

High School Graduation Requirements Task Force Meeting #8
December 13, 2017 at 6:00 PM
441 4th Street NW, Suite 1114
Washington, DC 20001

Attendance

High School Graduation Requirements Task Force Members:

Present:

Erin Bibo (Deputy Chief, College & Career Programs)
Julie Camerata (Parent, DC International, Executive Director, DC Special Education Cooperative)
Latisha Chisholm (Special Education Coordinator, Anacostia High School)
Celine Fejeran (Deputy Director, Raise DC)
Jerome Foster II (Student, Washington Leadership Academy)
Cosby Hunt (Teacher & Senior Officer of Teaching & Learning, Center for Inspired Teaching)
Sandra Jowers-Barber (Director, Division of Humanities, University of the District of Columbia College)
Sanjay Mitchell (Director of College & Alumni Programs, Thurgood Marshall Academy PCHS)
Cathy Reilly (Executive Director, Senior High Alliance of Parents, Principals and Educators)
Naomi Rubin DeVeaux (Deputy Director, DC Public Charter School Board)
David Tansey (Teacher, McKinley Technology High School)
Justin Tooley (Special Assistant for Legislation & Policy, Office of the State Superintendent of Education)
Laura Wilson Phelan (Task Force Co-Chair, State Board of Education, Ward 1)

Phone:

Cara Fuller (Principal, Ballou STAY High School)
Karla Reid-Witt (Parent, Banneker High School)
Jimell Sanders (Parent, Houston Elementary School)

Absent:

Markus Batchelor (Task Force Co-Chair, State Board of Education, Ward 8)
Tom Brown (Executive Director, Training Grounds, Inc.)
Larry Greenhill, Sr. (Vice President, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers)
Dwan Jordon (Senior Advisor, Friendship PCS)
Kimberly Martin (Principal, Wilson High School)
Carol Randolph (Chief Operating Officer, DC Students Construction Trades Foundation)
Shenita Ray (Director of Online Operations, Georgetown University School of Continuing Studies)
Jahari Shelton (Student, Sidwell Friends School)
Jane Spence (Deputy Chief, Secondary Schools, DC Public Schools)

SBOE Staff:

Present:

John-Paul Hayworth, Executive Director

Paul Negron, Public Affairs Specialist

Matt Repka, Policy Analyst

Maria Saliccioli, Senior Policy Analyst

Executive Summary

The High School Graduation Requirements Task Force (TF), led by Ms. Wilson Phelan and Mr. Batchelor, held its eighth meeting on November 8, 2017. Ms. Wilson Phelan welcomed the task force and acknowledged the controversy surrounding graduation rates at Ballou High School. She then introduced a panel of experts who were chosen to speak to the TF about best practices in graduation requirements across the country: Jennifer Zinth of the Education Commission of the States, Phillip Lovell of the Alliance for Excellent Education, and Don Long of the National Association of State Boards of Education. The panelists provided an in-depth look at the considerations around graduation requirements, including best practices across the country, promising new initiatives, and the importance of a rigorous standard diploma.

After the presentation, the TF directed questions to the experts, and then began a discussion on how this information impacted their vision of how the TF would spend the remainder of its time together. TF members discussed ideas for different types of diplomas and identified barriers to student success, both within and beyond the graduation requirements. As time ran out, Ms. Wilson Phelan drew the conversation to a close, suggesting that the TF pick up where they left off in January. She thanked the panelists and TF members for their time and engagement, and the TF adjourned until its ninth meeting on January 10, 2018.

Welcome

Ms. Wilson Phelan welcomed the TF to the meeting and let TF members know that Mr. Batchelor would unfortunately be unable to attend. She provided an overview of the meeting – after a presentation from a panel of experts, the TF would split into two groups, followed by a whole-group share-out of ideas. This would allow for productive conversation while offering an opportunity to share ideas.

Ms. Wilson Phelan said the TF could use its group discussion time to address the controversy that arose from the WAMU report on inflated graduation rates at Ballou High School. She acknowledged that the task force environment shifted following the report, and she has received more questions about TF work in this light. She noted that it has opened a new realm of possibility and opportunity for the TF.

