

CREDIT FOR LEARNING



Riverzedge Arts

Woonsocket, Rhode Island

200

Average number of students served during the school year

73%

Families with low incomes

Main funding sources:

- ▶ United Way of Rhode Island
- ▶ Governor's Workforce Board of Rhode Island (Real Skills for Youth program)
- ▶ 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative

Integrating youth voice and student-created curriculum to boost engagement

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, adolescence is a critical time for exposure to these types of learning opportunities, when young people are discovering their interests and passions as they begin on their path toward adulthood.

Afterschool programs can provide older youth opportunities to find their inspiration and gain skills that will benefit them in and outside of the classroom while allowing them to earn school credits. Credit-for-learning programs in the afterschool space—which can range from students earning physical education credits through a local YMCA to taking part in a boat-building course for elective science credit—are a valuable resource that individualizes knowledge acquisition and complements school day lessons for middle and high school youth.

Overview

Riverzedge Arts serves students ages 14-21 through their Arts Education and Training (AET) program, where youth are paid to work on real-world, client-led projects, and their Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELO) program, in which students earn high school credits outside of the classroom through experiential, career-focused programming. Intentionally designed to foster student engagement, the ELO program is youth-driven, with students' interests determining everything from creating ELO offerings to developing the structure and content of their final student projects. At Riverzedge Arts, students can also design their own individual ELO in partnership with industry mentors and program staff that best align with their interests and credit needs.

A typical day for students

All ELOs at Riverzedge Arts take an applied learning approach, however, what this looks like differs depending on the ELO. On any given day, students may work on independent research, participate in group work sessions, or go on field trips to community sites focused on their topic of study. Students are typically working away from the classroom with their mentors and engaging with the community and the environment around them. For example, in a health-focused ELO, students may work one-on-one with a medical professional who serves as their mentor in a hospital, pharmacy, or research lab setting. A typical day would involve taking part in hands-on experiences such as CPR training or using patient simulations and "dummies" to better understand the human body.

Outcomes

Based on a 2020 report, a majority of youth at Riverzedge Arts believe that they are likely or extremely likely to graduate from college or enter the workforce in a full-time job. A majority of youth also stated that they feel more prepared for life after high school and can communicate more honestly and openly. More than half of students agree that they better recognize their strengths and weaknesses and that the program is effective. All students enrolled in the programs at Riverzedge Arts maintain 90 percent attendance and perform higher on standardized tests than their counterparts at Woonsocket High School. Among Riverzedge Arts seniors, 100 percent graduate from high school or attain their GED.

Program characteristics

The Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELO) program at Riverzedge Arts revolves around its mission of empowering students to become self-directed learners both inside and outside of the classroom. Youth voice is incorporated throughout the program to create personalized learning experiences and individual pathways to graduation that excite students about learning and engage them in their education. Riverzedge Arts has found that students are more motivated and perform better academically when interested in and passionate about the subject matter.

Riverzedge Arts has two ELO options for students—pre-planned ELO courses they create and offer to all students and individual ELOs, both driven by student interests. Both ELO options provide real-world learning experiences for students and create connections among youth, industry professionals, and the community. Riverzedge Arts' education director and AmeriCorps VISTA member conduct student surveys to determine their interests and credit needs that inform their course offerings. Once the program gains an understanding of what students want, they identify community partners and work with Woonsocket High School to find an accredited teacher to evaluate the ELO and approve the credit earned. Students can sign up for the ELO of their choice and can further individualize their experience by focusing on a specific topic within the larger context of the course. For example, when students expressed a common interest in artificial intelligence and animation, Riverzedge Arts worked with the nationally renowned Rhode Island School of Design to implement an ELO around this topic. Students in this ELO first learned the fundamentals of design and illustration as they began their creations, before moving onto developing the software skills needed to execute their final products. This approach is in keeping with Riverzedge Arts' commitment to pair youth participants with industry-specific mentors, while making sure they learn industry-standard skills.

In addition to the ELO courses, Riverzedge Arts provides students the opportunity to design an individual ELO on the topic of their choice. Students first identify a field of study they would like to explore and work with program staff to find an industry mentor in that field that fits their credit needs. Students and their mentors work together to design the curriculum, develop an individual learning plan, and prepare their final project. Ultimately, students are responsible for making the case to an accredited teacher that both the ELO they envisioned and the work they completed deserve high school credit. This process was developed to empower students to have a say in what and how they are learning.

