

Testimony before the Senate Education Committee

A Proposal for High School Graduation Requirements

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Chairwoman Lehner, Vice Chair Terhar, Ranking Member Fedor, and members of the Senate Education Committee, my name is Paolo DeMaria and I am the Superintendent of Public Instruction. I am pleased to be with you today to share with you a set of recommendations for a proposed long-term approach to high school graduation requirements in Ohio.¹

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 graduation requirements start with taking and passing certain high school classes – a minimum of 20 credit hours. Additionally, all high school students must take the high school end-of-course exams. From there, students have a choice of one of three graduation pathways – each of which has a high-stakes, standardized testing component:

In the first pathway, a student must earn 18 or more points across all 7 state standardized high school tests. These tests are 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.

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. So, while this pathway focused on career-technical education programs, there are a number of program areas that do not have an industry credential connected to them. This pathway also requires reaching a certain score on a standardized assessment.

¹ Pursuant to Section 5 of Sub H.B. 491 (132nd General Assembly)

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 knowledge and skills 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 for students to demonstrate readiness to receive 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 likely 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.

Those options allowed students who did not meet one of the three graduation pathways – but had taken and passed all their required classes and 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 Plus² 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;

² <https://www.ohiohighered.org/ccp/students-families>

- Earn a State Board-approved industry-recognized credential³ or credentials that equal at least three points;
- Complete the OhioMeansJobs Readiness Seal⁴ requirements.

Again last November, data showed that thousands of students in the class of 2019 and 2020 were facing similar graduation uncertainty. House Bill 491 extended the 2018 transitional requirements to the class of 2019 and the class of 2020 with modifications⁵ 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. The Advisory Committee completed its work in the fall of 2018, and the State Board of Education endorsed its proposal in October 2018. The Board reaffirmed the endorsement last 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, teamwork, 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:

³ <http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Ohio-s-Graduation-Requirements/Industry-Recognized-Credentials-and-WorkKeys/Industry-Recognized-Credentials>

⁴ <http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/New-Skills-for-Youth/SuccessBound/OhioMeansJobs-Readiness-Seal>

⁵ 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.

First, students will continue to 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.

Second, high school students – in partnership with their parents, advisors and guidance counselors – would 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, as well as possible career options and further education opportunities.

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, a 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 evaluated 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 long-term graduation requirements proposal. Three meetings were held with representatives of Ohio's major business associations. In the course of these discussions, several areas of agreement were identified. These include the importance of having non-standardized-test-based options for students, developing a plan for the early identification and support 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, in particular, work-based learning opportunities, 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 representatives of 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 Department has committed to establishing appropriate training requirements and quality-control mechanisms. We 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 major state business association have in no way approved or endorsed this proposal.

Many educators and administrators in Ohio's districts and schools are excited about this approach and value the flexibility and opportunity that the proposed approach offers to students.

In fact, many local businesses who are familiar with the proposal also see its value and the opportunity for students to leverage work-based learning opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and skills. 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, let me close by addressing the implementation of these requirement. Normally, to reduce confusion, new graduation requirements are implemented for students at the time they enter high school. While that is ideal, we have to address the needs of the class of 2021 and beyond. The State Board recommends that the new requirements I've described begin with this year's sophomore class, the graduating class of 2022, using a simplified approach to the Culminating Student Experience. The requirements could then 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 not only give students more opportunities to show what they know and are able to do, but also shift the high school experience away from the one-size-fits-all checklist of courses and 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 students to discover and learn in much more engaging and meaningful ways.

Thank you for this opportunity to share this proposal with you today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.