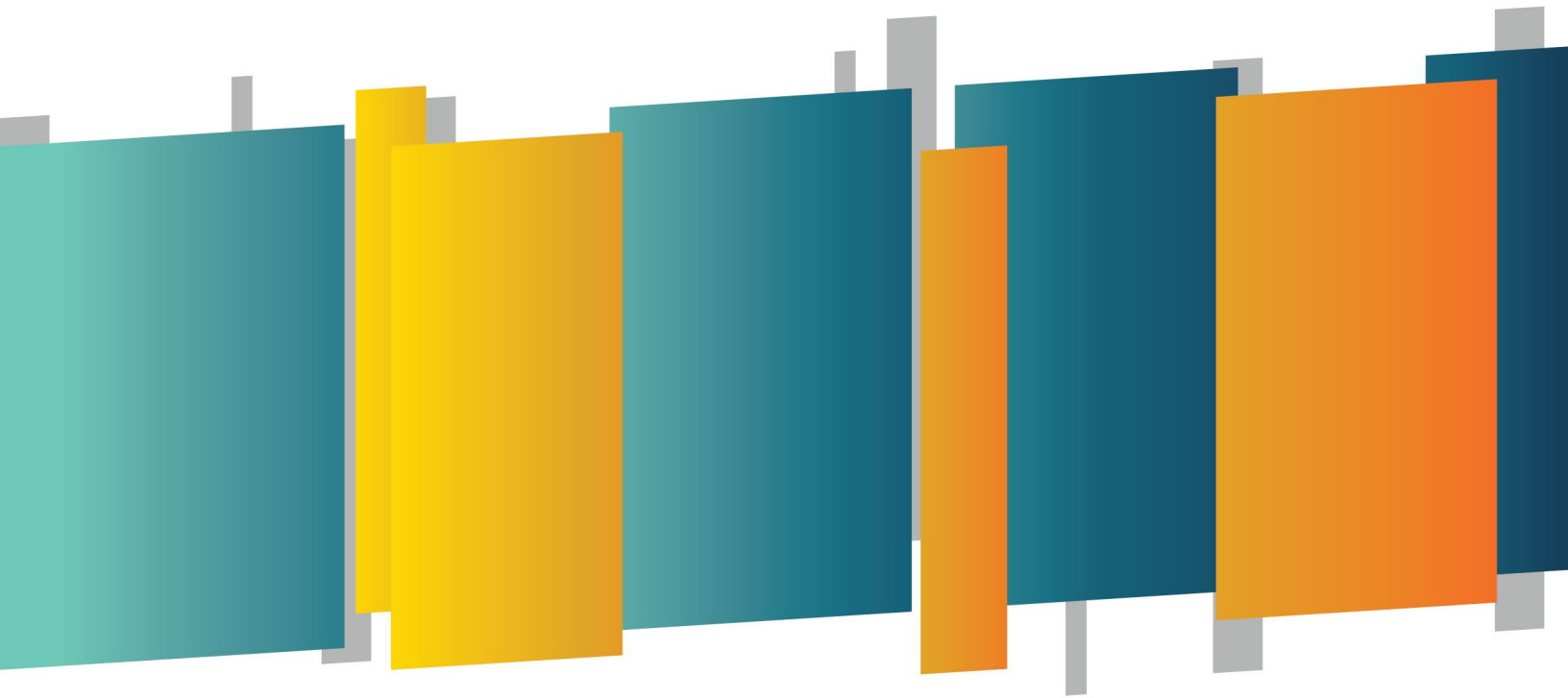


# Tiering Industry-Recognized Credentials for Secondary Schools

Technical Assistance for School Districts and Community Colleges (2026–27)



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## Updates to the 2026–27 List

An **industry-recognized credential (IRC)** is a certification that employers know, trust, and look for when hiring. It shows that someone has learned specific, job-ready skills and can successfully do the work required in a particular career.

The Industry-Recognized Credentials Approved List helps districts and students identify IRCs aligned with each CTE content area and with Iowa's high-demand, high-skill and high-wage occupations; it also shows how credentials connect to career pathways through secondary and postsecondary education.

The Industry-Recognized Credentials Approved List also explains how districts and community colleges can apply for credential approval and how credentials that are no longer valuable can be removed.

