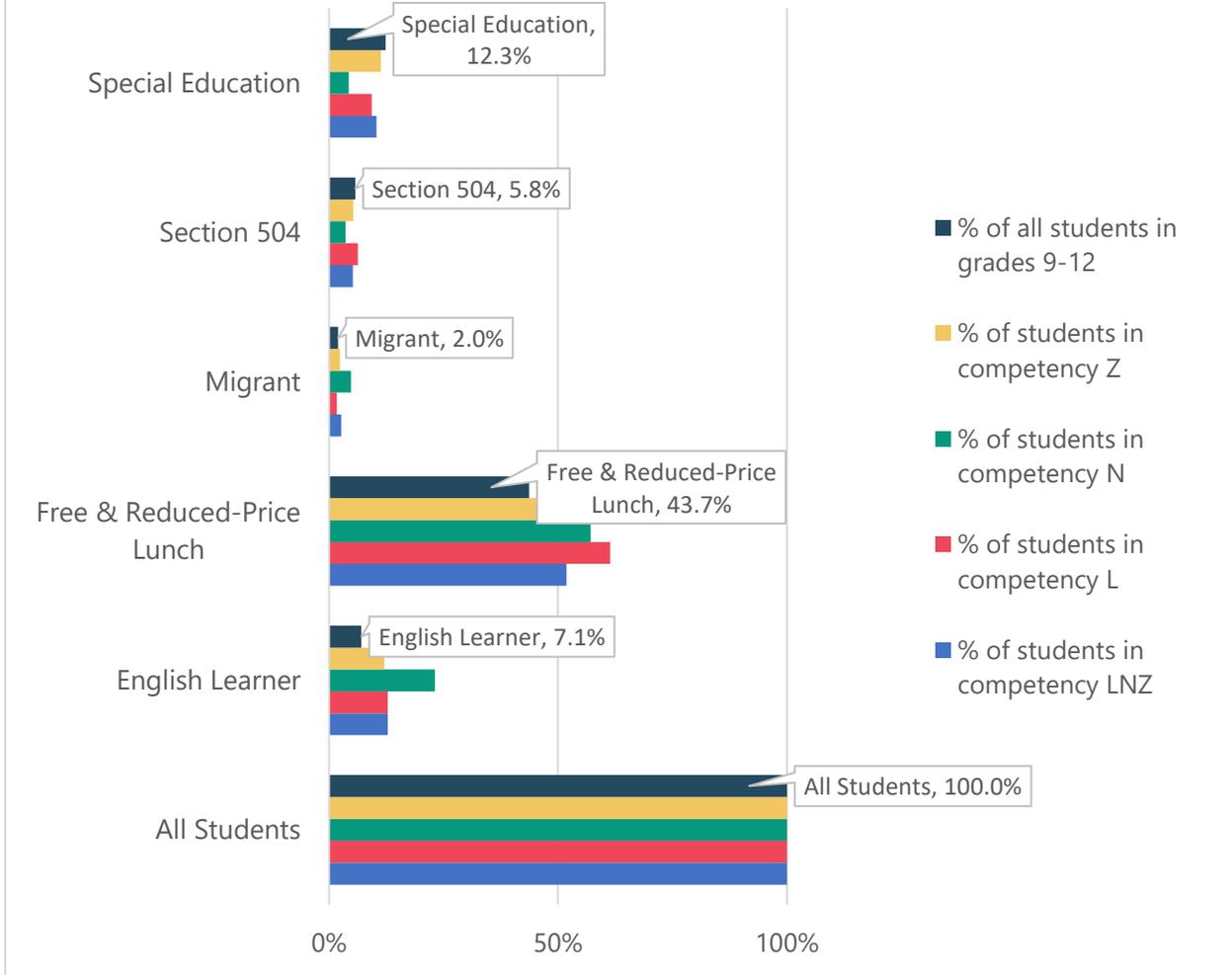
# APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Comparison by Student Group of Credit Earned in 2017–18 through National Tests, Local Tests, and Non-instructional, District-determined Options



**Source:** Comprehensive Education Data and Research System (CEDARS), pulled on October 14, 2019.

**Are certain student groups over- or under-represented in the type of competency credit awarded compared to their representation in the 9-12 grade student population?**



**Source:** Comprehensive Education Data and Research System (CEDARS), pulled on October 14, 2019.

The following definitions are included in the [CEDARS Reporting Guidance](#) for 2019–20 August 2019 Version 12.0, page 59.

- Z—Non-Instructional:** A designation used for occurrences where credit is given but there is not an actual course or instruction provided by a teacher. It is a local decision on which courses receive credit. Awarding credit for items such as the state assessments (SBA, HSPE, and EOC), alternative assessments (Portfolio, DAPE, and CAA Options), Local/National Competency Tests (STAMP, ACTFL OPI, OPIc, WPT and LinguaFolio Collection of Evidence, SLPI for ASL), senior projects, or other district determined allowances is consistent with the district option to award credit on the basis of clearly identified competencies in WAC 180-51-050. This designation will allow the record to be

submitted in CEDARS Student Grade History without a Teacher Certification Number since it is a non-instructional credit.

