

Mike DeWine, Governor  
Paolo DeMaria, Superintendent of Public Instruction

**Testimony before the Senate Finance Subcommittee on Primary and  
Secondary Education**  
**A Proposal for High School Graduation Requirements**

Paolo DeMaria, Superintendent of Public Instruction Ohio Department of Education  
May 14, 2019

---

Chairman Terhar, Vice Chair Lehner, Ranking Member Fedor, and members of the Senate Finance Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education, my name is Paolo DeMaria and I am the Superintendent of Public Instruction. I am joined today by Laura Kohler, who is the current President of the State Board of Education. We are pleased to share with you a set of recommendations for a proposed long-term approach to high school graduation requirements in Ohio.

We appreciate that this committee is turning its attention towards graduation requirements by hearing proposals from various stakeholders and charting a clear path forward regarding what Ohio's students must do to earn a diploma. Currently, Ohio is operating under a transitional set of requirements, as we will describe in this testimony, and I and the State Board of Education – and many others – believe it is time to settle on a long-term plan. Students and families need to know how to prepare to meet the requirements for a diploma, and colleges, universities, and employers need to know that students are emerging from high school ready for higher education or the workforce.

Beyond providing clarity around what is expected of our students, addressing the issue of graduation requirements is an important matter of *equity*. The data is clear – those students who do not graduate are disproportionately low-income, minority or disabled students. There is a 10 – 14 percent gap between the graduation rates for these students and the rate for all students. While these students are no different in their ability to acquire knowledge and skills, they face tremendous challenges to reach our traditional gauge of readiness for future success.

The research is also clear that an individual who does not earn a high school diploma faces a challenging future. They are more likely to live in poverty, have worse health outcomes, and have higher mortality rates. The future prospects faced by individuals without diplomas are daunting.

That is why it is so important to give students every opportunity possible to demonstrate that they have acquired the knowledge and skills needed to be successful after high school.

Our testimony focuses on 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.

### **Current Graduation Requirements Landscape**

Ohio’s statutory graduation requirements are heavily reliant on a student’s performance on state assessments: Under the statutory requirements, students pursuing the first pathway must achieve 18 points across Ohio’s 7 end-of-course exams. Those in the second pathway may graduate by earning an in-demand, industry-recognized credential and scoring a specified number of points on a WorkKeys workforce readiness test. In the third pathway, a student may earn a diploma by earning a college-ready score on both the math and English components of the SAT or ACT.

The modified transition plan offers additional options to students who did not meet one of these three pathways – but who had still taken and passed all their required courses and taken *and retaken* – the state assessments. The additional options include GPA, capstone, as well as test options such as scores on AP tests or WorkKeys exams.

Reliance on state assessments is less than ideal: we *want* to believe that our measures of knowledge and skills are extremely precise – and that there is a bright line that characterizes readiness for future success. But we know this is not true. So, when we design a graduation requirements system, we need to contemplate and address two possible types of mistakes that might emerge.

The first mistake we want to avoid failing to award a diploma to a student who has, in fact, acquired the knowledge and skills needed to succeed. We must try, at all costs, to avoid this type of error. The ability for this error to correct itself is over the life of an individual is extremely daunting, because it shuts off individuals from even an opportunity to apply their knowledge and skills and prove themselves in the real world.

The second mistake is that we award a diploma to a student who has not acquired the knowledge and skills to succeed. While this is bad, it is not as bad as the first type of mistake, as inevitably, this error will self-correct – that is, an individual will quickly show their lack of preparation when they attempt post-secondary pursuits.

We have to acknowledge that, in spite of our best efforts, our tests are part of a broader system that signals to low income students, minority students and students with disabilities that “you’re likely not going to perform as well as everyone else.” It’s implicit – and sometimes explicit – bias. Whether we like it or not, this has an impact on how these students perform on tests, and it compromises the fairness and equity of using tests for high stakes purposes such as graduation requirements.

### **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 in March 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 and provide a benchmark against which to determine if a student is veering off track and at-risk of not graduating.

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.

Finally, students will have multiple opportunities to demonstrate their skills and knowledge, including innovative ways that do not rely on a standardized test. We all know that in real life it is the successful application of learning that is the true test of knowledge and not the assessment of learning. We will always learn more about what a student knows by seeing them demonstrate their learning. (This is why standardized tests aren't a very good predictor of college success.)

Under this proposal, 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, science, 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.

An important feature of this proposal is the option for a student to complete a Culminating Student Experience. This feature allows students the freedom to engage in experiences throughout high school that align to their passions, interests and aspirations and to 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, as I said, 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.

It's important to understand that many students – maybe even most students – will *not* use the Culminating Student Experience. They will be perfectly fine continuing to use tests or credentials as is generally the current norm. But there is a meaningful group of students that will benefit from a more flexible and integrated approach to demonstrating skills – and it is that group that will most benefit from the Culminating Student Experience.

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.

Educators and administrators – and even many business people who we have spoken with in Ohio's districts and schools are excited about this approach and value the flexibility and opportunity that it offers to students. They recognize that graduation requirements should allow students the chance to explore and expand upon 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 opportunities for students.

More importantly it gives students hope and an opportunity to be excited and engaged about their high school experience. So often today we find students who are disillusioned and despondent as they move from class to class, test to test, on an aimless path to checking boxes. We owe better to our students. And we especially owe it to the capable students who experience the challenges of low socio-economic status, minority status or a disabling condition.

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 we have laid out today will shift the high school experience away from the one-size-fits-all checklist of state tests, and better recognize the multitude of ways that students demonstrate skills and knowledge.

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.

We hope this testimony helps you understand 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. We are happy to answer any questions from the committee.