Beginning in AY26–27, the Approved Industry-Recognized Credentials List will feature an updated format. The purpose of this change is to (1) help educators and students better understand the value of industry-recognized credentials for student career pathways and (2) make it easier for all users to understand and use information on industry-recognized credentials.

### **NEW: Tiered Industry-Recognized Credentials**

Earning a credential does not guarantee a job, but industry-recognized credentials help students show employers they have relevant knowledge and skills as they pursue careers. To make these credentials easier to understand, and more useful for planning future pathways, the Iowa Department of Education has moved from a single, broad list of credentials to a three-tier system.

This tiered approach helps students, families, and educators quickly see which credentials align to Iowa's high-demand, high-skill and high-wage careers and how

credentials can build toward long-term success. Not all credentials prepare students for high-demand, high-skill and high-wage occupations. With this new tiered approach, the Department more clearly shows students and institutions which credentials do.

### **NEW: Spreadsheet Format**

IRCs are now listed in a spreadsheet that users can quickly filter by Career Cluster or credential tier. This format makes it easier to find the credentials that best match students' interests and career goals. The IRC spreadsheets are available in two formats on the [Iowa Department of Education Industry-Recognized Credential webpage](#): by **content area** and by **tier level**.

### **NEW: Additional Data Elements**

The spreadsheet also includes new data elements not available in previous versions of the list. Users can now view the following for each credential:

- The occupation a student can enter with the credential
- The related occupation's Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) system code
- Whether the credential is eligible for the Credentials to Careers grant

# Industry-Recognized Credentials

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## What Is an Industry-Recognized Credential?

An industry recognized credential (IRC) is a certification that employers know, trust and look for when hiring. Having a credential doesn't guarantee a job, but it shows that someone has learned specific, job ready skills and can successfully do the work required in a particular career. Trusted organizations, such as professional associations, trade groups or certification bodies, award these credentials, which set clear standards for training and testing. For example, a student might earn an Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) 10-hour card for workplace safety, a CompTIA certification for information technology or a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) credential in health care. Because these credentials are widely valued across an industry, they give employers confidence in a person's skills and help individuals stand out when applying for jobs or advancing their careers.

## Why Are Industry-Recognized Credentials Important?

IRCs matter because they open doors. By earning one, a person proves they have skills that employers value, which shows readiness for real jobs and not only coursework. Industry experts provide direct input on these credentials, so they reflect the skills and knowledge employers need right now and will likely need in the future. By offering IRCs, school districts help students build practical, in-demand skills that can lead to jobs, apprenticeships or further education. When credentials are connected to CTE pathways, students can explore different careers, try out industries of interest and gain hands-on experience that helps them make informed choices about their futures. IRCs also strengthen partnerships between schools, local businesses, community organizations and colleges, often leading to valuable opportunities like internships, job shadowing and other work-based learning experiences for students.

## The Role of Industry-Recognized Credentials and Education Pathways

IRCs play an important role in helping students see, and follow, a clear path forward. They help create understandable, structured education and career pathways that students and families can plan around. Many IRCs are *stackable*, meaning a student can earn an entry-level credential first and then build on it over time as they gain more skills and experience. For example, a student might start with a basic certification and later earn more advanced, related credentials as they progress through a program. Some credentials are also connected to college credit or articulation agreements, allowing students to earn postsecondary credit while still in high school. Together, these pathways help students move confidently from education to careers, or to further education, without losing time or momentum.

# Characteristics of Quality Credentials

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High quality industry recognized credentials help ensure time spent learning leads to real opportunities. Credentials that are trusted by employers, aligned to education pathways and built for advancement enable students to gain skills that matter, allow families to see clear value and help employers confidently identify job ready talent.

## What Makes an Industry-Recognized Credential High-Quality?

High-quality, IRCs stand out because employers trust them and learners benefit from them. They represent real skills and open doors to careers and further education.

