



Final Recommendations of DC's High School Graduation Requirements Task Force

Executive Summary

While District of Columbia graduation rates have increased over the past several years, these increases have recently come under increased scrutiny, and several data points indicate that DC public school students are not ready for the next steps in college or careers when they graduate from high school. Specifically:

- The 2016-17 Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) scores, which predict college readiness, show that only 32% of DC students are college-ready in reading, and 27% of DC students are college-ready in math in grades 3-8¹
- The 6-year college graduation rate for DC students was just 23% in 2012²
- In 2016, the average District student's SAT score was 1285 out of 2400, compared to the national average of 1484³
- Of District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) students who took at least one AP exam, just 34% received a passing score of 3, 4 or 5 on one or more tests⁴
- 98% of DCPS graduates who attend the University of the District of Columbia take remedial courses⁵

The High School Graduation Requirements Task Force sought to address the dissonance between improving graduation rates and evidence that not all District graduates are college- and career-ready. The task force began its work by considering three key questions:

- How do DC's graduation requirements affect student preparedness for college and careers?
- How do DC's requirements and approach for awarding a high school diploma compare with those of other states?
- How do the graduation requirements measure and recognize student mastery of DC's learning standards?

To analyze and update the requirements, Laura Wilson Phelan (Ward 1 Representative) and Markus Batchelor (Ward 8 Representative) of the DC State Board of Education (SBOE) convened a task force in June 2017 comprised of District education stakeholders. At least 50% of the members were required to live and/or work in wards 7 and 8, where roughly half of the District's students live. The SBOE received over 100 applications, and Wilson Phelan and Batchelor selected a task force comprised of students, parents, teachers, administrators, ward education group representatives, workforce development specialists, and higher education professionals. The members of the task force are listed at the close of the report.

¹ [2016-17 Results and Resources](#)

² [Most DC High School Graduates Don't Finish College in Six Years](#)

³ [State Profile Report: District of Columbia](#)

⁴ [AP Score Data Sets](#)

⁵ [Faking the Grade](#)



Overview of Recommendations and Purpose of the Diploma

Task force members reached consensus on the following recommendations for the consideration of the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) to put forward into regulatory policy:

- *Provide an opportunity for students to demonstrate they have mastered course content for world language and mathematics in lieu of taking the course.*
- *Reduce the number of required community service hours from 100 to 50.*
- *Create a personalized learning plan for each public school student in the District, and revisit this plan in elementary, middle, and high school to ensure the student is on track to graduate.*

During the task force, its members identified the following as their purpose statement:

The purpose of the District of Columbia diploma shall be to prepare students to succeed in 21st century jobs of their choice and lead civically engaged lives. Please see below for definitions.

“21st century jobs” – jobs that meet existing needs in the world, as well as jobs that will solve as-yet unidentified problems. These jobs may require post-secondary education and/or specialized training. To be able to succeed in any of these jobs, and to be able to move freely between them, students need effective communication, time management, teamwork, and social-emotional skills. Students also need academic preparation in high school that will allow them to perform well in coursework at two- or four-year post-secondary institutions or workforce programs directly following graduation.

“Civically engaged lives” – graduates pro-actively engage in their communities and have developed the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to want and be able to positively influence the lives of others.

Overview

This report is organized into the following sections:

- The **Executive Summary** outlines the problem the task force sought to address.
- **Overview of Recommendations** presents the task force’s three final recommendations to OSSE and offers a vision for what the District diploma should mean for the city’s graduates; all recommendations in this report are offered in service of that vision.
- **Methodology** details the research the task force conducted to make an informed set of recommendations.
- The **Recommendations One - Three** explain each of the task force’s recommended adjustments to DC’s high school graduation requirements in detail, including the core principles of the recommendation, the rationale, and any minority opinions that emerged.
- **Minority Opinion** documents the issues the task force grappled with and lists ideas to improve student preparedness that did not ultimately reach consensus and make it into



the final recommendations but were nevertheless championed by multiple task force members or significant constituencies.

