



Tiered Certification Framework Guide

Office of Career Readiness

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South Carolina Department of Education

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Quick Start

For fast access to the Tiered Certification Framework resources:

- [View the Approved Tiered Certification List](#)
- [Submit a New Certification Application or Reevaluation Request](#)
- **Review Tier Descriptors:** See the [Tier Descriptors](#) section for guidance on assigning tiers.
- **Understand the Review Process:** Refer to [Appendix A](#) for the full application review flowchart.
- **Appeals:** If your application is denied during SCDE Internal Review, see the [Appeals Process](#) section for eligibility and submission requirements.
- **Timeline:** See the [Application Review and Approval Timeline](#) section for key submission deadlines and a step-by-step overview of the annual review process.

Overview

The Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V), signed into law on July 31, 2018, envisions that all students will meet rigorous academic and technical standards and be prepared for high-skill, high-wage, or high-demand careers. The Act emphasizes accountability, continuous improvement, and stronger connections between secondary and postsecondary education.

Industry credentials play a critical role in achieving these goals. They provide students with tangible evidence of career readiness and validate technical skills valued by employers. By earning recognized certifications, students demonstrate their ability to transition successfully into the workforce or continue their education.

The South Carolina Tiered Certification Framework supports this vision by classifying certifications into three tiers based on economic impact, job market relevance, and career advancement potential. This system helps educators, students, and employers understand the relative value of different certifications and ensures that their attainment aligns with workforce priorities.

Purpose of this Guide

This guide provides a transparent, standardized process for managing South Carolina's Tiered Certification Framework. It is designed to:

- Explain how certifications are evaluated and assigned to tiers based on workforce value and alignment with career pathways.

- Outline the steps for submitting new certification applications, requesting reevaluations, and understanding review and approval procedures.
- Ensure consistency, equity, and rigor in certification decisions to support students, educators, and employers in achieving career readiness goals.

Why Transition to a Tiered System?

South Carolina adopted a tiered certification framework to better align education with workforce needs and provide clarity for students, educators, and employers. The system offers several key benefits:

- **Improved Workforce Alignment:** Certifications are prioritized based on employer demand, ensuring students earn certifications that lead to meaningful employment and career growth.
- **Clear Differentiation of Certifications:** Organizing certifications into three tiers—Introductory, Intermediate, and Career Ready—helps stakeholders understand the relative value and purpose of each certification.
- **Support for Stackable Pathways:** The tiered structure encourages students to build on foundational certifications to achieve higher-level certifications, creating clear, progressive career pathways.
- **Stronger Industry Partnerships:** Employers play an active role in validating certification relevance, ensuring certifications reflect real hiring advantages and economic impact.

The tiering system was developed through a collaborative effort between the Office of Career Readiness (OCR), the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), the South Carolina Department of Employment and Workforce (DEW), and Technical Advisory Committees composed of educators, industry representatives, and higher education partners.

Tier Descriptors

In June 2025, the South Carolina Education Oversight Committee (EOC) unanimously approved the state’s Tiered Certification System, a structured framework designed to align student certification attainment with workforce priorities, employer demand, and long-term career advancement opportunities. The system classifies industry-recognized certifications into three tiers:

- **Tier 1 – Introductory:** Entry-level certification earned early in a CTE program sequence.
- **Tier 2 – Intermediate:** Certifications requiring additional coursework, skills, or specialized knowledge.
- **Tier 3 – Career Ready:** High-rigor certifications that demonstrate career readiness and are recognized by employers for hiring or advancement.

Each tier reflects the certification’s relevance to high-demand, high-wage occupations and its impact on future employability.

