

## FINDING THE RIGHT STARTING POINT

# Obtaining, Interpreting, and Evaluating International Transcripts

**N**ewcomer immigrant students enter U.S. high schools with a wide range of education experiences, and they have limited time to adapt to new environments and master English, if necessary. Schools are obligated to provide newcomer students with an education that allows them to earn a regular high school diploma within a reasonable length of time and prepares them to meet college entrance requirements. Thus, students must be placed in courses that are appropriate to their level of academic knowledge—which requires evaluating international transcripts. Clear policies and guidelines for this process increase consistency, improve fairness and transparency, and support students' efforts to graduate.



## FINDING THE RIGHT STARTING POINT

# Three Steps for Evaluating International Transcripts

1

## Obtaining and translating transcripts

The first step for any school, district, or external evaluator is to obtain the transcripts. However, requesting transcripts from students' home countries can be a lengthy process. Additionally, students may not have records from previous schools, or their records may be difficult to authenticate. The following strategies can help improve the process of obtaining and translating international transcripts:

- **Centralize the intake process** for newcomer students in the district office or a newcomer center, where staff members have experience working with students from other countries and often speak one of the most represented languages.
- **If in-house translation is not possible, contract with outside agencies** or refer families to consulates, refugee or immigrant centers, or community groups that can provide translation services.
- **Re-create students' academic histories if transcripts are missing.** Gather key information, such as course names, hours of instructional time, length of courses, and grades obtained. Use structured interviews with students and families to gather additional information about academic history and course content.



2

## Interpreting prior schooling experiences

Translating course names is usually not enough to evaluate international transcripts, as identically named courses completed in another country may vary in key characteristics, such as content, hours of instruction, and grading practices. To accurately interpret the courses listed on a transcript, districts must have current and accurate information about the corresponding country's education system. Here are some ways to help ensure international transcripts are correctly interpreted:

- **Standardize course equivalencies** by gathering detailed information about education systems in the countries your newcomer students are most likely to come from.
- **Periodically update advisors' knowledge** of education systems in students' home countries and document the new information.
- **Consider utilizing a foreign credential evaluation service** for professional interpretation of international transcripts.



### 3

## Making decisions about credit transfer and placement

The final step in international transcript evaluation is deciding how students' past coursework will count, in terms of the number of allowable transfer credits and how previous coursework will be applied to graduation requirements. Standardized procedures for awarding credit are critical to ensure all newcomer students receive fair and consistent treatment.

**Districts should develop clear guidelines and policies that specify:**

- **Who is responsible** for the evaluation of international transcripts
- **Allowable substitutions and waivers** for courses required for graduation, by subject area
- **How credits should be recorded** on the cumulative record, as well as the course titles and numbers that should be used
- **Guidelines for converting grades** to the 4.0 scale
- **How many credits will be allowed for each year of study** outside the United States and whether there will be any caps on allowable credits
- **How the language of instruction impacts credit transfer**, if applicable (e.g., does a language arts class taken in a language other than English count for language arts credit, world language credit, or elective credit?)
- **The role of exams**
- **The process for students and families to appeal** the district's credit-awarding decision



### FLIP FOR RESOURCES

Download sample guides, policies, and procedures to support your efforts to accurately and consistently award credits to newcomer students.

# Resources

1

## Obtaining and translating transcripts

**Working with Refugee Students in Secondary Schools** from the Minnesota Department of Education offers guidance to counselors on a range of topics related to refugee students. It includes step-by-step procedures on interviewing, researching, evaluating, and interpreting international transcripts.

➔ <http://bit.ly/working-with-refugees>

**The Metropolitan Area Foreign Student Advisors (MAFSA)** provides several useful resources, including a document with translations of course titles for 21 languages.

➔ <http://bit.ly/MAFSA-resources>

**Seattle Public Schools Transcript Evaluation Worksheet** provides a district example of how to make credit decisions, explain options for credit earned by exam, and document course equivalency decisions.

➔ <http://bit.ly/SPS-transcript-eval-worksheet>

2

## Interpreting prior schooling experiences

**Evaluating Foreign Transcripts: The A–Z Manual** from the New York City Department of Education provides step-by-step guidelines for how to evaluate foreign transcripts, one- to two-page descriptions of the educational systems for 76 countries, as well as their grading system and U.S. equivalencies.

➔ <http://bit.ly/eval-foreign-transcripts>

**The NAFSA Guide to Educational Systems Around the World** includes individual country guides for approximately 200 systems in a downloadable pdf format. Each guide lists the credentials and U.S. equivalencies, grading scales, and country-specific resources to help determine placement recommendations.

➔ <http://bit.ly/NAFSA-guide>

**The National Association of Credential Evaluation Services** lists providers that have completed a screening and selection procedure to demonstrate expertise in evaluation of credentials earned outside the United States.

➔ <http://bit.ly/NACES-resources>

3

## Making decisions about credit transfer and placement

**Los Angeles Unified School District's International Transcripts Bulletin** includes a clear policy describing the guidelines schools need to follow for assigning credits and grades from international transcripts.

➔ <http://bit.ly/LAUSD-transcript-bulletin>

**Jefferson County Schools Handbook for Secondary Counselors, Administrators, and Teachers Working with English Language Learners** includes a policy guide for counselors to explain course placement and credit policies for newcomer immigrant students.

➔ <http://bit.ly/JeffCo-handbook>

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