

Credit for Learning: Making Learning Outside of School Count

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Student-centered, active, and engaging learning experiences that build on young people's interests, while developing their skills and knowledge, are at the heart of high-quality afterschool programs. Young people of all ages can benefit from these experiences, however, there is increasing attention on adolescence as a critical time for exposure to these types of learning opportunities. In addition to a period during which significant neurobiological and social and emotional growth occurs,¹ adolescence is a time when young people discover their interests and passions as they begin on their path toward adulthood. Creating new and engaging learning opportunities for middle and high school students can help them find their inspiration, gain skills that will benefit them in and outside of the classroom, and play an active role in designing their own learning journey to reach their full potential.

Afterschool programs can provide older youth with opportunities to explore their interests and participate in activities that also allow them to earn credits toward their graduation requirements. These credit-for-learning opportunities can cover a wide range of content—from students earning physical education credits through a local YMCA to taking part in a boat-building course for elective math or science credit. Credit-for-learning programs are a valuable resource to provide unique, challenging, and compelling learning opportunities that individualize knowledge acquisition and complement school day lessons for middle and high school youth.

“Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELOs)—our credit-for-learning programs—allow students to bring their full identities into school, for a unique, personalized learning experience. As students progress through their education, they become curious and develop interests. ELOs provide students with the opportunity to pursue interests both inside and outside the school setting that often evolve into career pathway goals after graduation.”

- Carolyn Eastman,
New Hampshire Learning Initiative

The need for credit-for-learning opportunities

Credit for learning expands educational opportunities for youth, allowing students to pursue experiences that speak to their interests and delve deeper into subject matter outside of the classroom. These programs are a resource to help promote student engagement, prepare students for life after graduation, and provide a broad range of learning experiences for young people, particularly underserved youth.

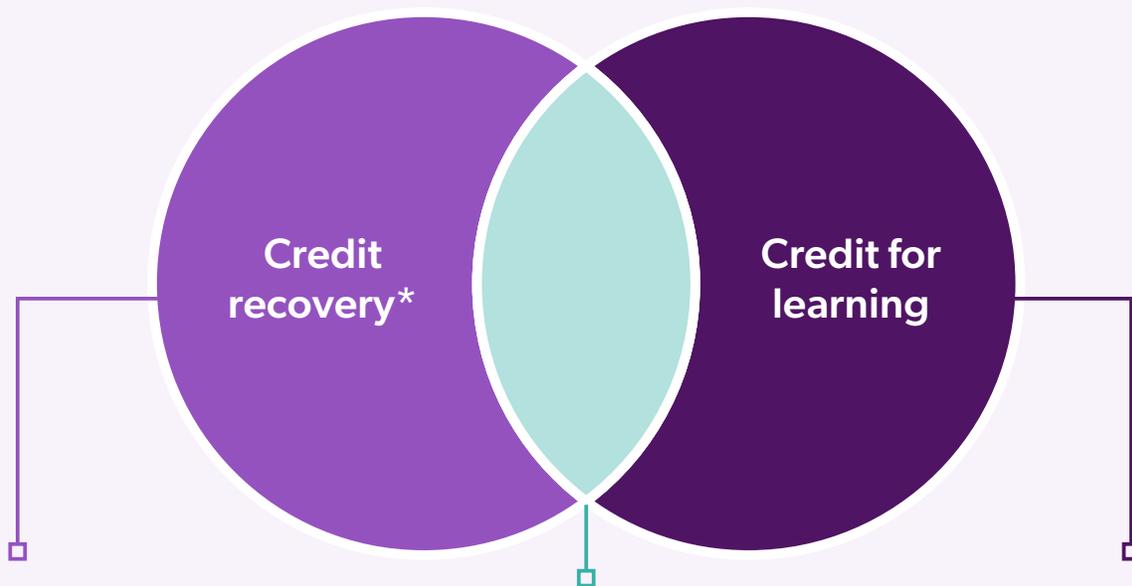
Boosting motivation and engagement by providing opportunities for student-centered learning

School engagement—where students are connected to and have strong relationships with their teachers, peers, and school²—has been found to decrease as students get older. Referred to as the “engagement cliff,” a 2016 Gallup Student Poll found that while 74 percent of 5th grade students are engaged in school, this number drops to roughly 1 in 3 when surveying high school students in the 10th (33 percent), 11th (32 percent), and 12th grades (34 percent).³



Credit recovery vs. Credit for learning

While the underlying intention of **credit recovery** and **credit for learning** differ from one another, there are overlapping strategies between the two credit earning opportunities.



