

Alternative High School Graduation Pathways



Executive Summary

Colleges, employers, and communities expect that students who earn high school diplomas will be prepared for success after graduation, whether in higher education, the workforce or civic life. Allowing students to advance through high school based on subject mastery rather than credit hours is an emerging approach that is meant to improve high school completion and ensure college and career readiness in the United States. [Senate Bill 34](#) and [House Bill 624](#) would establish the “Show Me Success Diploma” as an alternative high school graduation pathway available after the tenth grade. Diploma recipients who have demonstrated mastery of the established standards can stay enrolled in high school or move on to a job or college. For students who enroll in a postsecondary institution before the end of their twelfth year, 90% of the state, local and federal funds that would have been spent on their high school education will be deposited into a Missouri Education Savings Account in their name.

Highlights

- High school graduation standards are typically determined by credit hours, or “seat time.” However, **existing high school diploma standards may not be indicative of a student’s college & career readiness.**
- **Several states and school districts have started to implement competency-based education innovations** over the past decade, including alternative high school graduation standards. Arizona’s Grand Canyon Diploma Program, which most closely mirrors the Show Me Success Diploma, has graduated almost two hundred students over seven years.

Limitations

- Because most accelerated diploma programs are relatively new and vary across states and school districts, there is **limited research about how these programs affect high school graduation rates, college enrollment and completion.**
- It is **difficult to predict the number of students that would participate in and complete the proposed program in Missouri** and therefore the costs of program implementation.
- Although students who enroll in college early are likely to attend local community colleges or trade schools, there is **not enough information to determine the social-emotional impacts of students entering college at a younger age than their peers.**

Research Background

High school graduation requirements: seat time vs. mastery

For over a century, most American high schools have determined graduation requirements based on seat time, or the number of hours spent in particular courses. However, there is evidence that,

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in the accelerated program, in comparison to almost 3,500 Tennessee students who graduated early during that time under the traditional system.⁹ Senate Bill 34/House Bill 624 would not prevent motivated Missouri students from using the traditional graduation pathway to graduate early. Rather, it would establish a unique, additional approach to evaluating and progressing students through school based on their understanding of specific subjects.

Several states (e.g., Indiana, Illinois, Colorado) are currently implementing pilot programs to allow for high school diploma flexibility based on mastery rather than seat time. The provisions in Senate Bill 34 & House Bill 624 most closely mirror the existing [Arizona Grand Canyon Diploma Program](#). The diploma option is currently available to over 45,000 students in over 20 Arizona high schools, nearly 50% of whom are Latinx and over half of whom live in low-income households. Seven years after the legislation passed, 192 students had received the Grand Canyon Diploma. At this stage, however, there is insufficient information to compare college and workforce outcomes of Grand Canyon Diploma recipients to those students who receive a traditional diploma. It is also unclear how many students attempted, but did not complete, the accelerated diploma program. Since the program was implemented, Arizona has observed a slight increase in the high school graduation, but it is not possible to directly attribute this to the Grand Canyon Diploma program.

One concern about early high school graduation is that students will miss out on the high school experiences that are important for their social-emotional development and future success in college & the workforce. However, for students who might otherwise drop out of high school and those who feel prepared for the next step, the accelerated pathway increases educational options. Finally, states that have unsuccessfully attempted to roll out a statewide overhaul of all four-year, credit-based graduation requirements (e.g., Maine), highlight the importance of clear, state-level guidance and school district standards and the availability of sufficient training and resources to facilitate implementation of any competency-based program.

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