The need for credit-for-learning opportunities

Credit for learning expands educational opportunities for youth, where young people can explore their interests and delve deeper into subject matter outside of the classroom. These programs provide diverse learning experiences, promote student engagement, and prepare students for life after graduation.

Boosting motivation and engagement

When students are interested in what they are learning and have the opportunity to experience and develop a sense of agency, it can increase their engagement and motivation to learn. Credit for learning employs this student-centered learning approach, where learning is tailored to students' interests and needs, and students have ownership of their learning. This approach can be especially beneficial for older students, as school engagement has been found to decrease as students get older, or for youth who are disengaged from school.

Improving college and career readiness

Credit for learning provides youth the chance to engage in real-world learning experiences and learn about potential career paths while earning school credit. In these hands-on and applied learning contexts, students can develop skills that employers value, such as problem solving and collaboration, be mentored by and build connections with industry professionals, and complete internships or apprenticeships.

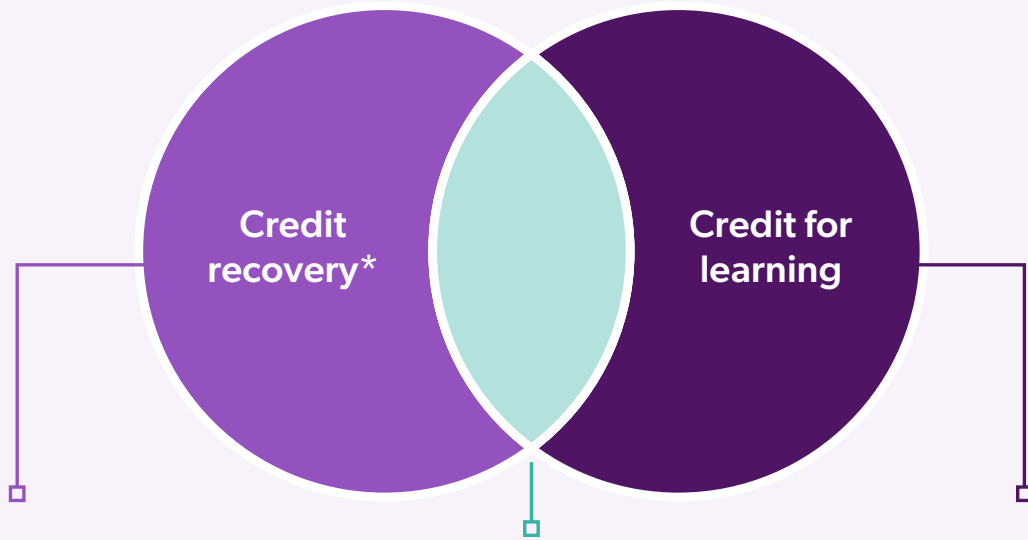
Addressing opportunity gaps

Research shows that students attending high-poverty schools too often lack access to the same learning opportunities as students attending low-poverty schools. Credit for learning can address equity issues present in the education system, broadening access to learning opportunities that schools may be unable to provide.

Read [Credit for Learning: Making Learning Outside of School Count](#) to learn more.

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**.
- Provides opportunities to earn credits outside of the school day that count toward graduation requirements.
- Intended for students interested in **earning additional credits** toward graduation, or students looking to **further personalize their education or pursue an interest**.
- 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.
- Can take place in afterschool and summer programs.
- 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>

Program history

Riverzedge Arts was started in 2002 by a group of artists, youth development professionals, and community leaders to increase the graduation rate in Woonsocket by keeping kids engaged in their education. The organization's goals were to provide meaningful enrichment opportunities and help students build ancillary skills in a safe space after school. Early on, the program model shifted to employ students to work on client-led projects, stemming from Riverzedge Arts' belief that students should not have to decide between earning money to support themselves and their families and receiving a quality education. In 2012, Riverzedge Arts added their Expanded Learning Opportunities program to pilot Rhode Island's statewide credit for learning initiative, initially serving as a "template" to test the model for the state. Today, the program works closely with Woonsocket High School staff, teachers, and individual department heads to help students earn elective credits as well as core academic credit if needed.

Recommendations

for integrating youth voice and student-created curriculum to boost engagement:

- ▶ Build relationships with outside organizations that can help you meet individual student needs. Your program may not have the capacity to offer everything students want, and partner organizations can expand your offerings and fill in where you may not be able to.
- ▶ Ask students what it is that they want and need, and figure out what you can do to fit that. Students perform best and are more motivated when they are interested in what they are learning.
- ▶ Be persistent and continue to work with schools to build support for your program to be able to offer outside credit opportunities.