- **N—National Competency Test:** 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). This designation is used to indicate when a student takes a National Competency Test in place of taking the actual test and passes via the score of that test. National Competency Test designations are only used for competency-based tests given within PreK–12 schools and cannot also be Running Start. Running Start students take actual courses and not competency-based assignments.
- **L—Local Competency Test:** A test that is used only in Washington state. This designation is used to indicate when a student takes a Local Competency Test in place of taking the actual test and passes via the score of that test. Local Competency test designations are only used for competency-based tests given within PreK–12 schools and cannot also be Running Start. Running Start students take actual courses and not competency-based assignments.

## Appendix B: Sample High School Competency-based Assessments Used Locally by Content Area

Content Area	Title of Competency-based Assessment
The Arts	Teacher-Created CBA
The Arts	Face Portrait for Art
The Arts	Band Cumulative Assessment
The Arts	OSPI-Created CBA
Career and Technical Education	MOS Microsoft Office Specialist
Career and Technical Education	Microsoft Certification
Career and Technical Education	Teacher-Created CBA
Career and Technical Education	Project Created CBA
Career and Technical Education	Work-Based Learning
Career and Technical Education	Fusion 360 - CAD Certification
Career and Technical Education	Core Plus Manufacturing Assessment
Career and Technical Education	STAR Assessment/Certification
Career and Technical Education	Marketing Concepts
Career and Technical Education	SP2 Certification
Career and Technical Education	Torque Assessment/Certification
Career and Technical Education	Precision Exams: Subject-Based Skill Tests
Career and Technical Education	Precision Measurement Assessment/Certificate
Career and Technical Education	Industry Certificates (Certified Nursing Assistant, CISCO, Adobe, Para Educator, Automotive, Service Excellence (ASE), National Security Agency (Cyber Security))
Computer Science	AP Computer Science
Computer Science	AP Computer Science Principles
Computer Science	OSPI Developed Assessment
Computer Science	NNAT & CogAT
Computer Science	Bumper Sticker Computer Assessment
Computer Science	District-Developed CA
Computer Science	Teacher-Developed Assessment
English Language Arts	SBA ELA
English Language Arts	iReady for ELA
English Language Arts	AP Literature
English Language Arts	AP Language and Composition
English Language Arts	CA from WONDERS
English Language Arts	Perfection Learning

<b>Content Area</b>	<b>Title of Competency-based Assessment</b>
English Language Arts	Cog At
English Language Arts	English 9–10
English Language Arts	General Education Exam
English Language Arts	LDC/LAA Bridge to College
English Language Arts	Collection of Evidence
English Language Arts	ACT/SAT
English Language Arts	Speak Up
English Language Arts	Woodcock Johnson III
English Language Arts	Woodcock Johnson IV
Health	Stress: Concepts of Health and Fitness
Health	Presidential Fitness
Health	Teacher-Created CBA
Health	OSPI-Created CBA
Health	Pearson Health Cumulative Assessment
Health	Concepts of Health and Fitness
Health	Therapy Project
Physical Education	Non-Instructional CAs
Physical Education	PE Competency Test Met
Physical Education	Presidential Fitness
Physical Education	End of the Year Fitness Assessment
Physical Education	Fitness Planning
Physical Education	Teacher-Created CBA
Physical Education	OSPI-Created CBA
Mathematics	SBA Math
Mathematics	iReady for Mathematics
Mathematics	AP Calculus
Mathematics	Advanced Algebra and Applications
Mathematics	Algebra 1
Mathematics	Geometry 1
Mathematics	CA from Go Math
Mathematics	Collection of Evidence
Mathematics	General Education Exam
Mathematics	LDC/LAA Bridge to College
Mathematics	ACT/SAT
Mathematics	Woodcock Johnson III
Mathematics	Woodcock Johnson IV
Mathematics	Cog At
Mathematics	Orleans-Hanna Algebra Prognosis

Content Area	Title of Competency-based Assessment
Mathematics	ITBS
Science	WCAS
Science	Biology EOC
Science	General Education Exam
Science	LDC-LAA
Science	Study Island
Science	ACT/SAT
Social Studies	Checks and Balances and Civics
Social Studies	Teacher-Created CBA
Social Studies	People on the Move
Social Studies	Washington State History
Social Studies	OSPI-Created CBA
World Languages	STAMP
World Languages	ALTA
World Languages	OSPI-Developed CA
World Languages	Generic Competency-Based Exam
World Languages	Multiple Languages (ACT FL)
World Languages	WALFT Custom
World Languages	World Speak
World Languages	OPL
World Languages	OPIC

**Source:** OSPI survey of school districts, spring 2019 (91 responses).



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