Table 1: Detailed Tier Descriptors

Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3
Introductory	Intermediate	Career Ready
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 point • Foundational Skills: Validates basic competencies for further education or training. • Regionally Recognized: Accepted by local industries but not statewide hiring requirement. • Early Career Pathway: Earned in the first stages of a CTE program, leading to higher-level certifications. • E.g. OSHA 10, Microburst EmployABILITY Soft Skills Certification, Stop the Bleed, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 points • Industry-Aligned: Valued by employers but not always required for hiring. • Supports Career Pathways: Provides an employment advantage and job readiness. • Enhances Workforce Participation: Increases employability, but additional training may be needed for advancement. • E.g. SC Boater Education Certificate, Adobe Certified Associate – Visual Design using Adobe Photoshop, First Aid/CPR/AED, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 points • High-Demand Careers: Required for employment in priority, high-wage occupations. • Clear Economic Benefits: Leads to significant wage gains, promotions, or job retention. • Career Advancement: Recognized entry point into further education, training, and certifications. • E.g. South Carolina Cosmetology License, Certified Nurse Aid, National Incident Management System Certification

Career Readiness Requirements

Beginning with the **2025–26 academic year**, students who entered 9th grade in the 2024–25 and 2025–26 school years (referred to as the 9GR25 and 9GR26 cohorts) will be evaluated under the new three-tiered system. To be designated Career Ready for state accountability purposes, these students must earn a **minimum of three points** by completing one of the following options:

- One **Tier 3** certification aligned to their career cluster
- A combination of two **Tier 2** certifications or a combination of a **Tier 2** and a **Tier 1** certification that are aligned to their career cluster
- A **Universal Certification** (e.g., OSHA 10) paired with a **Tier 2** Certification aligned to their cluster

Students *cannot* combine multiple Tier 1 certifications *or* multiple Universal certifications to meet the three-point requirement.

To be considered Career Ready, a student's earned certifications must align with their designated program of study and career cluster. Certifications earned outside of the student's career cluster or program of study will not count toward Career Ready status.

Note: Students who entered 9th grade in the 2022–23 and 2023–24 school years (the 9GR23 and 9GR24 cohorts) will continue to be evaluated under the previous single-tier system (CR Yes/No). These students must earn a certification from the state-approved list that carries a Career Ready designation to meet accountability requirements.

Current Approved Certifications and Tiers

The South Carolina Department of Education Office of Career Readiness maintains a list of approved industry certifications and their associated tiers.

You can view the [current Approved Tiered Certification List](#) on the South Carolina Department of Education website under the *Career and Technical Education* section on the *Programs* page.

Only certifications from this approved list will count toward Career Ready status in the accountability system.

For certifications offered by more than one vendor (e.g. Red Cross or American Heart Association for #44 First Aid/CPR/AED), districts and schools may select any vendor, provided that the certification and/or examination blueprints are identical to those associated with the certification listed on the Approved Tiered Certification List. Questions regarding acceptable vendors should be directed to the Office of Career Readiness.

Changes and Updates to the Approved Certifications List

The South Carolina Department of Education Office of Career Readiness (OCR), in collaboration with the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), has developed an application and review process for adding new, relevant certifications to the approved Tiered Certification List or reevaluating the tier designation or career cluster assignments of certifications already on the list.

New Certification Application Guidelines

Teachers and administrators in South Carolina schools, career centers, and districts can apply to have a new certification added to the approved list. In order for a new certification to be considered for addition to the approved list, the following guidelines must be followed:

1. Applications are required to be initiated by a sponsoring South Carolina school, Career Center, or district.
 - a. Vendors may not initiate the application process.
 - b. Vendors may assist only at the request of the sponsoring school, Career Center, or district.

2. Applications are required to be submitted electronically via the [South Carolina Tiered Certification Application Form](#). Handwritten, printed, or emailed applications will not be accepted.
3. Applications must be received by October 1st to be considered for approval during the Education Oversight Committee (EOC) meeting in January.
4. Applicants should review the current [Approved Tiered Certification List](#) to identify similar certifications before submitting an proposal.
5. Applicants are required to provide justification for why the proposed certification should be used instead of those already approved.
6. Applicants are required to include a vendor contact person who can respond to inquiries during the review process.
7. Applicants are required to demonstrate alignment of the proposed certification with current South Carolina CTE standards, courses, and/or CIP-coded programs.
8. Applicants are required to propose an appropriate tier for the certification based on the criteria outlined in the [Tier Descriptors](#) section of this document.
9. Applications must include detailed information for review, including but not limited to:
 - a. A description of the proposed certification
 - b. Exam structure and content details
 - c. Student data security and sharing protocols
 - d. Associated costs
 - e. Industry and/or higher education support
 - f. Value to the South Carolina workforce
10. Applicants should provide a list of local South Carolina employers and/or higher education institutions willing to support the certification, along with documentation of that support.

