

Virginia’s Use of SCED State-Specific Course Codes

A Case Study

The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) has implemented the School Courses for the Exchange of Data (SCED), a voluntary, common classification system for prior-to-secondary and secondary school courses. This case study focuses on VDOE’s use of one particular kind of course codes within the SCED system—state-specific course codes. SCED state-specific course codes allow states like Virginia to assign codes to courses that do not fit elsewhere in the SCED classification system.

VDOE’s Implementation of SCED

In the 2010-11 school year, VDOE implemented SCED in conjunction with its new data collection system for course information, the Master Schedule Collection (MSC). Staff crosswalked the outdated state course catalog with the SCED course codes instead of creating a new state course coding system. To ease the transition from the old state coding system to SCED, Virginia’s school divisions (which are similar to school districts in other states) had the option of submitting course data using either the old state course codes or SCED.

Five years later, for the 2016-17 school year, VDOE divisions were required to use the SCED course codes in their reporting, and the old state course codes were permanently retired. Most divisions in Virginia also use SCED as their course catalog, but a few still use homegrown systems and crosswalk to the SCED codes for MSC reporting. To create more meaningful verification reports, divisions have the option to report their local course codes along with the SCED codes for MSC reporting.

Virginia divisions have access to only a subset of all the SCED course codes. The courses of this subset were identified by the instructional specialist at VDOE and align to the state’s approved curriculum, as well as to teacher endorsement codes. Each year, VDOE aligns new courses to SCED based on recommendations by the divisions and approval by VDOE instructional specialists. Virginia divisions currently use about 1200 SCED course codes.

SCED’s State-Specific Course Codes

SCED is designed for widespread use, but even with frequent updates, it cannot include every course offered in every state. To accommodate courses that are not included, SCED has a set of designated course codes that states can use for courses that either do not yet exist in SCED or are only applicable to their state. Virginia, like many other states, has crosswalked a number of courses to SCED’s state-specific codes, because the courses as defined by Virginia did not seem to align with any of the existing SCED codes.

How to Create a SCED State-Specific Course Code

Each SCED course code is comprised of two parts: a two-digit SCED Subject Area code and a three-digit Course Number. To create a state-specific course code, states must first determine which of the 23 SCED Subject Areas the course fits into. Then, the state can choose one of the Course Numbers in the range 900-990; these are reserved for state-specific use.

A complete list of SCED Subject Areas is available at <https://ceds.ed.gov/CEDSElementDetails.aspx?TermId=12491>. More information on SCED state-specific course codes is available on pages 11-12 of the Forum Guide to School Courses for the Exchange of Data (SCED) Classification System, available at https://nces.ed.gov/forum/pub_2014802.aspx.

Sometimes when a course does not fit neatly into one of the highly specific SCED course codes, one of the more general SCED course codes can suffice. Consider a course with a modified Algebra I curriculum specific for writing algorithms for gaming. SCED course code 02052 (Algebra I) is not a good fit, but 02999 (Mathematics – Other) or 02058 (Particular Topics in Algebra I) may be a better code to use. In such cases, the SCED state-specific course code is not needed.

VDOE's Use of the State-Specific Codes

VDOE's instructional specialist realized that Virginia's course called Personal Living and Finance, which is a graduation requirement, does not fit into any existing SCED course code. Because of its importance in the state curriculum, it could not be assigned one of the general codes defined in SCED. Therefore, VDOE assigned it the SCED state-specific code of 02901.

Analyzing the Course Code of Personal Living and Finance

VDOE assigned its state-specific course Personal Living and Finance the SCED course code 02901. The first two digits indicate that the course is in SCED Subject Area 02: Mathematics. The next three digits fall within the Course Numbers reserved for state use (900-990), which indicate that the course is state specific.

Virginia's integrated science courses, which cover a combination of earth science, biology, and chemistry over a period of three years, were also assigned three state-specific codes (one for each year of the three-year program).

VDOE finds the SCED state-specific codes particularly useful for courses that are widely taught in Virginia, but not commonly taught—or not taught at all—elsewhere.

Transitioning a Course From a State-Specific to a Non-State-Specific SCED Code

Transitioning from using a state-specific to a non-state-specific SCED code—as a result of SCED including new course codes, as new versions are released—happens regularly. For example, in Virginia, AP Studio Art 2-D, AP Studio Art 3-D, and Ballet were originally assigned SCED state-specific course codes. Since then, SCED has been revised, and newer versions of SCED include these courses. VDOE now uses the designated SCED codes for these courses, instead of the SCED state-specific codes.

VDOE has a crosswalk available online that divisions use to identify and update their local systems. Divisions are informed, through email and webinars, when the crosswalk is updated, which occurs twice a year—around October 1 when the Fall MSC opens, and around May 1 when the End-of-Year MSC opens. At those times, divisions update their student information systems to match VDOE's updated crosswalk. If a division mistakenly uses an older code instead of the correct one during the reporting process, an error message appears. Division staff are able to double-check their work against the most recent crosswalk and fix any errors. If they continue to have difficulties, they contact VDOE for assistance.

VDOE's Crosswalk

To download the most recent version of VDOE's crosswalk between MSC and SCED, as well as crosswalks from previous years, visit http://www.doe.virginia.gov/info_management/data_collection/master_schedule_collection/index.shtml.

While some courses transition from a SCED state-specific code to a SCED non-state-specific code, other courses are so unique to Virginia they will never be applicable anywhere else. Virginia's Personal Living and Finance Course—required for every student in the state—is designed so specifically for Virginia students, and covers such a unique range of topics, that it will likely never move away from the SCED state-specific classification.

Lessons Learned in Using SCED State-Specific Codes

A significant amount of vetting should occur, including input from multiple offices, before a course is assigned a SCED state-specific code. The VDOE offices of Instruction, Licensure, and Educational Information Management review all proposals for state-specific courses. Every effort is made to assign an existing SCED code before a state-specific code is created. If, after review, all three of these offices agree that the course should be assigned a SCED state-specific code—because it does not fit anywhere else—then documentation is completed, the crosswalk is updated, and teacher endorsements (see the next paragraph) are assigned to the new state-specific course code.

As in many states, teacher licensure endorsements are tied to course codes in Virginia. Teachers in Virginia must be properly licensed—that is, endorsed, and therefore considered “qualified”—in the courses they teach. Information about teacher endorsements and courses taught is collected via the MSC and made available in VDOE’s Instructional Personnel and Licensure (IPAL) report. To ensure the accuracy of the IPAL report, the database must be kept up to date in regard to which subject areas and/or levels teachers are endorsed to teach, which courses teachers currently teach, and which endorsements are required for a teacher to be qualified to teach each course. This explains why, when a Virginia course is given a new code—for instance, when a course is assigned to a SCED state-specific code—the teacher endorsements associated with that course must be properly linked to that code in the database. An important lesson learned by VDOE is that careful attention to detail in this and other database-related matters is key to ensuring data accuracy.

Resources

Forum Guide to School Courses for the Exchange of Data (SCED) Classification System
https://nces.ed.gov/forum/pub_2014802.asp.

SCED Subject Areas
<https://ceds.ed.gov/CEDSElementDetails.aspx?TermId=12491>

School Courses for the Exchange of Data (SCED) web page
<https://nces.ed.gov/forum/SCED.asp>

Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) Master Schedule Collection (MSC) web page
http://www.doe.virginia.gov/info_management/data_collection/master_schedule_collection/index.shtml