For the past 60 years, high school students across the country have been able to complete college-level coursework through the Advanced Placement (AP) Program. In addition to the academic benefits, students may earn college credit for scoring well on their AP exams, which are graded on a scale of 1 to 5. But the policies on awarding credits can vary from state to state, or even within the same postsecondary system.

This summer, Illinois lawmakers approved a measure that ensures the state’s high-performing AP students will get a head start on their college careers. HB 3428, signed into law in August, requires all public colleges and universities in the state to award course credit for AP exam scores of 3 or higher. (The College Board and the American Council on Education recommend that a score of 3 or higher be the standard for awarding college credit.)

With the new law, which takes effect next fall, Illinois joins six other Midwestern states with similar policies in place (see map). This year, nearly 70,000 students in Illinois scored 3 or higher on an AP exam, according to the College Board — a number that is on the rise in Illinois and across the country.

Sen. Pat McGuire, who co-sponsored HB 3428, says he was surprised when he heard from Illinois’ public colleges and universities that there was no single method to determine what AP score would be required for a student to earn college credit.

“This law will help students and their families in their college planning and selection, make college more affordable, and help students achieve their degrees in a shorter period of time,” he says.

During committee hearings, some officials representing the state’s public colleges and universities expressed concerns over the original legislation’s wording, which would have required postsecondary institutions to give general education credits or, if unavailable, elective credits for AP exam scores of 3 or higher.

Skipping general-education courses, the officials said, could be detrimental to students. As a result of these concerns, the final version of the bill allows each institution of higher education to determine the type of credit that will be granted (elective, general-education requirement, or major requirement), as well as what credit an AP score of 3 would earn compared to a score of 4 or 5.
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