Certification Reevaluation or Correction Application Guidelines

Teachers and administrators in South Carolina schools, career centers, and districts can request a review of any currently approved certification to correct mistakes or request a reevaluation of the assigned tier and/or associated career clusters. Applications must follow the following guidelines:

1. Applications are required to be initiated by a sponsoring South Carolina school, Career Center, or district.
 - a. Vendors may not initiate the application process.
 - b. Vendors may assist only at the request of the sponsoring school, Career Center, or district.
2. Applications are required to be submitted electronically via the [South Carolina Tiered Certification Application Form](#). Handwritten, printed, or emailed applications will not be accepted.
3. Applications must be received by October 1st to be considered for approval during the Education Oversight Committee (EOC) meeting in January.

4. Applicants are required to provide details of the certification and the request, including:
 - a. Certification name
 - b. Certification ID number
 - c. Current certification details (cluster, tier, etc.)
 - d. Current alignment to South Carolina CTE courses and programs
 - e. Reason for the review request
5. Applicants are required to include a detailed explanation of the request and upload supporting documentation to assist the review and approval process.

Certification Application Review and Approval Process

The review and approval process uses a rigorous, multi-tiered approach involving multiple agencies and advisory groups. To ensure fairness and avoid bias:

- Applicant contact details, including school and district information, are kept confidential from reviewers.
- Vendor contact information and the Workforce Region where the request originated are shared with reviewers if additional details are needed.
- Reviewer contact information remains confidential and will not be disclosed to applicants.

A summary of this process is provided in the flowchart in [Appendix A](#).

Step 1: Internal Office of Career Readiness Education Associate Review

The first step in the application review and approval process is an internal review of the application by the OCR. This is done by one or more OCR Pathway Associates. The associate's review focuses on:

- Completion and appropriateness of the application
- Identification of similar certifications already on the approved list
- Alignment of the certification exam blueprint with current South Carolina CTE standards
- Validation of the applicant's recommended tier
- Validation of the applicant's assigned career cluster(s)

Based on this review, the Education Associate may:

- Recommend the application as submitted.
- Recommend the application with amendments (e.g. changes to the tier or associated courses/programs/clusters).
- Recommend the application for review by a second associate.
- Do not recommend the application.

If the recommendation is “Do not recommend the application” or “Recommend the application for review by a second associate”:

- The application will be forwarded to a second Education Associate for review.
- If both associates agree not to recommend the application, the application will be denied.
- If they disagree, the application will be forwarded to a Team Lead or Director for a final decision.
- If the Team Lead or Director does not recommend the application, the application will be denied.

After the Education Associate Review, applications are presented to the Pathways Team for additional insight and input. The applicant will then be notified in writing of the results and the next steps in the process.

Step 2: Department of Employment and Workforce Review

The second step in the process is a review by the South Carolina Department of Employment and Workforce (DEW). This review is similar to the OCR internal review but focuses on workforce-related aspects of the application, including:

- Alignment of the proposed certification to a South Carolina Priority Occupation
- Appropriate assignment of SOC code(s)
- Professional and/or higher education use of the certification
- Value of the certification for employability in South Carolina
- Validation of the OCR recommended Tier designation
- Validation of the OCR recommended career cluster alignment

Based on this review, the DEW reviewer may:

- Recommend the application as submitted by the OCR.
- Recommend the application with amendments (e.g. changes to the tier, priority occupations, SOC codes, or clusters).
- Do not recommend the application.

After the DEW review is completed, the application and the DEW recommendation will be returned to the OCR and forwarded to the next step in the review process.

Step 3: Technical Advisory Committee Review

The third step in the review process is an evaluation by a Technical Advisory Committee (TAC), organized by the OCR. The TAC may include teachers, administrators, and representatives from higher education and industry who are experts in the certification’s related field(s).

The TAC review focuses on:

- Validating and recommended tier
- Validating the recommended career cluster(s)
- Confirming industry and higher education relevance and workforce value

Based on its review, the TAC will make a recommendation to the OCR:

- Recommend the application as submitted by the OCR.
- Recommend the application with amendments.
- Do not recommend the application.