- **Research** provides an overview of outcomes from the research that was conducted in support of these recommendations.
- **Further Discussion** lists task force members' recommendations for improvements to high school education in the District. Unlike the Minority Opinion section, which focuses on areas where the task force opted not to act, the issues in Further Discussion were often met with broad support but fell outside of the task force's scope. The **Conclusion** is a call to action on the task force's three key recommendations and on the issues in the Further Discussion section that are outside of the task force's purview but would improve student preparedness in the District.
- **Acknowledgements** offers thanks to each of the experts and stakeholders who contributed to the task force's work.

Methodology

Task force members conducted focus groups to gather feedback from 67 DC students and recent graduates who represented 14 different District public and public charter schools. Members heard from a panel of experts who shared national best practices and promising new policies for graduation requirements. The task force reviewed this information, drew on their own expertise, and worked with members of their communities to test ideas to improve student preparation.

SBOE staff compared the District's graduation requirements to those used across the country, conducted in-depth research on emerging practices and best practices in graduation requirements, and explored competency-based education principles through extensive interviews, site visits, and research. This research was presented to and summarized for task force members, who used it to inform their decision-making.

Recommendation One: World Language and Mathematics Mastery

Core Principles of the Recommended Changes

Members of the task force propose the following adjustments to the mathematics and world language requirements:

- Students may receive credit for a high school math or world language course by demonstrating mastery of the equivalent standards in the course.
 - To receive credit, students must demonstrate a high level of mastery on an OSSE-approved test or equivalent assessment in math and by achieving an OSSE-approved designation on a world language assessment.
 - These assessments must be offered in testing conditions on published dates by DCPS and each DC public charter school (PCS) under the supervision of OSSE before the start of each semester and when there are two weeks remaining in the semester.
- These credits count toward the 24.0 required Carnegie Units.



- Students are encouraged to enroll in higher-level math and language courses upon demonstrating mastery.
- Students are not required to complete the seat-time requirement for the Carnegie Unit.

Rationale

This recommendation is designed to allow students to demonstrate what they know, and to receive credit for that knowledge without requiring that they learn that information in only one setting – through sitting for 120 hours in a classroom. Math and world language are unique subjects in that their standards are sequenced and therefore build on one another in a predictable, relatively linear way. Numerous rigorous and validated assessments exist for these subjects. Currently, students who take world language courses outside of those offered by their school (e.g., from spending a summer on a study abroad trip) have a difficult time receiving credit for what they know. Furthermore, students who enter high school already demonstrating mastery in world language do not have a way to receive credit for what they have already learned. Finally, for many students, building knowledge in a class setting does not work best for their learning style. By enabling students to receive credit by demonstrating mastery outside of a traditional classroom setting, the District acknowledges the many environments in which students learn.

To implement these mastery assessments, members of the task force recommend that OSSE research tests and accessible complementary assessments reflective of the Universal Design for Learning to assess math and world language mastery in the 2018-19 school year. Task force members agreed that the bar for receiving credit should be set high – at 85% mastery. OSSE should provide guidance on how, when, and by whom assessments may be administered beginning in the 2019-20 school year.

Other states have taken this work further by adopting competency-based education (CBE) policies that require students to demonstrate mastery as part of course completion. The SBOE approved a CBE regulation in 2016 that allows schools to apply for waivers to the Carnegie Unit for competency-based courses. The policy recommendation recommended by this task force adds to the current CBE regulation by allowing individual students to obtain credit for their knowledge. Under this recommendation, for example, a student who learned a semester’s worth of Japanese over the summer could demonstrate mastery to receive credit for this knowledge by passing a state-approved assessment even if his/her school does not offer a Japanese course for credit.

