

A GUIDE TO THE USE OF OPTION TWO

BACKGROUND

N.J.A.C. 6A:8-5.1(a) directs local boards of education to develop, adopt, and implement requirements for a State-endorsed diploma. Traditionally, this has consisted of a series of “credits” in required content areas, with the State dictating a minimal number of credits needed for graduation from high school. Local school districts are permitted to establish additional course or credit requirements. Credits are based on “seat time;” that is, if a class meets five times per week for 40 minutes or more, the student is awarded five credits for successful completion of the class. In recent years, states have begun to encourage variations in traditional seat time programs, such as block scheduling or a redesigned senior year experience.

As part of the department’s commitment to standards-based reform, the State Board of Education adopted regulations in 2001 that more clearly connected the high school graduation requirements to the Core Curriculum Content Standards. The new regulations clarified an existing alternative practice, then in N.J.A.C.6:3-4A.1(c)ii. Subsequently, the department received numerous inquiries about the use of Option Two and its impact on student graduation, promotion, and achievement. Informal feedback indicated that many local school districts did not understand how Option Two might be used and, as a result, did not use it. In June 2009, the State Board adopted revised high school graduation regulations that provide clarification about how Option Two might be used in local school districts.

NEW JERSEY CORE CURRICULUM CONTENT STANDARDS

The New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards establish a core body of knowledge and skills that all students need in order to become healthy, productive, well-informed employable citizens of an ever-expanding and changing world. The department acknowledges, however, that all students will not achieve the standards in the same way, at the same pace, or with the same level of success. In order to maximize student achievement, the department encourages local school districts to permit alternative learning experiences that are stimulating and intellectually challenging, and that enable students to fulfill or exceed the expectations set forth in the Core Curriculum Content Standards. Option Two (N.J.A.C. 6A:8-5.1(a)2) of the high school graduation requirements allows local school districts to design and/or approve educational experiences that serve as an alternative to traditional instruction and provide meaningful learning experiences that support student achievement of the Core Curriculum Content Standards.

This guide provides local districts with a series of important considerations that should be addressed when considering the implementation of an Option Two program. However, it is the responsibility of the district board of education and administration to ensure that such programs support the achievement of the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards

PURPOSE

The purpose of Option Two is to provide educational experiences that are meaningful and relevant, and that provide students with opportunities to explore and achieve at high levels. Option Two allows local school districts to design and implement curricular programs that meet the needs of all students. The regulations support student participation in deep and meaningful learning experiences that advance student learning and focus on student interest and abilities. Option Two allows students to obtain credit for learning experiences outside of the traditional classroom environment. Some of these experiences may provide real-world connections not available in the school setting. Other learning experiences may go beyond what the traditional high school can provide, allowing students to participate in research, international study, or college-level work. Appendix A provides district examples of Option Two programs.

Option Two, or program completion, permits district boards of education to determine and establish curricular activities or programs aimed at achieving the Core Curriculum Content Standards for promotion and graduation purposes. Option Two serves as an alternative to traditional seat time programs and involves in-depth experiences that may be internal (provided by school district personnel) or external (provided by instructors not employed by the school district). Option Two may include, but is not limited to, one or more of the following: independent study; online learning; study abroad programs; student exchange programs; and structured learning experiences, including, but not limited to, work-based programs, internships, apprenticeships, and service-learning experiences. In addition, *N.J.A.C. 6A:8-5.1(a)2iii* permits district boards of education to recognize successful completion of an accredited college course that assures achievement of the knowledge and skills delineated in the Core Curriculum Content Standards or includes learning that builds on and goes beyond the standards.

POLICY AND IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

Local School District Roles and Responsibilities

N.J.A.C. 6A:8-5.1(a) requires district boards of education to develop, adopt, and implement requirements for a State-endorsed diploma. Local boards establish the number of credits, over and above State requirements, that students need in order to graduate. In addition, each district board of education is required by N.J.A.C. 6A:8-5.1(a)2i through iii to develop policies to allow students to achieve the Core Curriculum Content Standards through Option Two. In order for an Option Two program to be successful, district boards of education, school administrators, and teachers must ensure that policies and procedures are in place and that they are carried out with fidelity.