Once the TAC review is complete, the application returns to the OCR. A final internal review by the OCR Education Associates may be conducted if deemed necessary. The decision to forward the application to the Education Oversight Committee (EOC) for final approval rests solely with the OCR.

Step 4: Education Oversight Committee (EOC) Final Review and Approval

After the OCR, DEW, and TAC reviews are complete, the OCR prepares the application and all review summaries for submission to the EOC.

The EOC has the final authority to:

- Approve the application as submitted by the OCR.
- Approve the application with amendments (e.g. changes to the tier or associated career clusters)
- Deny the application.

Once the EOC provides final approvals, the OCR will notify applicants of their application results. The OCR will also inform PowerSchool of any updates to certification lists, tiers, or cluster assignments so these changes can be included in the next PowerSchool update.

All requests for changes or updates to the Approved Tiered Certification List – except verifiable corrections to errors – must be reviewed and approved by the EOC before implementation. This includes:

- New certification applications
- Tier reevaluation requests
- Requests for changes or additions to career clusters associated with the certification.

Appeals Process

The purpose of this policy is to establish a fair and impartial process for applicants to appeal decisions made during the Office of Career Readiness (OCR) internal review of tiered certification applications.

This appeals process applies only to decisions made during the OCR internal review stage. Decisions issued by the Education Oversight Committee (EOC) regarding application approval or denial are final and cannot be appealed.

Eligibility for Appeal

- Appeals may only be submitted by the sponsoring school, career center, or district listed on the original application
- Vendors are not permitted to submit appeals.
- Applicants may appeal based on:
 - Perceived errors in the review process
 - New or clarifying information relevant to the application

Submission Requirements

- Appeals must be submitted in writing within 5 business days of receiving the denial notice.
- The appeal must include:
 - Applicant's name and contact information
 - The name of the denied certification
 - A detailed explanation of the reason for the appeal
 - Any supporting documentation

Appeal Review Process

- Appeals will be reviewed by an OCR Education Associate, Team Lead, or Director who did not participate in the original review.
- The reviewer will:
 - Examine the original application and denial rationale.
 - Consider any new evidence or clarifications provided in the appeal.

Decision Timeline

- OCR will provide a written response to the appeal within 10 business days of receipt.
- Possible outcomes:
 - Appeal Granted: the application resumes the review process and moves forward to the EOC.
 - Appeal Denied: the original decision stands.

Finality of Decisions

- Decisions made by the EOC regarding approval or denial are final and cannot be appealed.
- Applicants whose applications are denied may submit a new application during the next review cycle.
- If an applicant disagrees with the final tier designation or assigned career clusters, they may request a reevaluation by submitting a new application the following cycle.

Removing Certifications from the List

The Office of Career Readiness (OCR) will collect and review data on all certifications on the Approved Tiered Certification List annually.

Discontinued Certifications

Certifications that are discontinued or no longer offered will automatically be removed from the list.

Certifications with No Usage

Certifications that have had no usage for three consecutive years will be automatically removed.

- Certifications with no usage that are in danger of being removed from the list will be indicated by a pink highlight.

Certifications with Historically Low Usage

Certifications flagged as historically low usage will undergo the OCR internal review process outlined above. A minimum of two Education Associates will review the certification. Both associates must agree that the certification should be removed from the Approved Tiered Certification List before removal can occur.

- Certifications flagged as “historically low usage” will be indicated by red text.
- These certifications should remain on the list if no substantially similar certification exists.
- They may be removed if recommended during the review process for any of the following reasons:
 - Low usage when a substantially similar, higher-usage certification exists
 - Low usage when a substantially similar, more in-demand certification exists
 - Low usage when a substantially similar certification is more closely aligned to standards
 - Low usage when a substantially similar certification is more cost effective

Historically Low Usage is defined as certifications that have consistently low adoption rates across South Carolina schools, career centers, and districts.

A Substantially Similar Certification is defined as one that is closely comparable in content, purpose, and workforce value to another certification already on the Approved Tiered Certification List

Requesting Certification Removal

OCR, schools, Career Centers, or districts may request a certification be flagged for review and possible removal for any of the following reasons:

- The certification is outdated or obsolete and no longer reflects current industry standards or technology.
- The vendor no longer provides support or updates to the certification or exam.
- The certification lacks recognition by employers or higher education.
- The certification has compliance or security issues.
- The certification has poor student outcomes.

