

High School Graduation Requirements Task Force Meeting #4
September 27, 2017 at 6:00 PM
441 4th Street, NW, Suite 1114
Washington, DC 20001

Attendance

High School Graduation Requirements Task Force Members:

Present:

- **Markus Batchelor** (Task Force Co-Chair, State Board of Education, Ward 8)
- **Julie Camerata** (Parent, DC International, Executive Director, DC Special Education Cooperative)
- **Celine Fejeran** (Deputy Director, Raise DC)
- **Jerome Foster II** (Student, Washington Leadership Academy)
- **Cara Fuller** (Principal, Ballou STAY High School)
- **Senovia Hurtado** (School Counselor & Parent, School Without Walls)
- **Dwan Jordon** (Senior Advisor, Friendship PCS)
- **Sandra Jowers-Barber** (Director, Division of Humanities, University of the District of Columbia College)
- **Kimberly Martin** (Principal, Wilson High School)
- **Sanjay Mitchell** (Director of College & Alumni Programs, Thurgood Marshall Academy PCHS)
- **Shenita Ray** (Director of Online Operations, Georgetown University School of Continuing Studies)
- **Karla Reid-Witt** (Parent, Banneker High School)
- **Cathy Reilly** (Executive Director, Senior High Alliance of Parents, Principals and Educators)
- **Naomi Rubin DeVeaux** (Deputy Director, DC Public Charter School Board)
- **Laura Wilson Phelan** (Task Force Co-Chair, State Board of Education, Ward 1)

Phone:

- **Erin Bibo** (Deputy Chief, College & Career Programs)
- **Tom Brown** (Executive Director, Training Grounds, Inc.)
- **Latisha Chisholm** (Special Education Coordinator, Anacostia High School)
- **Larry Greenhill, Sr.** (Vice President, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers)
- **Cosby Hunt** (Teacher & Senior Officer of Teaching & Learning, Center for Inspired Teaching)
- **Carol Randolph** (Chief Operating Officer, DC Students Construction Trades Foundation)
- **Jahari Shelton** (Student, Sidwell Friends School)
- **Jane Spence** (Deputy Chief, Secondary Schools, DC Public Schools)

Absent:

- **Jimell Sanders** (Parent, Houston Elementary School)
- **David Tansey** (Teacher, McKinley Technology High School)
- **Justin Tooley** (Special Assistant for Legislation & Policy, Office of the State Superintendent of Education)

Presenters:

- **Tisa Holley** (School Counselor, Friendship Public Charter School)
- **Leslie Sargent** (School Counselor, Wilson High School)
- **Jessica Schimmerling** (School Counselor, Anacostia High School)

SBOE Staff:

- **John-Paul Hayworth**, Executive Director
- **Sabrina Hernandez**, Policy Fellow
- **Paul Negron**, Program Support Specialist
- **Maria Saliccioli**, Policy Analyst
- **Alexandria Smith**, Communication Fellow

Executive Summary

The High School Graduation Requirements Task Force (TF), led by Ms. Wilson Phelan and Mr. Batchelor, held its fourth meeting on September 27, 2017. TF members reflected on the feedback that emerged from the focus groups, focusing on student remarks that were either surprising or in line with expectations. The group briefly looked at data from the Public Charter School Board on the courses that were most commonly failed at twelve different charter schools, and Ms. Wilson shared some information on preparedness barriers District students face when pursuing career and technical education (CTE) pathways. A panel of counselors presented on their impressions of the District's high school graduation requirements, and then TF members worked in groups to define a problem statement for the task force to adopt. Each group generated a set of concerns or questions that will be refined into a problem statement at the next meeting.

The TF then adjourned until its fifth meeting on October 11, 2017.

Agenda Items**Review Focus Group Data**

TF members were given a one-page synopsis of focus group feedback and reflected on it. They then discussed the results and their impressions from focus groups.

Dr. Jowers-Barber asked if any focus groups reflected on the content of the community service hours; Ms. Saliccioli shared that while some students said they were able to do easy tasks to fulfill their hours, no one reported doing boring or meaningless tasks.

Ms. Reilly talked about her focus group, which featured two DCPS graduates. She said they stated English was useful, and they had enjoyed community service, and that one graduate spoke about how learning tolerance from her history teacher had helped her in the workplace. Ms. Reilly noted that it would be difficult to separate content from requirements in terms of what causes students dissatisfaction. She added that students wished to be able to take more world language courses. She suggested convening more focus groups with DC graduates to learn about how their courses helped them with their postsecondary endeavors.