- Intended for students who are **falling behind academically** or **at-risk of not graduating on time**.
- Students can **redo coursework in a class they have failed** or **retake the class** in an alternative manner, such as in summer school, during afterschool or weekend classes, or online.
- Provides opportunities to earn credits outside of the school day that count toward graduation requirements.
- Can take place in afterschool and summer programs.
- Intended for students interested in **earning additional credits** toward graduation, or students looking to **further personalize their education or pursue an interest**.
- Students can **earn credits for various activities and experiences outside of the classroom**, such as community service projects, internships or apprenticeships, independent studies, and student-led projects.

*U.S. Department of Education. (2018). Issue Brief: Credit Recovery. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/high-school/credit-recovery.pdf>

Credit for learning employs a student-centered learning approach that can help improve students' engagement in their education. In a student-centered model, students take ownership of their education and learning, and learning is individualized to address each student's "strengths, needs and interests."⁴ When students are interested in what they are learning and have the opportunity to experience and develop a sense of agency—competencies that are prioritized in the out-of-school time space—it can increase their engagement and motivation to learn.⁵ This individualized approach can be especially beneficial for older students or for youth who are disengaged from school. A study that examined the effects of student-centered learning found that students in these classroom environments reported both higher engagement levels and learning acquisition compared to students in a traditional setting.⁶

Credit for learning can provide the flexibility to better meet individual student needs, employing a personalized approach to education that accommodates different strengths and learning styles, addresses students' interests and passions, and offers students voice and choice in their educational experiences.^{7,8} In credit for learning, students can enroll in classes of interest to them or in a subject area or advanced coursework that their school is unable to provide. Young people can also participate in student-led projects that give them agency over their learning or service-learning projects that connect them to their community, all while earning credit toward graduation.

Improving college, career, and life readiness

Credit for learning provides opportunities for youth to engage in real-world learning experiences, broadening exposure to potential career paths and creating career readiness opportunities. In these hands-on and applied learning contexts, students are able to develop the skills and knowledge that will help them prepare for their future and do well in today's job market that values skills such as problem solving, collaboration, communication, and initiative.^{9,10} Additionally, some credit-for-learning models involve students working with a community mentor, enabling students to form relationships with industry professionals and build those connections starting at a young age.¹¹ Students may also complete internships or apprenticeships, both earning school credit and furthering their career readiness skills and career exploration.

Addressing opportunity gaps and advancing equity in education

Student-centered, personalized learning opportunities like those found in afterschool programs can be a crucial piece to address opportunity gaps and equity issues present in our education system. Research has shown that students attending high-poverty schools too often lack access to the same opportunities as their peers attending low-poverty schools. A Government Accountability Office report found that high schools with the highest concentration of students living in poverty, whose students were largely Black and Hispanic, were significantly less likely than schools comprised primarily of higher-income students to offer advanced courses that many colleges consider prerequisites, such as calculus (50 percent vs. 85 percent) and physics (62 percent vs. 90 percent), as well as Advanced Placement courses (60 percent vs. 80 percent).¹² Similarly, a report examining National Assessment of Educational Progress data found that elementary and middle schoolers attending the highest-poverty schools are much less likely to have access to science labs and materials, as well as less likely to regularly take part in hands-on science activities during the school day than their peers attending low-poverty schools.¹³ Credit for learning can create opportunities for youth of all backgrounds to personalize their education and pursue an interest that they are unable to during the school day.



Afterschool as a key partner to support credit for learning

A unique attribute of the afterschool field is its flexibility and responsiveness to the needs of the young people they serve. Afterschool programs are a space where youth have a voice in program offerings, can explore their interests, and take part in relevant and engaging hands-on learning activities under the guidance of positive adult mentors who create a safe and supportive setting. This environment supports whole-child development, with research finding that afterschool programs help boost engagement in school, increase motivation to learn, and are well positioned to foster high-quality relationships and provide inclusive, equitable environments.^{14,15}

Afterschool programs provide an ideal environment for innovative learning to take place, such as credit-for-learning opportunities. In a review of New Hampshire's Extended Learning Opportunities (ELOs), afterschool programs implementing credit for learning had a positive impact on student outcomes. Students who participated in ELOs were more likely to accumulate credits and be on track to graduate on time, outperform non-participating peers on the SAT, and were significantly more likely to be enrolled in college six months after graduating from high school.¹⁶

From integrating youth voice to leveraging school partnerships, afterschool programs are successfully providing opportunities for youth to earn credit for learning outside of the classroom.



Credit-for-learning insight

Credit for learning often relies on school buy-in and support from superintendents, principals, and teachers, as strong school-program partnerships allow programs to best serve students. Schools can help identify students that would be a good fit for programs, share data with programs, and generate support for credit for learning, while teachers can help programs design curriculum that align with state standards or serve as mentors in programs.