Certifications flagged for removal will undergo the OCR internal review process outlined above. A minimum of two Education Associates will review the certification. Both associates must agree that the certification should be removed from the Approved Tiered Certification List before removal can occur.

Certifications with Substantial Changes

Certifications with substantial changes to requirements, exam structure, or other critical elements will remain on the list for one year. During that year, they will undergo the full review process outlined above to determine whether they remain.

- Final approval for continued inclusion after substantial changes rest with the Education Oversight Committee (EOC).

Reinstatement Requests

A South Carolina school, Career Center, or district may request reinstatement of a certification that has been removed from the Approved Tiered Certification List. Requests must be submitted in writing within one year of removal.

Reinstatement rules vary based on the reason for removal:

- Certifications removed due to no usage
 - If the request is made within one year of removal, the certification will be added back to the list.
 - Requests made after one year must follow the New Certification Application process outlined above.
- Certifications that were removed due to low usage or by request that have undergone OCR internal review
 - The certification will be re-added to the list for one year.
 - During that year, it will undergo the full review process outlined above.
 - The EOC will make the final decision on whether the certification remains on the list.
- Certifications removed after EOC review
 - These certifications cannot be reinstated automatically.
 - Schools, Career Centers, or districts may submit a [Tiered Certification Application Form](#), which will follow the New Certification Application process and full review and approval procedures.

Application Review and Approval Timeline

Applications for new certifications or requests to reevaluate existing certifications may be submitted year-round using the [South Carolina Tiered Certification Application Form](#). The Education Oversight Committee (EOC) conducts its annual review of Tiered Certification applications in January.

- **Applications received by October 1** will be processed and included in the January EOC meeting for consideration.
- **Applications received after October 1** will be reviewed and considered during the next annual cycle.

The annual review process follows this timeline:

- **October 1** – Deadline for submitting new certification applications and reevaluation requests to the Office of Career Readiness (OCR).
- **October 31** – OCR completes its internal review and forwards recommended applications to the Department of Employment and Workforce (DEW).
- **November 30** – DEW completes its review and returns applications to OCR for referral to Technical Advisory Committees (TAC).
- **December 31** – TAC completes its review and returns applications to OCR for final internal review.
- **January 7** – OCR forwards recommended applications to the EOC for final review and approval.

