

Testimony before the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee

A Proposal for High School Graduation Requirements

Paolo DeMaria, Superintendent of Public Instruction Ohio Department of Education
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Chairman Blessing, Vice Chair Jones, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee, my name is Paolo DeMaria and I am the Superintendent of Public Instruction. I am pleased to present a set of recommendations for a proposed long-term approach to high school graduation requirements in Ohio.

My testimony today will outline Ohio’s current statutory high school graduation requirements, the transitional requirements for the classes of 2018, 2019 and 2020, and the State Board of Education’s proposal for a new set of requirements which will provide Ohio’s students with test-based and non-test-based options to demonstrate readiness to transition to career, college, the military or a self-sustaining profession.

Statutory Graduation Requirements

Ohio’s statutory graduation requirements are heavily reliant on standardized tests. While all students must take and pass certain high school classes, students also must choose one of three graduation pathways – each of which has a high-stakes, standardized testing component:

In the first pathway, high school students take seven tests at the end of seven required courses: English 1, English 2, Algebra 1, Geometry, Biology, American History and American Government. For each of these tests a student may earn a score of one through five points. A student is awarded a diploma if they earn 18 or more points across all 7 state standardized tests.

In the second pathway, students may graduate by earning an in-demand, industry-recognized credential – like a welding certification or other similar skill-based credentials – AND scoring a specified number of points on the WorkKeys workforce readiness test. This workforce-focused pathway requires that a student earn a credential – which excludes a number of career-technical program areas. This pathway also relies on a standardized assessment.

In the third pathway, a student is eligible to receive a diploma if he or she earns college-ready scores on both the English and math components of the ACT or the SAT exam.

When these graduation requirements were developed, the state legislature intended these pathways to provide flexible options for students. While there is a lot of flexibility, all students must demonstrate their skills and knowledge using some form of standardized test. This is

perhaps one of the most important issues in the current discussion of graduation requirements. The question becomes one of whether this is appropriate or whether there should be other meaningful ways to demonstrate readiness to earn a diploma.

Transitional Requirements

In 2017, many local school district superintendents shared concerns with the General Assembly and the State Board of Education regarding Ohio's graduation requirements. These superintendents were worried that many students in the class of 2018 were not on track to meet the new graduation requirements – specifically the 18 points on the state end-of-course tests.

Our analysis at the time showed that more than 30,000 seniors appeared to be in danger of not graduating. Due to these concerns and based on recommendations from the State Board of Education, the legislature passed House Bill 49 which contained a set of temporary graduation options for students in the class of 2018.

The transitional requirements allowed students who did not meet one of the three graduation pathways – but had taken and retaken the state tests – additional options to qualify for graduation. These students were required to meet at least *two* of the following requirements:

- Attendance rate of 93 percent during the 12th-grade year;
- Earn a GPA of 2.5 on a 4.0 scale in all courses completed during 12th grade (must complete at least four full-year, or equivalent, courses);
- Complete a capstone project during 12th grade that the district or school defines;
- During 12th grade, complete a work or community service experience totaling 120 hours that the district or school defines;
- Earn three or more College Credit Plus¹ credits at any time during high school;
- Earn credit for an Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) course *and* earn an AP exam score of 3 or higher or IB exam score of 4 or higher at any time during high school;
- Earn a WorkKeys exam score of 3 on each of three test sections;
- Earn a State Board-approved industry-recognized credential² or credentials that equal at least three points;
- Complete the OhioMeansJobs Readiness Seal³ requirements.

Just last November, the legislature again learned that thousands of students in the class of 2019 and 2020 were facing similar graduation uncertainty. House Bill 491 extended the 2018

¹ <https://www.ohiohighered.org/ccp/students-families>

² <http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Ohio-s-Graduation-Requirements/Industry-Recognized-Credentials-and-WorkKeys/Industry-Recognized-Credentials>

³ <http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/New-Skills-for-Youth/SuccessBound/OhioMeansJobs-Readiness-Seal>

transitional requirements to the class of 2019 and the class of 2020 with modifications⁴ to enhance the rigor and expectations for students.

These transitional requirements have helped and will continue to help more students walk across the stage and receive their diploma.

State Board of Education Proposal

To address the shortcomings of the current structure, an Advisory Committee of educators and parents convened to recommend a new graduation requirements system that provides students opportunities to demonstrate what they know without necessarily relying on state tests. Ohio's State Board of Education endorsed this proposal in October 2018 and reaffirmed the endorsement earlier this month by an overwhelming majority.

Before crafting the proposed graduation requirements, the Advisory Committee outlined the following priorities and principles that would guide the development of an improved graduation system:

- Graduation requirements should recognize and nourish the individual needs, differences, and interests of students.
- The system of requirements must reflect a balance between academic, technical, and other more difficult to measure content like leadership, reasoning, team work, social awareness, self-management and many others.
- Graduation requirements should accommodate non-test methods for students to demonstrate knowledge and skills necessary for success after high school.
- Students should be adequately prepared and not limited in transitioning to their chosen post-high school path, whether that is a job, college, the military or another self-sustaining path.

The proposal has three important components:

First, high school students – in partnership with their parents, advisors and guidance counselors – should utilize an adaptable Individual Graduation Plan to identify the courses, internships, or other experiences that will support the student's path to success. This plan can be adjusted as the student progresses through his or her academic career and reaches various benchmarks. The plan will help ensure that students are deliberately thinking about their interests and future aspirations.

Second, as is currently the case, students will be required to take and pass at least 20 core and elective courses in high school and to take all state-required end-of-course exams. Local schools and districts will continue to have flexibility to deliver additional content and courses meaningful to their communities.