The following resources provide additional information on how CBE looks in other states and may provide guidance for future efforts:

- [Education Commission of the States: Competency-Based Graduation Models](#)
- [Indiana State Board of Education: Graduation Pathways Panel](#)
- [Rhode Island: Putting Together the Pieces of a Competency-Based System](#)

Minority Opinion

Several task force members were only in favor of letting students demonstrate mastery if it was limited to one mathematics course and one world language course. These task force members, many of whom work in schools, worried that schools might not have enough remaining courses for



students who place out of six required courses, especially if those students wanted to pursue higher-level math and world language courses.

Other task force members did not support this policy at all, saying that students would likely find ways to exploit the process. Task force members responded to this objection by saying that the test must be rigorous, and the bar for passing the test must be very high.

Another minority opinion was that this idea would not impact a large number of students, and therefore might not merit policy change. One task force member responded to this idea by saying that regardless of how many students are impacted, it would be worthwhile to help those who need the additional flexibility.

Recommendation Two: Community Service

Core Principles of the Recommended Changes

Members of the task force propose the following adjustments to the community service requirement:

- All students must complete 50 hours of community service to receive a high school diploma.

Rationale

Like the previous recommendation, this proposal is designed to increase flexibility. Students reported struggling to find meaningful community service experiences in which to participate, and for students who need to work for money, the current 100-hour requirement is burdensome. Reducing the required hours would allow students to spend more time doing paid work, pursuing internships, and participating in extracurricular activities.

Task force members agreed to let each Local Education Agency (LEA) continue to set its own definition for community service because the city lacks a system for enforcing a common definition. The proposed policy should go into effect in school year 2019-20 for incoming freshmen, which would mean that the graduating class of 2023 would be the first class required to complete 50, rather than 100, hours of community service.

This resource outlines other states' community service requirements. At 100 hours, the District is currently an outlier; no other state requires as many hours, particularly without an accompanying service learning experience.

[High School Graduation Requirement or Credit toward Graduation](#)

Minority Opinion

DCPS central office is in favor of maintaining a policy of 100 required community service hours and adding the opportunity for students to receive credit for internship hours.

Task force members debated giving further guidance about community service hours through such potential actions as defining community service for the city, expressly permitting students to gain



community service hours for paid work, and embedding service learning coursework in the graduation requirements.

In the end, task force members decided to let each LEA define community service, with the knowledge that many charter LEAs currently follow DCPS' definition of community service, so there is a high level of standardization across the city. Task force members also decided that because there is not equitable access to internships across the city, they did not want to add internships into the definition of community service because of the potential to create more flexibility only for those students who are traditionally well-served by District schools. The task force opted against creating a service learning course because of the potentially significant burden on schools, which would need to create a curriculum and find teachers to offer service learning courses.

Task force members expressed hope that LEAs would voluntarily broaden their definition of an acceptable community service partner beyond nonprofit organizations.

Recommendation Three: Personalized Learning Plans

Core Principles of the Recommended Changes

Members of the task force propose the following adjustments to the graduation requirements, in support of student preparedness:

- Each District student should receive a personalized learning plan (PLP).
- Plans should be offered at 3 times during a student's education with the following foci:
 - Plan 1: between grades 2-4 (the transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn")
 - Focused on reading and math benchmarks for grade level, detailing areas for intervention and opportunities.
 - Plan 2: At the end of 5th grade (transition to middle school)
 - Focused on reading and math benchmarks for grade level and preparedness for middle school, detailing areas for intervention and opportunities.
 - Plan 3: At the end of 8th grade (transition to high school)
 - Focused on planning and preparedness for high school, academics, careers, and ideally hands-on experience through internships, detailing areas for intervention and opportunities.
- Each plan should include a list of home-based interventions parents can make and opportunities they can provide, as well as a list of the interventions a school has made and will make in the future.
- Each plan should be reviewed by a team designated by the school (e.g., counselor, teacher); families are integral to the success of these plans. Conversations about the PLPs should include observations about the student's social-emotional learning (SEL), but given the absence of state SEL standards, the task force felt these standards could not be included in the official PLP.