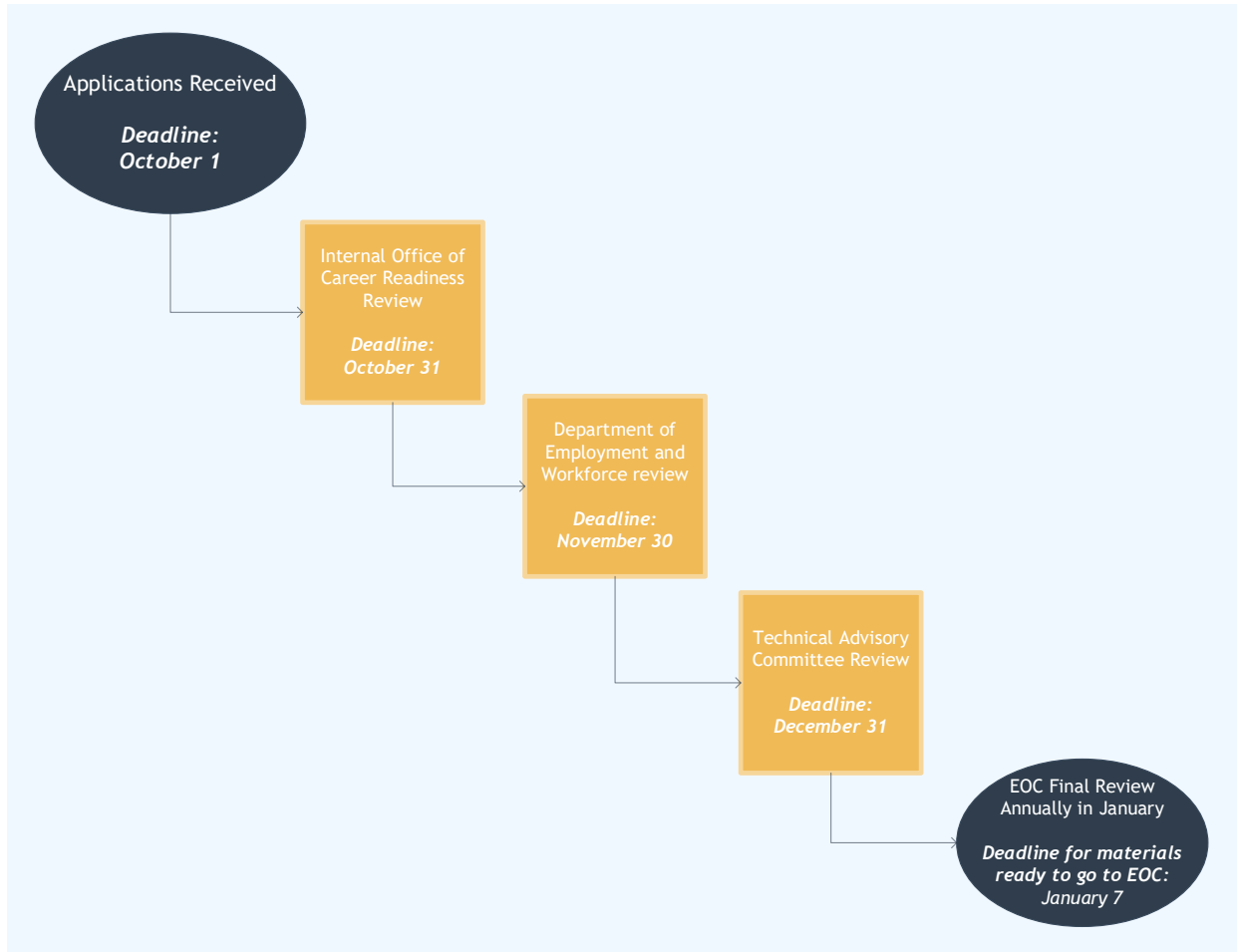
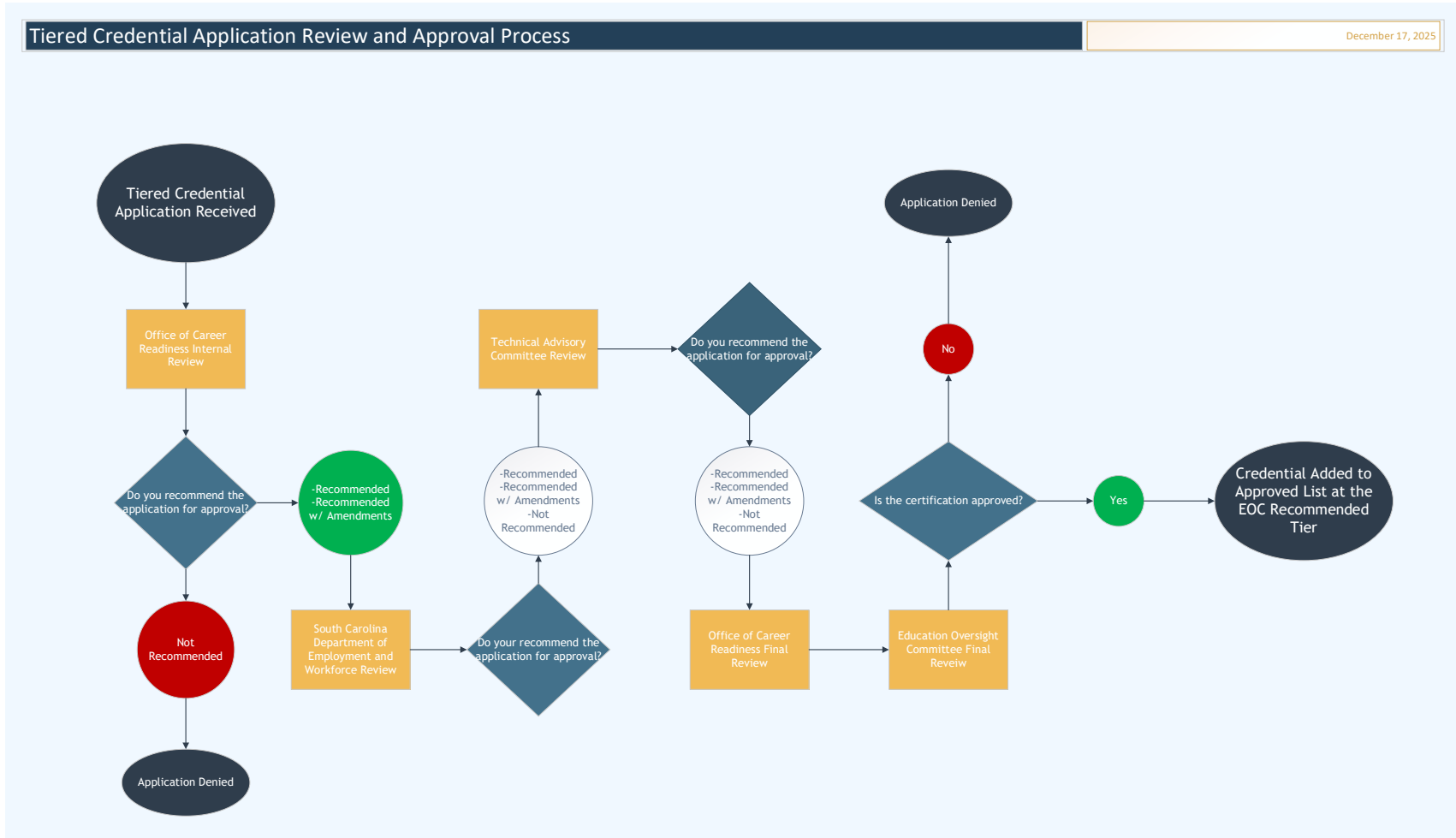