Key characteristics of high-quality IRCs include the following:

- **Industry Recognition.** High-quality credentials are widely recognized and respected within an industry. Employers know what they mean and trust them when making hiring or promotion decisions. Professional associations, trade groups and industry leaders often endorse these credentials. For example, an OSHA safety credential or a CompTIA certification signals to employers that the holder meets recognized industry expectations.
- **Real-World Relevance.** A high-quality credential reflects the skills people need right now, and those they will need in the future. It aligns with current industry standards, tools and practices and is updated regularly as technology and job requirements change. This ensures the credential continues to have real value in the workplace.
- **Clear Standards and Meaningful Assessment.** High-quality credentials define clear expectations for what individuals must know and be able to do. Learners must demonstrate their skills through reliable and credible assessments, such as exams, performance tasks or hands-on demonstrations. The organizations that award these credentials are transparent and accountable, giving employers confidence that credential holders have genuinely earned them.
- **Opportunities to Advance and Build Skills Over Time.** Many high-quality credentials are *stackable*, meaning an individual can start with an entry-level credential and build toward more advanced ones as they gain experience. For example, a student might earn an introductory manufacturing credential and later stack it with more advanced certifications that lead to higher-skill, higher-wage jobs. These credentials are designed to be portable, so they retain value across different employers, regions or industries.
- **Alignment to Education and Career Pathways.** High-quality credentials are clearly aligned to CTE programs of study. This alignment helps students understand how what they are learning directly connects to careers and next steps, whether that leads to a job, apprenticeship or college credit. When credentials are built into education pathways, students can move forward with purpose and confidence.

# Preparing for High-Demand, High-Skill and High-Wage Occupations

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The Department's three tiers for IRCs help students, families and educators quickly see which credentials align to Iowa's high-demand, high-skill and high-wage careers and how credentials can build toward long-term success. Not all credentials prepare students for high-demand, high-skill and high-wage occupations. With this new tiered approach, the Department more clearly shows students which credentials do.

- **Tier 1:** Enable students to enter an occupation that meets *one of the three criteria* for high demand, high skill or high wage. Tier 1 also includes credentials that do not enable students to enter a high-demand, high-skill or high-wage occupation, but are still necessary to prepare students for the education and training required to earn higher-level credentials.
- **Tier 2:** Enable students to enter an occupation that meets *two of the three criteria* for high demand, high skill or high wage (high demand and high skill OR high demand and high wage OR high skill and high wage).
- **Tier 3:** Enable students to enter an occupation that meets *all three of the criteria* for high demand, high skill and high wage.

This tiered approach aligns with [House File 2610](#), passed by the legislature in spring 2026. This policy establishes updated definitions in [Iowa Code 256.136](#) for Iowa's high-demand, high-skill and high-wage occupations:

- A **high-demand occupation** is an occupation in which state, local or regional labor market forecasting shows occupational demand exceeds the overall state, local or regional employer demand metrics, including in openings, numeric change and growth.
- A **high-skill occupation** is an occupation with education or training requirements, including the completion of an apprenticeship program, an industry-recognized credential, a short-term college credential such as a certificate or diploma, a noncredit college credential certification, an associate degree or high, on-the-job training or on-the-job credential or certification.
- A **high-wage occupation** is an occupation for which at least three of five hourly wage or annual salary measurements for that occupation exceed the hourly wage or annual salary for all occupations in the state or region.

The new tiering approach also aligns with the [Department's 2025–2029 Strategic Plan](#), specifically Goal 4 to “provide all students with multiple pathways to postsecondary success and the support needed to earn credentials unlocking in-demand, high-wage and public good careers.”

# Use Cases of Tiered Industry-Recognized Credentials List

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The following scenarios provide examples of how teachers and school counselors can use tiered IRCs with students as they explore careers, select coursework and plan next steps after high school.

## Exploring Health Science Through a Credential Stack

- **Role:** Career and technical education (CTE) teacher
- **Student goal:** Explore health care careers and choose a starting point.
- **How tiered IRCs are used:** Identify a Tier 1 on-ramp credential, review entry roles tied to that credential, and map a Tier 2/Tier 3 sequence aligned to the student's target occupation and training requirements.
- **Outcome/Next step:** Student selects a pathway course sequence and a short list of credentials to pursue over the next 1–3 years.

## Building a 4-Year Course Plan Aligned to a Credential Goal

- **Role:** School counselor
- **Student goal:** Create a course plan that leads to a credential by graduation.
- **How tiered IRCs are used:** Filter by Career Cluster and target tier(s), then backwards map courses (CTE, academics and work-based learning) that prepare the student for training and testing.
- **Outcome/Next step:** Student drafts a draft 4-year plan that includes prerequisites, a planned testing window and work-based learning milestones.