Expert Panel

Ms. Wilson Phelan introduced the three panelists, noting that their expertise is both broad and deep, and is well-suited to address TF members' questions on other states' practices - what changes they've made, what they've considered, what are some innovative practices, what do different diplomas look like within states, and what are the various associated approaches.

Mr. Long opened the presentation, stating a goal of answering TF members' questions and working with the TF to apply best practices across other states to the DC context. He noted that he would focus on using a Carnegie Unit diploma to improve student outcomes, and then turn to Ms. Zinth to focus on innovative practices. He noted challenges to the rising expectations of high school graduates, including the steeper rate of change required to demonstrate college, career, and civic readiness.

He gave three recommendations: align the diploma with college and career readiness, look beyond that, perhaps to create a profile of a high school graduate, embedding deeper learning skills within content standards, and create a "high school and beyond" plan to ensure students are supported to meet their goals.

To align the diploma with college and career readiness standards, Mr. Long highlighted Massachusetts' graduation requirements, noting that a critical difference between the TF's last straw man and the Massachusetts version is the inclusion of Algebra II in the graduation requirements. He noted that Massachusetts' progress is leveling off, and one of the stated reasons is that there needs to be increased capacity built around school leaders. There are still achievement gaps for students of color in the state.

He stressed the importance of going beyond standards for deeper learning, focusing on it as an equity issue. Mr. Long shared that Virginia developed a profile of a high school graduate, which provides a full picture of what a high school graduate should know and be able to do. He noted that if one focuses on the traditional Carnegie Diploma, the profile can be a preamble, as Virginia's is - this permeates the standards to ensure credits are meaningful. Because of the profile's emphasis on deeper learning, the ELA community in Virginia integrated deeper learning skills into the curriculum framework. Other content areas are expected to follow suit.

Mr. Long also recommended that DC do what Washington and other states have done and create a High School and Beyond Plan. This creates a vision of what high school success looks like, and it shines a light on the issue of equal access to rigorous content and instruction. Students realize what their education should look like and can advocate for themselves and hold schools accountable.

Ms. Zinth noted that she would present about recent changes states have made to update their requirements, shedding light on why those changes were made. She added that her employer, ECS, is nonpartisan and simply shares best practices and lessons learned. Ms. Zinth said she had created a compilation for another state on what policies were in place around plans like the High School and Beyond plan and would share it with the TF.

She noted that many states are looking beyond Carnegie Units. She added that she would not focus on exit exams, which states are decreasing focus on - down from 25 to 15 in recent years, decrease focus on proficiency-based credit models, or portfolios and performance-based measures.

Ms. Zinth noted a shift - at one point, pathways were designated for advanced students, but they are now targeted for all students and aligned with college and career readiness (CCR) standards. Previous diplomas offered endorsements, but they were not necessarily industry-recognized or

aligned with CCR standards. Pathways ensure that all students are prepared for college or a career.

Ohio is phasing in three pathways - end-of-course assessments, industry credential and workforce readiness, and score remediation. Students must fulfill the requirements for one of these pathways to graduate, but can opt out through pursuing college credit-bearing courses or taking approved AP/IB exams. For students who choose the first pathway, end-of-course-assessments, Ohio has created end-of-course assessments in seven subjects. Students must take a certain number of these assessments to earn the necessary points to graduate.

The second pathway in Ohio is for CTE-oriented students. Students meet the benchmark by earning an industry-recognized credential AND earning a 13+ on ACT WorkKeys assessment, which the state of Ohio pays for. Some certifications provide the necessary 12 points, and others are smaller trainings through which students can cobble the necessary points together.

The third option is remediation-free on ACT/SAT. If students meet or exceed a score that would exempt them from remedial college coursework, they complete the graduation requirement and are able to enter college without undergoing placement testing.