Figure 1: Application Approval Timeline

Appendix A: Tiered Certification Application Review and Approval Process



Appendix B: Definitions

To ensure clarity and consistency, the following terms are defined as they apply to the Tiered Certification Framework:

9GR##

A code indicating the school year in which a student entered 9th grade. The “##” represents the spring of the academic year the student first enrolled in 9th grade. For example, 9GR25 means the student entered 9th grade in the 2024-25 school year (i.e. the year concluding in spring 2025).

Approved Tiered Certification List

The [official list](#) maintained by the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE) that identifies all certifications recognized for accountability purposes, organized by tier and career cluster.

Appeals Process

The procedure allowing sponsoring schools, career centers, or districts to request reconsideration of a denial during the Office of Career Readiness (OCR) internal review stage. Vendors cannot submit appeals.

Certification

An industry-recognized certification or assessment that validates technical skills and knowledge relevant to a career pathway or occupation.

Certification Reevaluation

A process initiated by a sponsoring entity to review and potentially change the tier designation or career cluster assignment of an existing certification.

Historically Low Usage

A designation for certifications that have consistently low adoption rates across South Carolina schools, career centers, and districts. These certifications undergo review to determine continued inclusion on the Approved Tiered Certification List.

No Usage

A certification that has not been reported as earned by any student for a specified period (currently five consecutive years, subject to policy updates). Such certifications are flagged for removal.

OCR Internal Review

The initial evaluation of a certification application conducted by the Office of Career Readiness Education Associates. This review checks application completeness, alignment with CTE standards, and validates proposed tier and career cluster assignments.

Priority Occupation

An occupation identified by the South Carolina Department of Employment and Workforce (DEW) as high-demand and high-wage, used to validate certification relevance during the review process.

Reinstatement Request

A formal written request submitted by a sponsoring school, career center, or district to restore a certification that was previously removed from the Approved Tiered Certification List.

Substantial Changes

Significant modifications to a certification's requirements, exam structure, or other critical elements that may affect its alignment with workforce needs or CTE standards. Certifications with substantial changes remain on the list for one year while undergoing full review.

Substantially Similar Certification

A certification that is closely comparable in content, purpose, and workforce value to another certification already on the Approved Tiered Certification List. Used to determine whether a new application or low-usage certification should be approved or removed.

Sponsoring School, Career Center, or District

The South Carolina educational entity responsible for initiating certification applications or appeals. Vendors cannot initiate applications or appeals.

Vendor

An organization that provides the certification or certification exam but cannot directly submit applications or appeals. Vendors may assist only at the request of a sponsoring entity.