## Selecting Credentials for Immediate Employment After Graduation

- **Role:** CTE teacher and/or school counselor
- **Student goal:** Earn a credential that supports entry into work soon after high school.
- **How tiered IRCs are used:** Review Tier 2/Tier 3 options in the student's pathway, confirm the credential eligibility and local availability and choose the credential(s) most directly aligned to entry-level jobs and hiring needs.
- **Outcome/Next step:** Student enrolls in the right course(s) and registers for a credential exam aligned to their graduation timeline.

## Aligning Instruction and Exam Timing to Credential Readiness

- **Role:** CTE teacher
- **Student goal:** Prepare to pass the credential assessment.
- **How tiered IRCs are used:** Use the credential's expectations and tiering to pace instruction, identify required lab experiences and select a testing window when the student has demonstrated competency.
- **Outcome/Next step:** Student completes targeted preparation activities and test when readiness is highest.

## Planning Concurrent Enrollment and a Smoother Postsecondary Transition

- **Role:** School counselor
- **Student goal:** Reduce duplication of coursework and continue the credential pathway after graduation.
- **How tiered IRCs are used:** Use the aligned community college credentials field to identify the next-step credential/certificate and plan concurrent enrollment courses that support progression.
- **Outcome/Next step:** Student leaves high school with a documented next-credential target and coursework that supports advanced standing.

## Starting With Tier One for an Undecided Student

- **Role:** Teacher and/or school counselor
- **Student goal:** Explore options while building transferable skills.
- **How tiered IRCs are used:** Review Tier 1 credentials across multiple Career Clusters to identify a broadly useful starting credential; revisit the list to narrow toward Tier 2/Tier 3 as interests and strengths become clearer.
- **Outcome/Next step:** Student gains momentum with an achievable credential while keeping multiple pathways open.

## Identifying Funding Supports to Remove Cost Barriers

- **Role:** School counselor
- **Student goal:** Understand potential financial support for credential costs.
- **How tiered IRCs are used:** Check whether the credential is eligible for the Credentials to Careers grant and use that information to guide selection, planning and family communication when cost is a barrier.
- **Outcome/Next step:** Student and family understand support options and can plan for credential-related expenses.

## Using Tiered IRCs to Award Credit for Prior Learning in a Community College

- **Role:** Career services and registrar/advising staff
- **Student goal:** Receive credit for prior learning (CPL) for obtained IRCs to reduce time and cost for completion while staying on track for a certificate or degree.
- **How tiered IRCs are used:** For each program of study, use tiered IRCs list and pathway information to identify relevant credentials for each course and map each credential's competencies to course outcomes. Document a consistent CPL decision (credit, waiver or advanced placement) for students who provide proof of attainment.
- **Outcome/Next step:** Student is awarded CPL and receives an updated program plan that shows how to progress to the next credential in the stack to achieve career goals.

## Building Tiered IRCs Into an Iowa Career Academy Program of Study

- **Role:** High School Partnerships staff at community colleges
- **Student goal:** Earn college credit and an IRC while gaining clarity about a career pathway and next steps after high school.
- **How tiered IRCs are used:** Select a small set of Tier 1 and Tier 2 credentials as the program's core milestones and map them to specific courses and competencies. Employer partners confirm local value and align work-based learning experiences to credential competencies. Students use the tier structure to see how early credentials build toward Tier Three options after graduation.
- **Outcome/Next step:** Career academy publishes a clear pathway guide with courses, credential milestones and work-based learning. Students graduate with documented progress in a credential stack that supports employment, apprenticeship entry and/or continued postsecondary training.

## Middle School Career Awareness: Exploring Career Clusters Through Tier One Credentials

- **Role:** Middle school counselor and teachers
- **Student goal:** Build awareness of career options and understand that skills can be built in steps over time.
- **How tiered IRCs are used:** Use Tier 1 credentials in career awareness lessons as conversation starters to help students connect skills to workplace settings and job roles. Trace how Tier 1 credentials stack into Tier 2/Tier Three credentials so students see how a pathway can be built intentionally over time. Invite industry professionals to speak with students about career opportunities in the sector and what high school classes and credentials can help them prepare.
- **Outcome/Next step:** Students complete a short Career Clusters and skills reflection and identify one or two Career Clusters to explore through electives, clubs and future high school course planning.