Mr. Batchelor thanked focus group participants for their work.

Welcome

Student Preparedness Data Review and Discussion

Ms. Wilson Phelan said that Ms. Rubin DeVeaux would share some data across the charter sector on behalf of the Public Charter School Board (PCSB).

Ms. Rubin DeVeaux shared that the PCSB reviews all charter school freshman and senior transcripts each year – the freshmen to make sure they're on target, the seniors to make sure they're ready to graduate. This review does not include any additional requirements that a school may ask of its students.

The data showed that one school's students were most likely to fail because of their senior expedition, and at three schools, science and social studies were the most likely culprits of failure. Two schools indicated that math, science, and social studies most often led to failure, one said English IV, and one said government and US history. Community service hours came up across the most schools – obtaining enough hours was a barrier to graduation at six of the 12 audited schools.

Ms. Wilson Phelan shared on behalf of Mr. Greenhill that students were unable to pass entrance exams to enter trade schools. He had estimated that few students were able to pass a test that required basic skills applicable to the workplace. Ms. Wilson Phelan said that the group needed to focus on the career track in addition to the work it had already been doing about college track preparation.

Counselor Panel: Impact of Requirements on Students

Mr. Batchelor introduced the counselors on the counselor panel. He opened the panel by asking if any of the focus group feedback surprised them, and he wondered if it was accurate to the challenges they hear most often.

Ms. Schimmerling of Anacostia High School said that not much of the feedback was surprising to her, but she was surprised to hear that students did not want to take four years each of science, social studies, math, and English. She said the majority of the other feedback was not a surprise, particularly students' interest in life skills courses. Anacostia High School offers career pathways, including biomedical sciences and computer science. Students are more interested in pathways that center on topics from the feedback sheet, however – things like cooking and cosmetology. She thought that offering pathways around these careers these would be beneficial to her students. Many of Ms. Schimmerling's students wait until the last possible moment to complete community service hours, and many do not have a plan to complete the 100 hours. Anacostia only offers one foreign language, Spanish, and that has been the case since 2010 – 2011. She has heard negative feedback about that before.

Ms. Sargent of Wilson High School echoed Ms. Schimmerling's takeaways. She said that she has heard the feedback that students don't want to take four years each of the core subjects, and would be willing to swap another course in a core subject (i.e., 5 years of science for 3 years of English). She has also heard students clamoring for more life skills courses, and she thinks that home economics classes are useful to students who ask for "help with adulting." Wilson has a financial planning course, which is a positive thing, but is not enough for what students are looking for, and there are not enough sections for all students to take this course. Parents ask for help with students' life skills even more than students themselves do. Ms. Sargent noted that senior year is when parents and students realize these life skills preparation gaps.

Ms. Holley of Friendship Public Charter School echoed her colleagues' feedback on the need for life skills and students' difficulty completing their community service hours. Advisory teachers at Friendship are asked to help students fulfill their community service requirements, but whether this helps students meet their goals is hit-or-miss. The counseling team hosts community service fairs and brings in resources to support this work, but it remains the greatest challenge she sees.

Ms. Schimmerling added that her students are in two groups: either they have met nearly all of their graduation requirements by 12th grade, so their schedules are half-full of electives during senior year, which students don't like, or they are far behind with their credits and cannot meet their requirements in four years because of repetitive course failures. The graduation requirements are too low for the first group, because they can be completed in 3.5 years, but those students don't want to take classes beyond what is required. Students take AP courses, but because they fulfill core class and college prep requirements, they do not solve the problem of schedules full of electives. Ms. Schimmerling does not advocate for more requirements because of her students who struggle to graduate, but she asked what could be done for her top students who have to fill their schedules with unneeded classes.

Ms. Sargent said that middle schools grant many credits – up to two language credits and two math credits. Students finish their required math classes by the end of senior year, in some cases, and may not need to take language courses.

Ms. Reilly asked about acknowledgment for students who go above and beyond, such as a diploma with distinction, wondering what would motivate them if they were unable to enter dual enrollment courses.

Ms. Holley said that within the Friendship network, students are able to partner with colleges for online classes in addition to a dual enrollment option at the University of the District of Columbia (UDC). That has been helpful for students who finish their requirements, and there is the convenience of staying on campus in addition to the benefit of teacher oversight and support. Students build community as they enroll in courses together. Others load their schedules with AP courses to increase rigor and earn college credits.

