

Amy Dudas, DC Alliance of Youth Advocates  
Testimony to the DC State Board of Education  
Working Session on Proposal Permitting OSSE to Award State Diplomas  
April 1, 2015

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Good evening, members of the DC State Board of Education (“State Board”). Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony as you discuss a proposal permitting the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (“OSSE”) to award state diplomas during today’s working session. My name is Amy Dudas and I am submitting testimony in my capacity as a policy analyst with the DC Alliance of Youth Advocates, a coalition of over 130 youth-serving agencies in the District to provide feedback on this promising approach to education, especially for youth whose academic pursuits have stalled out on traditional pathways.

Today, the State Board considers a proposal that would allow OSSE to issue diplomas to students graduating from OSSE-managed schools, as prompted by the need to award diplomas to graduates of OSSE-managed Hospitality High School. However, in December of last year, OSSE released proposed regulations that would have included District residents who attain a GED or NEDP eligible for this “Superintendent’s Diploma”. While it’s certainly important and time-sensitive to address the needs of the 30-some students set to graduate from Hospitality High in June, isolating this group of youth to receive the benefits of a state-issued, Superintendent’s Diploma leaves the need for flexible education options of at least 7,500 educationally disengaged District youth and 60,000 District adults without a high school diploma on the table. It is critical that our school system adapt to create as many opportunities to reconnect youth and adult learners to successful academic and career pathways as possible.

The bulk of existing programs in the District offering educational re-engagement or “second chance” options provide GED preparation to disengaged youth. Preparing to attain a GED is often a faster option for youth than rebooting their progress towards a traditional diploma, and a speedy, yet rigorous, process of re-engagement is critical for disconnected youth who are facing real-world demands to earn income and support dependents. Students who become disengaged from school and do not earn a high school credential often struggle to gain solid footing in the labor market, and lack exposure to the entry-level positions that pave the way for long-term earning potential. Alarming, 34.2% of 16-19 year old District residents were unable to find paid, unsubsidized employment in 2013<sup>1</sup>. By incorporating GED attainment within a state-issued diploma the District can effectively shorten the on-ramp to post-secondary and credentialing opportunities for youth who have struggled in traditional academic pursuits.

Beyond incorporating GED and NEDP into a state-issued diploma, I encourage the School Board to incorporate the attainment of a GED through community based organization’s (CBO’s) programming in order to ensure a “no wrong door” approach to youth reengagement. In the long term, designating LEAs

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<sup>1</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, Local Area Unemployment Statistics, 2013. Available at <http://www.bls.gov/lau/table14full13.pdf>

sole authority to determine competency-based graduation requirements would exclude CBO-based GED preparation programs and the youth they serve from the benefit of a competency-based diploma. This could have unintended consequences on the ability of CBOs to fund and recruit youth for their high-quality GED prep programs. As an alternative, we recommend that the authority to grant diplomas for GED attainment should reside within OSSE; as the purveyors of the GED within the District, and the authority over the NEDP, it makes sense to house all pathways to state-issued diplomas within one agency for consistency in metrics.

Ensuring all youth have access to a best-fit educational trajectory with no wrong door depends on the smart investments and strategic planning of the School Board. We urge you to consider the consequences of limiting this pathway to success graduates of Hospitality High School alone. I thank you again for the opportunity to submit testimony.

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