## Middle School Career Awareness: Connecting School Subjects to Real Jobs Using Credential Pathways

- **Role:** Middle school classroom teacher (e.g., science, math, family and consumer sciences) with support from a counselor
- **Student goal:** Understand how school learning connects to careers and what job readiness can mean in different industries.
- **How tiered IRCs are used:** Select a few high-interest Career Clusters, use the IRCs List to build sample credential stacks for each cluster and guide students in creating a "pathway poster" that links middle and high school courses and activities to the selected cluster. Share the poster with families to prompt discussion about future electives, career-connected learning and how stackable IRCs can reduce duplication across high school and postsecondary programs.
- **Outcome/Next step:** Student leaves with a personalized next step (one elective or activity to try next year) and a clearer understanding of how credentials can stack toward future education and career goals.

# Credential Evaluation, Approval, and Tiering Process

The Bureau of CTE and Postsecondary Readiness will keep this document up to date to reflect how credentials are added and removed and how tiering is determined. A district or community college that wants to add an IRC for a **secondary** CTE course and/or program must submit a request using the process below. This process includes four main steps; the first two steps are completed by the district or community college, and the third and fourth steps are completed by the Department.

The Department will only consider adding a credential if the application shows it is industry-recognized, valuable, up to date and supported by at least five Iowa employers.

## Credential Approval and Tiering Process

### Step 1: Institution Review and Quality Assurance Checklist

#### Credentialing Institution Guidelines

The submitting district or community college has verified that:

- The credentialing institution is in good national standing.
- A third party has validated the credentialing institution.
- The credential includes clearly stated competencies.
- The credential demonstrates portability across employers and settings.
- The credential is stackable within a career pathway or toward additional credentials.
- The third-party credential provider is transparent about:
  - The assessment process.
  - The value of the credential to employers.
  - The performance requirements needed to earn the credential.

#### Quality Assurance Guidelines

The submitting district or community college has shown that:

- The credential supports at least one of Iowa's CTE content areas by identifying the aligned content area.
- The credential aligns with at least one of Iowa's high-demand industries by identifying the aligned industry.
- At least five Iowa employers have endorsed the credential for hiring purposes by attaching evidence of the endorsements.

### Step 2: Submission of Application Form Checklist

The submitting district or community college has:

- Completed all required sections of the application in full.
- Submitted the credential for review using the official application form on the [Department's website](#).
- Completed the application form during the spring application window.

### Step 3: Review and Response

Following the application deadline, the Department will review each submitted application and make a decision according to the following conditions:

#### Approval

Conditions:

- The credential meets all high-quality criteria guidelines.
- The credential meets all quality assurance guidelines.

Outcome:

- The credential is approved and added to the official list.

#### Pending

Conditions:

- The credential meets some, but not all, required criteria.

**OR**

- The Department needs clarification on one or more sections of the application.

Outcome:

- The applicant may be asked to:
  - Revise, clarify, or expand portions of the application.
  - Meet with members of the Bureau team.

#### Denial

Condition:

- The credential does not clearly meet the criteria guidelines.

Outcome:

- The credential is not approved for inclusion on the official list.

### Step 4: Align Credentials to Iowa's High-Demand, High-Skill, and High-Wage Occupations Definitions

After the Department finalizes the list of approved IRCs for the year, it assigns each credential a tier by doing the following:

- Linking each credential to an occupation using the credential's CIP code and the [Advance CTE CIP-SOC Crosswalk](#) to identify the related SOC code.
- Checking whether each occupation meets Iowa's high-demand, high-skill and high-wage occupations definition included in [HF 2610](#):

A **high-demand occupation** is an occupation in which state, local, or regional labor market forecasting shows occupational demand exceeds the overall state, local or regional employer demand metrics, including in openings, numeric change and growth.

A **high-skill occupation** is an occupation with education or training requirements, including the completion of an apprenticeship program, an industry-recognized credential, a short-term college credential such as a certificate or diploma, a noncredit college credential certification, an associate degree or high, on-the-job training or on-the-job credential or certification.

A **high-wage occupation** is an occupation for which at least three of five hourly wage or annual salary measurements for that occupation exceed the hourly wage or annual salary for all occupations in the state or region.

- Assigning each credential to a tier based on alignment:
  - **Tier 1:** The credential aligns with **one** of the three criteria:
    - High demand **or**
    - High skill **or**
    - High wage
  - **Tier 2:** The credential aligns with **two** of the three criteria:
    - High demand and high skill **or**
    - High demand and high wage **or**
    - High skill and high wage
  - **Tier 3:** The credential aligns with all three criteria:
    - High demand **and**
    - High skill **and**
    - High wage