Assessing + Recognizing the Prior Learning of Transfer Students

What You Need to Know

• The assessment and interpretation of a transfer student’s transcript is the responsibility of the principal or his/her designee, as required by state law and determined by local policy.
• A student’s transcript is the official document representing the full range of student work and achievement.
• Proficiency-based transcripts should provide a more detailed representation concerning what students know and are able to do.

What You Need to Do

• Recognize that your system and the sending system will most likely not be in complete alignment.
• Accept that the interpretation process of prior learning will not be perfect.
• Ensure structures are in place to allow for smooth transitions for new students.
• Develop consistent guidelines for interpreting transfer students’ transcripts to ensure that they are not disadvantaged by interpretations of prior experience.

Timeline

Summer 2017

Reminder: The steps we recommend and the resources we provide are grounded in the PBL Simplified Model we have created and assume a general level of familiarity with it.

When students transfer to a district from another high school, they arrive with a transcript consisting of grades, courses, and credits from their prior system. In cases where the transfer student is coming from a school that records achievement by classes, not specific learning standards, receiving schools must first determine which standards incoming students have demonstrated. Requiring students to take a battery of assessments to determine this is logistically difficult, if not impossible. Consequently, principals or their designees have to make decisions based on information provided by the student’s transcript.

We would suggest that standards that are customarily covered in a parallel course offered at the receiving school be recognized as having been learned and demonstrated by the student who took this course at his or her previous school. We recognize that in almost all cases, the exact learning standards are not the same, but in actuality, this process is no different than the one currently used where, for example, a credit in Algebra I is recognized universally by sending and receiving schools. Courses with more ambiguous titles, such as “freshman seminar” for example, would be accepted at face value as a credit but, in the absence of more detailed standards-based reporting, would not as demonstration of specific standards. If students in the receiving schools collect evidence in some sort of portfolio for demonstration purposes, transferring students could present work from these courses to demonstrate learning, in much the same way as a student would use evidence from an internship. Further, while we recognize that due to averaging of assessment results, a student is likely not to have achieved uniformly on all standards in a course, the single course grade will have to suffice as a best approximation of learning for each standard. As proficiency-based transcripts become more frequent, such translation processes will most likely need to change. In future cases, principals or their designees may actually be able to track specific standards and provide targeted interventions based on transfer needs—a reality we hope to see in the coming years.

Timing of the transfer must also be considered. Students who transfer and still have several years of learning to undertake should have ample time in their new schools to demonstrate required levels of proficiency. Students who transfer later in their high school careers present a more complex issue. It may be necessary to provide a graduating student with a transcript that
clearly denotes achievement demonstrated in both schools to fairly and accurately document the differences and how the receiving school determined qualifications for the diploma.

Most districts will describe the transfer process in policy. The following are a few helpful strategies to consider:

- If the receiving school honors graduates based upon a GPA, the receiving school should calculate a GPA from the data provided on the transcript from the sending school. The school will have to determine, based upon the number of courses or credits, and years at the schools, how to weigh the sending school's GPA. These decisions ultimately rest with the principal. Having this process in policy and available to parents eases anxiety in the transfer process. This process is even more straightforward if the receiving school has eliminated the practice of sorting students based on GPA, in favor of a Latin Honors system that recognizes deeper learning for every student.

- Receiving schools should develop a translation process for various incoming grading systems.

- Students transferring in the middle of a grading term should be assessed by the receiving school’s system. In these cases teachers would have to review the student’s progress in the course up to that point and make a reasonable and fair judgment at the end of the grading term. A proficiency grading system that more heavily weighs summative assessments aligned with the same set of performance indicators completed later in the term, e.g. decaying average or trending, is advantageous in this situation.

- Transfer students may not have a record of achievement that completely aligns with the receiving school’s specific performance indicators. In some cases, student scores on performance indicators at the receiving school will provide adequate data to determine achievement of the graduation standard. When this is not the case, and the sending school’s transcript reports learning by graduation standards, the transcript should note that the student met the graduation standard in accordance with data from their previous school.

- When student achievement in the receiving school raises concerns based upon daily formative assessment data, a range of supports should be provided—regardless of data from the previous school.

Whatever system is in place, the true meaning of the diploma and where learning has been demonstrated is described in the transcript, which communicates the level of proficiency achieved. The transcript documents courses and standards achieved in different schools as well as the student’s proficiency levels in the content area at the time of graduation. While not always uniformly possible for transfer students who have learned and demonstrated achievement through multiple systems, the transcript should provide a more accurate picture of what the student actually knows and is able to do.

It’s easy to get sidetracked by debating the meaning and value of the local diploma. It’s important to remember that—when taken together—the transcript, the school profile, and the diploma are opportunities for schools to clearly showcase what students have achieved and the ways in which they have distinguished themselves.

Resources

- District Policy Exemplar: Transcripts
- Exemplar High School Transcript
- Exemplar High School Profile
- SAT/ACT Prep Online: How to Transfer High Schools: A Complete Guide
- New York State Education Department Transfer Students Q/As