The current credit-for-learning policy landscape

A handful of states and local communities have enacted policies and initiatives around credit for learning to develop and implement credit-bearing opportunities outside of the traditional school day through afterschool and summer learning programs. Rhode Island and New Hampshire are leading the work in this area. In total, seven states have enacted credit-for-learning legislation to date.

Rhode Island's All Course Network is a statewide course catalogue designed to help districts meet students' needs and prepare students for jobs in critical sectors by creating opportunities to pursue an individualized pathway to graduation. Through the All Course Network, students can take courses that are in the areas of work-based learning, dual enrollment, career and credential, advanced placement, and enrichment in out-of-school time settings, where they receive grades and high school elective credits for their work.

New Hampshire's Extended Learning Opportunities (ELOs) allow students to acquire knowledge and skills through experiences outside of the classroom, including independent study, visual and performing arts programs, internships, community service, apprenticeships, and online courses. Each school that offers ELOs has an ELO team that assesses learning through competency-based assessments aligned with state standards. ELOs are co-designed by students, their advisors, teachers, and community partners.

Other states that have enacted legislation this year that will allow credit for learning to take place include Alabama, Mississippi, Montana, North Dakota, and West Virginia.

Sources: Rhode Island Department of Education. All Course Network. Retrieved from <https://www.ride.ri.gov/StudentsFamilies/EducationPrograms/AllCourseNetwork.aspx>

New Hampshire Department of Education. Extended Learning Opportunities. Retrieved from <https://www.education.nh.gov/partners/education-outside-classroom/extended-learning-opportunities>



Integrating youth voice and student created curriculum to promote engagement

Credit for learning in the afterschool space allows students to individualize and direct their learning in subject matter that speaks to their interests. **Riverzedge Arts** in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, incorporates student voice throughout their Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELO)* program, from students selecting the credit-for-learning topic to determining the composition of their final project. At the start of the program, students are surveyed to learn about their general interests and credit needs. The program then looks for industry partners and classes they can offer to fit those interests, working with the school to ensure students can earn the credit they need. During the ELO, students team up with their industry mentor to design a final project that an accredited teacher will evaluate for credit. For example, through their Healthy Lifestyles ELO, students worked with a local health care center and a local filmmaker to create a video on teen sexual health. Students developed the content for the film, which included information about sexual and reproductive rights of teenagers, as well as information about healthy relationships. For this project, a health teacher evaluated the material and students received elective physical education credit for their work.

Similarly, at **Laconia School District's Extended Learning Opportunities (ELO) program**† in New Hampshire, ELOs are student-owned and directed, with a teacher, community mentor, and the district's dedicated ELO coordinator supporting and guiding high schoolers in the design and execution of their project, which can take the course of one or two semesters. Initiated by students based on an interest they want to pursue, ELOs develop organically and lead to a wide range of topics covered, from improving photography skills to learning to become a real estate agent. Throughout the ELO, students work toward meeting the benchmarks outlined in their individual learning plan. At the end of the term, students present their final product to a panel of stakeholders to demonstrate what they have learned. For example, a student who wanted to learn about athletic program management worked alongside the school's athletic director to learn about scheduling, logistical planning, budgets, and working with game officials. Through the ELO, the student created spreadsheets to highlight school sports teams' statistics, scheduled umpires for games, helped prepare budgets, and set up various events and ceremonies, earning a general elective credit at the end of the semester.

Creating a path for career exploration and readiness

YouthForce NOLA, in New Orleans, Louisiana, prepares students for full-time careers post-graduation. Two of their programs—an internship program and technical training provider program—allow students to earn elective credits toward graduation. Through their technical training provider program, YouthForce partners with nine third-party training providers—such as the New Orleans Technical Education Training Center and the New Orleans Career Center—to help students develop job-specific technical skills and earn industry-recognized credentials after school in areas including digital media and information technology, carpentry, and cyber security. In addition to the credentials students earn that help them secure high-demand jobs after graduation, YouthForce works as an intermediary to ensure that students earn high school credits that count toward graduation requirements. YouthForce's internship program provides students the opportunity to earn credit after school, taking part in job skills training, career development workshops, and paid work experience. This past spring, 23 students earned course credit for after school internships, and more than 40 students earned industry-based credentials in after school technical training during the 2020-2021 school year.

* While most programs in Rhode Island refer to their credit-earning programs as "courses" through the All Course Network, Riverzedge Arts uses the terminology "Expanded Learning Opportunities" (ELO) to describe its credit-earning program.

† In New Hampshire, Laconia School District offers the "Extended Learning Opportunities" (ELO) program.

Digital badging: Another approach to credit

Digital badges are validated indicators of accomplishment, skill, quality, or interest that can be earned in various learning environments. While they do not provide credit toward graduation requirements, digital badges are another way to recognize the learning that takes place out of school.