Ms. Wilson Phelan said that the most selective colleges only require two years of science and social studies, and she wondered if colleges had rejected students without four years of the core classes.

Ms. Sargent said that she liked the 4x4 (four years each of English, math, social studies, and science) requirement, because it covers everyone, adding that certain state schools require it and their students have met those requirements. She gave North Carolina as an example and said that it was a common state for DC students to end up in. She found the 4x4 to be insurance, not worrying about whether the student is college-bound for the state where they want to go.

Ms. Holley added that coming from DC to Maryland, she used to hear that colleges wanted four years of science for engineering majors. She said she had to have conversations with students where she wanted them to take more science and they didn't want to because it wasn't a graduation requirement. She was happy to see students weren't barred from matriculating in their programs of choice due to insufficient credits.

Ms. Schimmerling said by and large, Anacostia students are not able to enroll in the most prestigious colleges because of SAT scores and GPA limits.

Mr. Batchelor asked if there was a correlation between the requirements and how well students are prepared for life after high school. Ms. Holley said that life skills are important – the counseling and culture teams work together at Friendship to see how they can infuse soft skills into the curriculum.

Mr. Foster told the group about the required LEAD class at Washington Leadership Academy; it is a leadership and life skills course and counts for two credits.

Ms. Sargent said that top colleges want to see more than two years of world language, asking to see as many years of language as students can take, even though DC only requires two. She added that elite schools want to see students doing the best they can with the school's resources. She said it's important to align with state schools' requirements, but elite schools want to see the best course load possible.

Ms. Schimmerling said that the ACCUPLACER, the college placement test used at UDC to determine whether students need remedial courses or can take credit-bearing classes, often shows that Anacostia students are not ready for credit-bearing English or math. She said she doesn't know how to fix this problem at the graduation requirements level, because adding a fifth English or math class isn't reasonable, and kids are not coming into her school having earned math or language credits in middle school. These students go to charter or application high schools. Anacostia students often have middle school-level Lexile scores, which is a metric that indicates reading level.

Dr. Jowers-Barber said that because of the co-requisite model they use at UDC, students are in college courses with supplemental instruction. Identifying students' needs earlier and providing boot camp to enhance pre-college skills would be helpful.

Ms. Reid-Witt asked how students fulfill their requirements early. Ms. Schimmerling explained that everything but a few of the four-credit requirements can be finished by sophomore or junior year. Students take two credits of English during freshman year at Anacostia.

Ms. Rubin DeVaux interjected that it was necessary to talk about what a credit means, because she thought what Ms. Schimmerling described was a school-level problem. She felt that Anacostia's decision to award two credits for English I could be reversed.

Ms. Schimmerling responded that blocking classes was necessary for students who may have been behind upon entrance into the 9th grade.

Mr. Hunt asked about diplomas of distinction and what they could look like.

Ms. Fejeran said that in Fairfax County, students on the IB track receive a diploma with distinction and can do an internship during school hours, orchestrated at the school- rather than student-level. She said that the District can be creative to help students who fly through the requirements and would like to hear what these students would like to spend their time on. She felt that early college entry or a gap year could be among the interesting possibilities.

Mr. Jordon asked if students are going to college prepared, and he asked what is missing if not. Ms. Schimmerling said she did not think changing the requirements would fix the problem. Ms. Sargent and Ms. Holley agreed.

Ms. Rubin DeVaux suggested removing block scheduling to solve the problem of students breezing through school. Ms. Schimmerling said they would never be promoted if that happened,

because there would be no room for failure. Ms. Rubin DeVaux suggested students take seven rather than eight courses per year, adding that many charter schools do not do block scheduling.

Ms. Sargent said she agreed with Ms. Schimmerling, adding that offering an eighth period improved Wilson's graduation rate.

Ms. Martin explained her concern that English Language Learner (ELL) students have six weeks to take a PARCC exam and then four years to graduate. They have to learn a new language, and then learn all the high school subjects in that new language. She said that giving them only seven chances every year to take seven credits is unfair, adding that it would be giving the city's growing population of ELL students a "drop out early" pass.

Ms. Fejeran returned to a conversation from a few meetings ago – District students' lack of preparedness. She thinks much of the issue is quality – how are schools working with students, and what challenges do students have to face – much beyond credits. But she hearkened back to someone's comment about how credits impose upon schools in a way that detracts from schools' ability to meet students where they are and give them what they need. She said that while the problem is bigger than the requirements, she would like to see how the credits may be an impediment.

