

## Shelly Vaughn, Testimony - Graduation Requirements

Good afternoon Chair Lehner, Vice- Chair Tarhar and Ranking Member Fedor and members of the Senate Education Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about graduation requirements. I am Shelly Vaughn, superintendent of the Mercer County Educational Service Center.

I have served on Superintendent's Advisory Committee for Graduation Requirements since January 2017. It is important to note that this committee and the committee work that followed included a variety of educators: principals, guidance counselors, career technical directors, and superintendents- from a cross section of districts around the state. Our charge was to work with legislators and ODE staff to develop recommendations for the first class affected by the graduation requirements. This eventually led to work on long term solutions that would be recommended for consideration by state legislators. I take the time to detail the work of these committee members to highlight that the proposal endorsed by the state board of education includes thoughtful work from educators who know how these options will support multiple tested and non- tested methods for high school students to demonstrate what they know and are able to do. As Senator Huffman has heard me state many times, honor this process. The graduation options that have been presented to you by the Department of Education have been vetted by educators. In my opinion, that is how good policy should be created. I've been actively involved in 16 work sessions at ODE with other educators working on this work. Please, honor this process.

Recently, you have learned about another proposal endorsed by the Alliance For High Quality Education, Ohio Excels and Fordham. I'd like to reiterate Paulo's comments when he spoke to you last week; this is not a competition and the two proposals complement each other. We are all in this to create high quality graduation options for ALL students in Ohio. I'd like to speak to five of the concerns I've heard throughout the graduation requirements debate and share an educator's perspective about these concerns.

### Too Much Testing

Many of us in this room agree there is too much testing in Ohio's public schools - our accountability systems, including the graduation requirements currently in law, create a system that focuses solely on a student's ability to pass tests. The conundrum is finding the balance of allowing students to demonstrate what they know and are able to do, their competency, in ways that are authentic and not assessment based. Standardized tests have been our default because these measures are a very quick way to determine if students have met a standard. However, there are other more sophisticated and robust ways that policy makers should consider such as the culminating experience - which includes community and work opportunities as well as capstone projects.

I appreciate that the proposal developed by the Alliance focuses on competency in only two end-of-course exams and suggests eliminating tests at the high school level. While I appreciate the proposal's suggestion that a committee identify a new cut score for these tests, I think this recommendation places further emphasis on the wrong target - our assumption that standardized tests are the most accurate way to define student success.

This over reliance on testing results in a waste of human talent. Teachers and administrators must focus on compliance first and innovative practices second. This is particularly true in our small school districts - where resources are often limited and in those districts with the most

diverse student populations. This led me to another hot topic in the graduation requirements debate...

### Equity

We don't run public schools like country clubs - we do not pre-select, we educate all. NAPE scores are flatlined because despite the push from reformers to use standardized tests as our measure of success, the traditional virtues of public education in America remain- *looking for and supporting the individual strengths of students*. This is what closes achievement gaps and allows students to achieve greatness in their own way- not the deficit model that is traditional standardized testing.

Equity means making sure every student has the support they need to be successful. Equity in education requires putting systems in place to ensure that every child has an equal chance for success. The options in the proposal developed by educators and ODE staff place emphasis on a variety of options for Ohio's students with their unique challenges and barriers to successfully acquire the skills to be successful post high school.

By making the culminating student experience available to all students as part of the graduation requirements, educators will be held accountable to something other than tests, thus providing additional supports to help their students overcome barriers. While this culminating student experience in itself may not ensure equal *outcomes*, this is a big step to ensuring that every child in Ohio has equal *opportunity* for success.

### Lack of Rigor - Culminating student experience

How do we ensure that students aren't "getting a pass" if they choose the culminating experience as their opportunity to demonstrate their competence?

I facilitated a work session with 40 superintendents in February. We debated the graduation options proposal and took a deep dive into the culminating student experience. We discussed the meaningful learning experiences that already exist in their high schools and how these could be the foundation for the culminating experience as a graduation option. Their biggest concern was rigor and they asked for rubrics and guidance documents from ODE to promote high quality implementation. In the past few months, detailed guidance for the work and community service as well as the Capstone options have been developed and can be found [here](#).<sup>1</sup> I encourage you to explore these tools on the department's website. These tools prove that rigor is not compromised in the options. The Department of Education is well equipped to develop standard rubrics for districts to use that would ensure rigor and allow for local control.

One of the "tensions" that often surfaced in our work sessions was simple vs complex - As a work group we gave thoughtful consideration to educator's willingness to tolerate the complexity of a culminating student experience because it fosters customization and flexibility. As a work group we believe the complexity for adults does not outweigh the opportunity for students. Educators recognize the increase in workload to support the culminating student experience, but they are up for the challenge. Many times, principals, guidance counselors and superintendents have referenced this as the "right kind of work".

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<sup>1</sup> <http://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Ohio-s-Graduation-Requirements/Earning-an-Ohio-High-School-Diploma-for-the-CI-1/Work-and-Community-Service-Experience-and-Capstone/Work-Experience-Toolkit.pdf.aspx?lang=en-US>

### Local Control

In a survey conducted last fall of 70 district superintendents in Ohio by our advocacy network, 62 of the 70 respondents want local school boards to set graduation requirements. The initial proposal made by the Alliance included grade point averages as a option for students to demonstrate competency. Grade point averages are often a greater indicator of future success than other standardized measures. You will notice that GPA is not longer included in the proposal endorsed by Ohio Excels and Fordham. Education reformers argue that grade inflation should keep GPA from being an option for graduation. They will say that with local control, we are fragmented and that local control enables inequity. As an educator, I share with you that local control enables professional autonomy and customization for students.

What works may be messy and what works looks different from one district to another.

### An Ohio Diploma Should Mean Something

It should! It should mean that a student has completed high school course work and is leaving our public schools with basic competency. But, it should also mean that they leave with an informed plan. I encourage you to read written testimony from Ben Brigham, talent development manager at Nidec Minster.

He writes, "Success can – and should – be measured using metrics and demonstrations of competency that are meaningful to businesses, versus a college preparation testing system that looks suspiciously like a farm system intended to produce large numbers of tuition-paying college students. The Ohio Department of Education's proposal is clearly more flexible and would cultivate the kind of innovation needed to address the current and future workforce needs of our state's businesses."

Chair Lehner, thank you for allowing me to share my support for the culminating student experience and the graduation options developed by educators. Members of the Senate Education Committee, please honor this process. I am happy to answer any questions.