At **Reel Works**, a filmmaking program that pairs teens with professional filmmaker-mentors in Brooklyn, New York, students can earn badges to signify credentials in areas such as film editing, photography, and animation. The badges were developed in partnership with local businesses, and are recognized by prospective employers as credentials that reflect work-readiness skills.

Through dozens of organizations that are part of Chicago's out-of-school ecosystem and found through **My CHI. My Future**, youth can earn badges by completing different online challenges or participating in programs across the city. Badges run the gamut from earning a badge in goal setting through the Malott Family Zoo Intern Program to an automation and robotics badge through Project SYNCERE, an organization focused on increasing STEM opportunities for students traditionally underrepresented in STEM fields.

South Carolina's **College and Career Innovation Digital Badge (CCIDB)** program provides digital indicators of a student's college and career readiness. Students earn digital badges in four areas—Life and Career Characteristics (such as work ethic and direction), World Class Skills (such as teamwork and creativity), World Class Knowledge (such as STEM and grammar), and Trekking (such as CPR and entrepreneurship).

In Wasilla, Alaska, students attending Burchell High School, an alternative school in the Matanuska-Susitna school district, have their choice of experiential and project-based learning electives through the **L.E.A.D. Afterschool program**. Burchell High School often serves students from difficult backgrounds, serving the district's highest population of homeless students and teen parents. A program priority is to help young people prepare for life after graduation by connecting students with opportunities to explore career options, as well as developing leadership and collaboration skills, critical thinking skills, and goal-setting and planning skills. Due to the school's small size, it relies on L.E.A.D. Afterschool to offer elective courses, many of which are career-focused. For example, a current elective is restaurant management, where students learn the basics of running a restaurant, including ordering supplies, hiring quality workers, maintaining inventory, and managing a large staff. Throughout the course, students gain a better understanding of essential concepts in the food industry, such as food safety, hygiene, customer relations, and marketing. For this elective, students earn a half credit in culinary arts and a half credit in entrepreneurship.

Fostering relationships to create a strong sense of belonging

At **FabNewport** in Newport, Rhode Island, middle and high school students can take classes through the state's All Course Network for high school credit, allowing students to take advanced computer science classes that their schools are unable to offer, or take a class in a subject area that they are interested in. For example, students were able to take part in a Native American history class and learn about the history of Indigenous peoples through oral history telling, native musical performances, and culturally relevant arts activities taught by a local Native American musician. Regardless of the course content, relationships, particularly those between teachers and students, are at the core of learning in the program. FabNewport aims to create an environment where all students feel safe, valued, and heard. For FabNewport, these teacher-student relationships often begin in elementary school, well before students are able to sign up for the All Course Network. The program establishes a relationship with students through their typical afterschool programming, and as they foster the relationship through high school, they also encourage students to take All Course Network classes. FabNewport has found that these teacher-student relationships help cultivate a strong sense of belonging and community among the students in the program, keeping them coming back.

Leveraging school partnerships to best serve students

School partnerships are an essential component in the credit for learning work. **Sail Academy**, a boat-building and sailing program for high school students in New York City, New York, has a collaborative relationship with seven public high schools in the area to help students earn elective credits in math, science, and physical education. The partnership model is mutually beneficial, with Sail Academy looking to schools they serve to recommend students, while the schools depend on the program to offer enrichment opportunities that they are unable to provide. Through the close relationships with school-day staff, Sail Academy is able to stay up-to-date on how their students are doing during the school day and the individualized supports that would best meet their needs in real time. To provide accountability and solidify the partnerships, Sail Academy has contracts with each school that includes expectations and responsibilities of each entity. Overall, 98 percent of 9th grade students, 94 percent of 10th grade students, and 63 percent of 11th and 12th grade students at Sail Academy earned at least one full credit during the 2019-20 school year, with nearly all students across grades earning at least a half credit.

Conclusion

In credit-for-learning programs, students can pursue experiences that speak to their interests, boosting their motivation and engagement in learning, or explore different career options while building the social and emotional skills and competencies needed for work and life. Credit for learning also provides an opportunity to address inequities in our education system by giving students in under-resourced schools access to engaging enrichment content, hands-on projects, and opportunities to challenge themselves outside of the classroom. Afterschool programs, which employ supportive mentors, promote youth voice, and create compelling learning experiences, are well positioned to support credit-for-learning opportunities that personalize learning for students from all backgrounds.



Credit-for-learning insight

In the early 2000s, New York City began its small schools movement, where the New York City Department of Education took large struggling public high schools throughout the city and broke them up into several new smaller schools of choice to better serve some of the district's historically underserved youth. One common feature of this movement was partnerships between schools and nonprofit and community organizations. Schools looked to outside groups, including community-based organizations, to offer enrichment opportunities for their students outside of the school and school day, engendering a dynamic for credit-for-learning opportunities.

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