- PLPs would not supplant individualized education programs (IEPs); for students who have IEPs, PLPs would serve as an addendum.
- DCPS would oversee plans for DCPS schools; the DC Public Charter School Board (PCSB) would oversee plans for schools that opt to create them.
- State education agencies, City Council, and LEAs will support the success of these plans by:
 - Engaging families and school-based stakeholders in this process and plan, which is critical; families should sign off that they understand the plan and what it means for their child.
 - Ensuring this is a funded mandate. There will be more work for schools where most students need supports. There must be additional support provided to schools for this to be effective.
 - Ensuring the District offers real options for students, developed by families in partnership with schools. Will students who don't meet grade-level standards be held back? How many times? What is the maximum capacity of summer school programs?
 - Working to start implementation in school year 2019-20 as a pilot, with an OSSE-directed review of the process and an expansion in August 2020.

Rationale

This recommendation is grounded in the evidence that the majority of DC students receive a high school diploma without being prepared for next steps in life. Personalized learning plans are designed to bring families and school personnel together and align around how a student is performing and what can be done to ensure the student is successful. These plans will use available data to help students get to grade level, stay on grade level, or exceed grade level. Students will have greater control over their academic outcomes if LEAs and the State Education Agency (SEA) can work together to consolidate student data, identify and execute actions that will help students grow more proficient, and involve families in conversations about data and student goals. **Some task force members noted repeatedly that many District students receive test scores each year indicating that they are not performing at grade level, but the city does not have a standardized plan to increase student achievement, and families are often unaware that their students are not on track to graduate until they reach high school.** PLPs will bring families into the conversation and offer high-impact interventions to improve student outcomes.

Task force members were explicit that the purpose of the PLPs was to help ensure students are prepared for next steps by arming parents with information to help them support their children and should not be used to allow schools to discriminate against students in any way. Task force members also believed that PLPs should only be enacted if funding is allocated to ensure their success.

The task force created a potential timeline for this work, indicated in the last bullet of the proposal; the District should pilot these PLPs across both sectors in school year 2019-20 with students in grades 2-4. OSSE should review the process to understand the impact and identify any difficulties



that arose. After making recommendations for improvements to the PLPs, the plans should expand to all students in grades 2-12 over the 2020-21, 2021-22, and 2022-23 school years.

These recommendations were informed in large part by task force members' experience, but the following resources were also informative:

[Texas Student Success Initiative Manual - Grade Advancement Requirements](#)
[Education Commission of the States - 50-State Comparison: High School Graduation Requirements](#)

Minority Opinion

DCPS central office staff noted that while they were in favor of implementing PLPs for grades 9-12, they could not endorse plans for elementary or middle school students until they had more fully explored this idea, including an evaluation of their capacity to ensure schools would have the resources to implement plans with fidelity.

DC Public Charter School Board agency staff noted that members of the task force made recommendations for PLPs to be done in LEAs that serve grades pre-kindergarten through eight while not having any charter representation on the task force of schools serving those grades nor soliciting their feedback. PCSB also noted that it does not monitor high school graduation outcomes in schools that do not serve grades 9-12.

Several task force members were wary of making a recommendation without an identified funding stream to support it. One task force member oversaw a similarly intensive set of high school preparedness interventions in another state. She shared that they were highly effective, but demanded significant resources and commitment. Task force members also feared that the burden of maintaining the plans would disproportionately fall on teachers and principals without providing them additional support, and although this was not seen as a reason not to recommend the plans, it was an area of concern. One task force member also felt that PLPs should be opt-in.

One task force member was concerned that PLPs are not necessary, as students' math and reading scores are shared year-over-year from school to school through electronic file-sharing.