The **District Board of Education** must approve general policies and procedures for the implementation of Option Two as well as any performance or competency assessments

that will be used to determine student completion of programs. The board must ensure that programs and related assessments are based on specific instructional objectives aimed at meeting or exceeding the Core Curriculum Content Standards. Group programs shall be approved by the board in the same manner as with other courses while individual requests shall be reviewed and approved according to the local board-adopted policy required by the regulations at N.J.A.C. 6A:8-5.1(a)2i. District boards of education must ensure equitable access to such programs while weighing the overall benefits and costs to the student(s) and the district as a whole. District policies must clearly address issues such as student safety, transportation, tuition, and fees. The safety of students involved in Option Two programs is of critical importance. The district board of education must ensure that approved programs comply with applicable laws and regulations (e.g., child labor laws, occupational safety). District boards should consider the need for procedures that are consistent with their own employment practices, such as criminal background checks and employee physical examinations.

The **Chief School Administrator** must ensure that the district board of education has full understanding of the proposed use of Option Two. It is important for the success of the program that the superintendent delegate responsibility for the program to the high school principal. The superintendent should also allow district curriculum specialists and/or department supervisors to support the principal in the review of Option Two requests as well as with the selection and implementation of proficiency or competency assessments. In addition, the chief school administrator should engage in discussions with K-8 sending districts to ensure that policies, procedures, and expectations for coursework prior to high school and related proficiency assessments are aligned. The chief school administrator must ensure that annual data collection takes place and that a regular program evaluation is completed and reported to the board and the public.

The **Principal** has primary responsibility and authority for the implementation of the Option Two program and must oversee all aspects of the program. This can best be accomplished through the implementation of a building-level Option Two Review Committee, comprised of the principal, other administrators, teachers, and other staff members. This committee assists the principal to collect and review pertinent information about the proposed Option Two program and recommends to the principal the approval or disapproval of the alternative activity. The committee may also suggest possible Option Two opportunities and should be involved in the identification and/or development of appropriate assessments. In order to certify completion of the curricular programs and activities based upon adopted district procedures (*N.J.A.C. 6A:5.2i(2)(C)*), principals must develop mechanisms to document student progress and program completion on student records. The principal is ultimately responsible for certifying that the student has successfully completed the program. The success of the Option Two experience rests on the building principal.

Content Area Supervisors should assist with communication, documentation, and assessment and provide regular feedback to the principal to ensure that students in alternative programs will be able to meet or exceed the core standards. Supervisors may

also assist with the review and approval of programs or selection of teachers and mentors for Option Two activities.

School Counselors should be involved in developing and maintaining a documentation process. Policies that address class rank, grade point average, and honors status need to be addressed.

District Teaching Staff Members are an important part of the Option Two program. It is imperative that teachers employed by the district board of education follow accepted policies and procedures for course proposals, approvals, and documentation. Teacher commitment, participation, and engagement in the process will contribute to successful learning experiences for the students.

Instructors not employed by the district must be consulted regarding how the program design aligns with the Core Curriculum Content Standards and is of sufficient rigor to ensure student achievement. Principals must ensure that the qualifications and experience of the instructor match the outcome of the Option Two program. Instructors in Option Two programs must also provide evidence that the program is safe and in compliance with child safety and/or labor laws. Instructors must participate in ongoing communication and reporting, generally with the building principal or designee, to ascertain student progress and course completion.

Parents/guardians may initiate a request for Option Two status for an existing school-sponsored course or activity. They may also request that an external program, taught by an individual who is not employed by the district board of education, be used to fulfill state and local requirements. The high school principal based on local district policies determines whether this request results in an Option Two program. The parent/guardian must comply with any requests for information about external programs, in order to ensure that the student participates in activities that are safe, rigorous, and aligned with the standards and local curriculum. The principal is responsible for verifying that the activities are appropriate. In addition, when a student participates in an external program, his/her parents/guardians may be responsible for paying for the course or activity or providing transportation, specialized equipment, or materials. Regular communication between the instructor, the school, and the parent/guardian is essential to program success.

Students who participate in Option Two programs have some additional responsibilities regarding what they are learning in the program. They must keep accurate records of attendance and assignments and share them, upon request, with school staff. In addition, students must participate in the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) or other State Competency Assessments, such as those in algebra I or biology, and may be required to participate in local assessment programs. Students should be called upon to provide school officials with an evaluation of their Option Two experiences.

Policy and Program Development: Questions to Consider

In order to ensure that all educational experiences are of the highest quality, district boards of education and school administrators should consider the following questions as they develop policies and procedures to implement Option Two. These questions provide guidance for policy development; however, the answers may vary from district to district.