Mr. Foster suggested cost-free remedial classes in the core subjects to keep students on track – additional credit hours.

Ms. Reid-Witt asked if any states give guidance to elementary or middle schools and could find ways to fit in remediation courses for credit.

Ms. Sargent said she loved the idea of students testing out of certain requirements, because students transferring from other states and countries may have different skills. Such a test would benefit the 2 – 4 students per year to whom that would apply. At Wilson, students may enter with algebra or world language credit. To ensure this credit is valid, students may pass a final exam, and if they earn a C or higher, they can take the next math or language class.

Ms. Martin said that 75 students at one of her feeder middle schools had taken Algebra II and would arrive to her in need of honors pre-calculus as a ninth grade class. She is meeting monthly with her feeder middle school principals, assistant principals, and counselors to share expectations and ensure the middle school courses deserve to be counted as credit-bearing high school courses.

Ms. Fuller asked about the requirements around lab sciences and college and career prep. They are in place so our students can launch into more successful schools. She wondered if students could use those credits for remediation – classes that don't bear credit and are hard to incentivize.

Mr. Martin noted that he finds conversations around students moving quickly through requirements to be problematic, particularly around college credit. He finds SATs to be an arbitrary marker of student knowledge and said that conversations around students do not give students enough credit for the grit they have to get through rigorous programming, noting that this grit and resilience can help them persist through college.

Ms. Schimmerling said that Anacostia offers READ 180 for their lower level readers, but this does not fulfill any requirements besides an elective course. It is not a real elective but it counts

as an elective. They have built in time with double blocking English and math, but it still is not enough instruction for students behind grade level.

Ms. Holley asked how prepared students actually are to get through their first semester and year of college.

Ms. Chisholm said that blocked math classes in 9th and 10th grade present a problem because they adhere to the scope and sequence of a typical 9th grade math class when they are designed to provide remediation. She said the course should have a name that indicates it is remediation, which would allow teachers to teach what students had not learned in previous courses.

Work Period: Iterate on Problem Statement

Ms. Wilson Phelan directed task force members to the draft problem statement in their folders. She noted that it was long and asked task force members to read it quietly, mark it up with questions, thoughts, and ideas, and asked them to discuss their thoughts and edits in their groups.

The groups shared their feedback; one group had a series of questions. They asked: How many individual opinions is the problem statement based on? Can the TF bring a draft problem statement to their communities to gather consensus? Does the group want to address middle- or elementary-level concerns? Are electives getting the short end of the stick? How effectively can exams let us know about student performance? To what extent can we get information on student performance earlier? How can we address low-level performance while avoiding conversations on content or equality? How can we come up with a system that serves students well as they pass between LEAs?

Another group expressed relief that the existing draft problem statement was focused on existing requirements as a specific entry point to a conversation on preparedness. They asked: How can we infuse flexibility without shortchanging students, recognizing that this is difficult given students' varying levels of preparedness? How can we leverage the work of the competency-based education task force? Can we create opportunities to let students opt out of certain requirements, i.e. a football player opting out of PE, or a bilingual student opting out of the world language credit? As a body, is it possible to create something specific that doesn't hamstring schools?

A third group shared that they do not think that the grad requirements are the direct cause of students' lack of preparation, particularly for college. They asked: What can be done to advocate for non-college pathways? The group asked for flexibility on history, math, and world language courses, but they added that flexibility should be matched with resources. The group also recognized that many issues are administrative and school-based rather than system-wide, due in part to students passing between schools and LEAs regularly. The group added that while it will be possible to implement policies that offer choices, if schools do not provide students and families with information, things would not improve. The group concluded by sharing that work occurring outside of the purview of the TF will affect whether or not District students are prepared.

Closing

Ms. Wilson Phelan asked TF members to create draft problem statements, based on the group discussion. These problem statements are due to Ms. Salciccioli by Wednesday, October 4. SBOE staff will distill these problem statements into a draft problem statement, which the TF will iterate

on in groups and then as a whole group. The TF will emerge from the next meeting with a final problem statement.

TF members responded to an exit slip asking:

- What went well?
- What suggestions do you have for improvement?
- What should we discuss next time?

The group will hold its next meeting on October 11, 2017, from 6:00 – 8:00 PM. TF chairs and Board staff will follow up with minutes, notes for the problem statement, and an agenda for the next meeting. The meeting was adjourned at 8:00 PM.