Some task force members expressed interest in including socio-emotional learning (SEL) in the plans. Because there are no state standards for SEL, members expressed concern that that teacher input would lack a common set of standards against which to judge student progress. Several task force members also voiced concern about implicit bias that may be captured in plans that would follow students from LEA to LEA, and they requested that PLPs be shared only if parents explicitly consented to do so.

Minority Opinion

Flexibility

The task force grappled with the issue of flexibility, wondering about the extent to which it would be helpful to provide students with more choices by reducing the number of required courses, increasing the number of available courses, and allowing students to demonstrate mastery without dedicating seat time to a class. The following ideas were posed repeatedly:

- Creating a diploma of distinction



- This idea was ultimately rejected because the majority of the task force felt that creating diplomas of distinction would devalue the standard diploma, ultimately disadvantaging those students who were not served well by their high schools.
- Waiving requirements for students with qualifying IEPs
 - One task force member suggested that LEAs and their IEP teams be given the flexibility to waive or modify certain requirements (world language and/or Algebra II) for specific students whose disability significantly impacts the student's ability to earn those credits. Another task force member felt that any flexibility that would help students on IEPs should help general education students as well. Any ideas that were deemed necessary for students with IEPs have been incorporated into the final recommendations.
- Requiring that students take both years of world language in the same language
 - Task force members were split on this recommendation; some task force members felt that two years in the same language was preferable because colleges view it more favorably. Others felt that this would put a burden on students who transfer LEAs during high school; if a student started taking French and transferred to an LEA that only offered Spanish, he or she would fall behind. Task force members also said that allowing students to take two different languages would better serve students with learning differences. Due to a lack of consensus, the task force ultimately opted to leave the policy as-is, allowing students to take two different languages to fulfill their world language requirement.
- Reducing the number of required courses within the core subjects
 - After receiving input from high school teachers and LEA staff across the District on the potential impact of these changes on student learning, many task force members decided that existing required courses in math, social studies, and science best prepare students for college admission. Task force members did not propose any changes to English requirements. Some task force members advocated for the addition of requirements in technology, life skills and financial literacy to the graduation requirements.

Research

Experts, research, and student feedback informed the task force's work. Task force members heard from three sets of experts; first, a PCSB graduate, Darryl Robinson, spoke to the task force about his experience attending high school in the District. Robinson penned a 2012 Washington Post op-ed called "[I went to some of D.C.'s best schools. I was still unprepared for college.](#)" The piece speaks to how Robinson was unprepared to succeed at Georgetown University, despite being a top student at a highly regarded District school. Task force members then heard from high school guidance counselors who work at DCPS and PCSB schools across the city; the counselors talked about what college and employers are looking for and discussed the challenges their students face on the path to graduation. Finally, the task force heard from a panel of experts: Jennifer Zinth of the Education Commission of the States, Don Long of the National Association of State Boards of Education, and



Phillip Lovell of the Alliance for Excellent Education, all of whom are well-versed in national best practices and upcoming trends in high school graduation requirements. Task force members also read articles and reports from Ms. Zinth's, Mr. Long's, and Mr. Lovell's organizations and other education research and policy organizations.

Community engagement was an integral part of the task force's work. Task force members were selected in part based on their ability to represent a set of stakeholders who would be influenced by shifts to the graduation requirements. Throughout the process, task force members polled their constituencies and reported back their input. In September 2017, task force members and SBOE staff conducted focus groups with students from 14 DCPS and PCSB schools. The focus groups gathered input from 65 current high school students and two recent graduates. Ms. Wilson Phelan and Mr. Batchelor also presented to a group of education stakeholders – including teachers, school-based staff and administrators – at Raise DC's annual Graduation Pathways Summit to solicit their input. The feedback task force members gathered from their communities was compiled, shared, and discussed during meetings.