1. What is the application process?

- When will applications be accepted (e.g. rolling, by July 1)?
- Who submits the initial application? Is a written application necessary? What should be included on the application?
- If the application is for a group of students, will each student be required to complete a separate application?
- What procedures must be in place to accommodate a student in grade 8 in a sending district who wants to pursue Option Two upon enrollment in a receiving high school? When transferring from a K-8 private school to a 9-12 public high school? Will the high school grant "credit" for work completed prior to grade 9?
- If a student applies for an external program, does the application require that the student's parents/guardians hold the local school district harmless for liability? Are parents/guardians informed that schools are not required to perform background checks on external instructors?
- Who must approve the application? Will all requests be approved at one board meeting?
- If an application is denied, can a student or group of students reapply at a later date? Can a student appeal a denial?
- Is there sufficient interest in this activity to develop a new course offering that is open to all students in the school?
- Can a new student enrolling from out-of-district request Option Two credit for coursework completed prior to enrolling in the current school (e.g., enrolling from out-of-state or country or from a private high school)?

2. How can we ensure that the proposed program provides high quality instruction?

- What are the credentials of the teacher or instructor? Is the person qualified to address all of the aligned standards?
- How has the program been evaluated?
- What, if any, are past successes or problems with the program?
- What do other schools or participants say about the program? Do they recommend it?
- What is the program's duration? Is the program seasonal? Does it align with the marking period, semester, or school year? If the program does not align with the regular school schedule, how will the student be accommodated?
- What does the program cost? Will specialized equipment or materials be required? Will the student require transportation?

- Does the program align with the CCCS and local objectives? How does the program address knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviors? How does the program promote higher level thinking, real world application, and/or complex problem solving?
- Does the course require travel (e.g., student exchange)? Who will pay for the activities?
- Will the student require release time in order to participate?
- Is the program offered in a safe environment, conducive to learning?
- What, if any, child labor (e.g., working papers) or safety laws (e.g., hazardous occupations or conditions) must be adhered to in the program?
- If the student is participating in worksite program, is there a signed agreement between the school, student, business, and parent/guardian?
- What forms of assessment are planned? Is assessment aligned with the program?
- Does this program unfairly favor or advantage a particular student or group of students? Would approval of this program negatively or positively impact the student population?
- If the student is eligible for special education services and has an IEP, is the proposed program aligned with the special education plan? Will the program require modifications?

3. How will student progress and the completion of the activities be documented?

- Will students receive a grade? Pass/fail? Who will award the grade?
- How will student achievement be documented? What kinds of progress reports will be required? Who is responsible? Will a statement of assurances be sufficient evidence of course completion?
- How will student "credit" be determined for graduation? How will school counselors "mix" traditional credit and Option Two coursework to determine course placement and options?
- How will Option Two courses impact a student's grade point average and honors status (e.g. valedictorian)?
- If a student cannot successfully complete the alternative program, what happens? What evidence of attendance will be required?
- Will students be expected to participate in local assessments (e.g., final exams)? Will the program support or interfere with student achievement on the HSPA or other State Competency Assessments, such as those in algebra I or biology?
- How will the local district accommodate students who have already completed Option Two courses in another school district?
- If a student takes and passes a proficiency exam prior to high school entrance, must a high school accept the results of the exam in lieu of credit? Can a high school require the student to take another course at a higher level before awarding credit?

- Will the use of Option Two impact the student's athletic eligibility now or in college? (Go to www.ncaa.org for more information on core course requirements.)
- What happens if the student quits or is no longer able to participate in the alternative activity (e.g., an injury or illness, family hardship)?

SAMPLE PROGRAMS

The department will work with the county superintendents on an ongoing basis to identify programs that implement Option Two.

SUMMARY

New Jersey high school students must complete a local program of study of not fewer than 120 credits in courses designed to meet all of the Core Curriculum Content Standards. The State Board of Education adopted regulations that require all students to attain a set amount of course "credits" in each of the core content areas. However, the 120-credit requirement may be met in whole or in part by program completion, commonly referred to as "Option Two." *N.J.A.C. 6A:8-5.1(a)2* provides the regulatory framework for district boards of education to adopt policies and procedures for the implementation of Option Two. District boards should consider how the flexibility afforded by the use of Option Two will provide students with enriching, stimulating, and meaningful learning experiences that enhance student achievement of the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards.