⁴ Modifications include the removal of the attendance criteria, extending the GPA requirement to include the junior and senior year, and requiring the capstone and work or community service projects to comply with guidance issued by the Department.

Finally, students will have multiple opportunities to demonstrate their skills and knowledge, including innovative ways that do not rely on a standardized test. Students, with their parents and teachers, will identify the methods by which they will demonstrate post-high school readiness in each of five areas: English, math, well-rounded content, technology, leadership and reasoning and social-emotional development.

- In English and mathematics, students could continue to demonstrate their knowledge and skills through performance on the traditional state tests or other relevant assessments. Alternatively, students could use one of several non-test based academic options to satisfy their English or math requirements. These options include grade point average, participation in College Credit Plus, and performance-based demonstration through a Culminating Student Experience. Students would also be required to demonstrate technology knowledge and skills while in high school. The technology component would be locally defined, aligned to high school technology standards and supported by Department guidance.
- The well-rounded content requirement is designed to ensure each student has been exposed to and gained knowledge in a variety of diverse content and skill areas. This is intentionally expansive, and a student could satisfy this requirement by demonstrating knowledge and skills in areas as diverse as fine arts, music, chemistry, history, foreign language, engineering, any number of career technical education programs, or through a personally developed and designed project. The student would have to show knowledge and skills in at least two areas using, again, any variety of demonstration approaches like those for English and math, including the Culminating Student Experience.
- The final category is the leadership reasoning and social emotional development. Once again, there are many ways for a student to demonstrate knowledge and skills in this category. Given the unique needs of each community and each student, this component will be developed by local districts and schools and could include options like earning the OhioMeansJobs Readiness Seal, participating in an extra-curricular activity, or completing a work or community service experience.

A fundamental feature of this proposal is the option for a student to complete a Culminating Student Experience. This performance assessment evaluates students by allowing them the freedom to engage in experiences throughout high school in which they may demonstrate the knowledge and skills that affirm their readiness for post-high school success.

The Culminating Student Experience is intended to be anchored by a significant project, or set of projects, aligned to a student's career interests, passions and post-high school aspirations — similar to a capstone project. It is also an opportunity for a student to demonstrate important skills and attributes that are known to be indicators of post-high school success such as innovation, creativity, determination, grit, and tenacity. For students who use the Culminating Student Experience to satisfy their English and math requirements, the projects would be scored by trained educators against a state designed rubric. The State Board has committed to ensuring that the Culminating Student Experience is rigorous and has appropriate quality assurances.

Under this proposal, the State Board of Education would be responsible for establishing the criteria, including the required scores, for each assessment or area of demonstration for knowledge and skills. This proposal also recommends that the State Board of Education in coordination with the Ohio Department of Higher Education and the Superintendent of Public Instruction, be responsible for approving any other opportunities that may be added to the list of options for demonstrating knowledge and skills.

House Bill 491 required the Department to consult with the business community on this proposal. Three meetings were held with representatives of Ohio's major business associations regarding Ohio's graduation requirements. In the course of these discussions, several areas of agreement were identified related to future graduation requirements. These include the importance of having non-standardized-test-based options for students, developing a plan for the early of identification and supports for students who are not "on track" to graduate and a deliberate student planning process to help students envision their future and understand the pathways to get there. Additionally, there is the recognition that there must continue to be an emphasis on career-focused activities for all students and we must continue to leverage and engage Business Advisory Councils to foster a meaningful connection between students, schools, and the business community.

The business community clearly represented that, while the Culminating Student Experience is an attractive opportunity for student learning and demonstration, it should not be part of the graduation requirement system. They questioned the ability of the state to implement this part of the proposal with consistency and integrity. To address these concerns, the SBOE and Department have committed to establishing appropriate training requirements and quality-control mechanisms. The SBOE will also continue to work with the business community to set minimum mathematics and English expectations, appropriately collect data, encourage work based learning and develop guidance for districts and schools to identify students who may not be on-track to graduate. However, I want to be clear that the business community has in no way approved or endorsed this proposal.

Educators and administrators who we have spoken with in Ohio's districts and schools are excited about this approach and value the flexibility and opportunity that the proposed approach offers to students. They recognize that graduation requirements should allow students the chance to explore and expand on their interests and passions while they learn, not restrict them. They also recognize that this plan empowers schools to explore innovative and flexible approaches to the high school experience and provide integrated learning experiences for students.

Finally, we should discuss when we expect students to meet these new requirements. To reduce confusion, new graduation requirements are usually implemented for students before they enter high school. The State Board recommends that these new requirements begin with this year's sophomore class, the graduating class of 2022, with a simplified approach to the Culminating Student Experience. The requirements could be fully implemented for the Class of 2023. To support the transition, we propose that the graduation options that are available to the class of 2020 be extended to the class of 2021.

Conclusion

The State Board of Education and I believe that the graduation proposal that I have laid out today will shift the high school experience away from the one-size-fits-all checklist of state tests. There is no standardized definition of success. Talent is jagged and our graduation requirements should support the workforce, academic, and life goals of each student. Legislation to enact this system will reduce the high-stakes nature of state high school tests, return flexibility to local schools, and innovatively empower student learning.

I hope this testimony has helped you understand the current state of graduation requirements, and the effort that has gone into designing the State Board of Education's proposal. I believe this proposal is more supportive of students, gives them more options for demonstrating what they know and are able to do, and better prepares them for what comes after high school. After all, the success of our students is the highest priority. I am happy to answer any questions from the committee.