Further Discussion

Task force members acknowledged that while graduation requirements can help improve student preparation, some of the issues plaguing District schools cannot be fixed by changes to the requirements alone. Throughout the task force's meetings, members regularly noted:

- Some disparities can be traced to unequal course offerings across District schools
- Students expressed an appetite for life skills courses, including financial literacy and computer science
- Students feel that a District diploma is not always sufficient for employment
- Dual enrollment opportunities are not equally available for students at all District schools

Additional items noted by task for members for future action included:

- “True summer school” beyond credit recovery to allow students to catch up on material they haven't mastered.
- Creating opportunity for 8th and/or 9th grade students to decide whether success might require a 5th year of high school or summer courses. These options were recommended as part of a plan for success, not a fix after failure.
- Reconsidering the “IEP Certificate of Completion” granted to students with disabilities. Without a diploma, these students are limited in the ways they can engage in post-secondary education, training, and even employment.
- Creative solutions to address student trauma and mental health challenges, given the shortage of mental health professionals in schools.
- Support for teacher self-care.
- Improvements to the city's parent culture that leverage the powerful role they play in the education of their children.
- Accessing economies of scale to address the needs of all students with disabilities.



- Increased funding and support for career and college guidance counselor programs.
- A paradigm shift away from building linear education systems when students' lives are curved.

These ideas, and a host of others, are outside of the task force's and SBOE's scope but merit attention and further action from other District agencies. The task force's recommendations are a necessary but insufficient step toward improved student preparation.

Conclusion

These recommendations are designed to move District students toward the goal of success in 21st century jobs and civically engaged lives. While the majority of task force members agreed on these three recommendations, task force members also agreed that they are necessary but not sufficient to ensure all District graduates are prepared. There is more work to do. Other states require that students demonstrate college and career readiness through portfolios, end-of-course exams, and qualifying test scores, but task force members felt that those were not the right steps for the District requirements at this juncture.

Task force members now ask that SBOE and OSSE accept the recommendations in this report and turn them into regulations in a timely fashion to ensure they are adopted for the 2019-20 school year. These recommendations are designed to improve student preparation and increase equity in the District, and expedient action is critical.

Acknowledgements

The SBOE acknowledges the hard work and dedication of the High School Graduation Requirements Task Force members:

- **Erin Bibo**, Deputy Chief, College & Career Programs, DCPS; Ward 6 resident; DCPS parent
- **Tom Brown**, Executive Director, Training Grounds, Inc.; Ward 7 resident; DCPS and PCS parent
- **Julie Camerata**, Executive Director, DC Special Education Cooperative; Ward 1 resident; PCS parent
- **Latisha Chisholm**, Special Education Teacher, Anacostia High School; Ward 8 resident
- **Naomi Rubin DeVeaux**, Deputy Director, DC Public Charter School Board
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- **Jerome Foster II**, SBOE Student Advisory Committee Member; Student, Washington Leadership Academy; Ward 7 resident
- **Cara Fuller**, Principal, DCPS Ballou STAY High School; Ward 8 resident
- **Larry Greenhill, Sr.**, Vice President, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 26; Ward 8 resident
- **Cosby Hunt**, Senior Officer of Teaching & Learning, Center for Inspired Teaching; Teacher, Real World History for DCPS and PCSB students; Ward 5 resident; PCS parent
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- **Justin Tooley**, Special Assistant for Legislation & Policy, OSSE; Ward 1 resident (abstained from voting, as OSSE is the recipient of this report)

The SBOE and the task force also extend our thanks to experts Tisa Holley, Don Long, Phillip Lovell, Darryl Robinson, Leslie Sargent, Jessica Schimmerling, and Jennifer Zinth for sharing their knowledge with the task force. Further thanks go to Tyler Barnett, Aaron Griffith-VanderYacht, David Heckler, Jennifer Jackson, Alicia Kielmovich, Lillian Pace, Brian Pick, Tamra Sease, Christine Sellers, Natalie Truong, Matt Webb, Leon Wheeler, Anne Widener, and Maria Worthen for their help with our research. We thank Karen Williams for her logistical support and NASBE for providing SBOE with a grant to support deeper learning initiatives in the District.





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