Another exemplar state is Colorado - effective 2021, students must show college and career-readiness in math and ELA. There is no impact data yet because the measures are new. Colorado created a menu of options, but each district determines which options it will make available. Districts can also set higher bars than the one mandated by the state.

In Indiana, students will need to complete Carnegie Units, employability skills, and postsecondary writing competency. They take part in project-based, service-learning, or work-based experiences.

Mr. Hunt asked about Indiana's current diploma options, and Ms. Zinth clarified that the existing diplomas are differentiated by academic orientation vs. career orientation.

Mr. Lovell then began his part of the presentation; he noted that his employer, the Alliance for Excellent Education, is partisan and he can share which policies he thinks are good.

He opened with considerations: are diplomas aligned with CCR standards? A key recommendation is that a CCR diploma must be the default option. Next, do all students truly have access to CCR diplomas? Do they have prepared teachers, the right coursework? Finally, is data disaggregated by pathway and subgroup?

Across the 50 states, the Alliance found 98 pathways, and 47 were aligned with CCR. Eighteen states do not have a CCR aligned pathway, and 32 states plus DC offered one or more CCR diploma pathway. Only 9 of 23 states had at least one CCR pathway and tracked disaggregated data for each pathway, both by pathway and subgroup.

Mr. Lovell noted that the CCR graduation rate is much lower than the adjusted cohort graduation rate - meaning that the number of students who graduate is much larger than the number who graduate prepared for college and careers. He identified this gap as a large problem to solve.

Ms. Reilly asked what the CCR rate meant, and Mr. Lovell explained that this is the percentage of students who earned a college- and career-ready diploma where multiple options are offered, as opposed to the total number of students who graduated. He said the total number of students who are truly ready for college and careers is lower, but the percentage is the number of students who met the requirements for a CCR diploma.

Mr. Lovell added that traditionally, underserved students earn CCR diplomas at a lower rate than their peers do. He finally found that when the CCR diploma is the main pathway, there were smaller gaps between subgroups than in states where it was not the default.

The panelists had more data to share, but Ms. Wilson Phelan suggested that the meeting move into a question and answer period, which would allow TF members to ask pressing questions related to the information the panelists had already presented.

Q & A

Mr. Tansey asked what a default diploma meant, and Mr. Lovell explained that it is the diploma a state positions students to pursue unless a parent opts to remove his/her child from that pathway.

Ms. Fejeran asked if the gaps in Mr. Lovell's data were based on the adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) or attainment rate of the CCR designation; Mr. Lovell said they were based on the ACGR.

Mr. Tansey asked about any analysis on whether there was an impact on graduation rates in those states that designated a CCR diploma as the default. Do fewer students meet the necessary requirements? As an example, Mr. Lovell cited Indiana – their graduation rate compiles all four of the state's diplomas. Removing the diploma with the lowest standards, which is not aligned to CCR, results in a graduation rate that is 12% lower. Mr. Lovell said there is an argument to be made that high graduation requirements may decrease the graduation rate, but there may still be low performance even with high requirements, and it's not accurate to state that higher requirements will definitely decrease graduation rates.

Mr. Mitchell asked if the research Mr. Lovell cited encompassed college enrollment rates, and Mr. Lovell said that only Indiana was able to provide the data necessary to answer that question. Indiana's data allowed him to draw a few conclusions: requirements should align with the full breadth and depth of CCR standards, the CCR diploma should be the main diploma, state and local report cards should report and disaggregate data by subgroup, and it is crucial need to provide information to students and their families about the likely outcomes of pathways. Indiana students need to know that students who pursue a general diploma are less likely to pursue postsecondary information and are more likely to need remediation.

Mr. Lovell added that since DC's graduation requirements are high, it might be worth taking an approach similar to those pursued in Ohio and Indiana, where opportunities and requirements are built on top of standards that support college- and career-readiness. He urged caution to the TF, noting that raising requirements does not help students prepare for them better. Other factors have to be considered in any adjustment to graduation requirements - teaching, strategic planning, and other components of preparing students to become college-ready.

Ms. Jowers-Barber asked if there was information on particular courses that make it difficult for students to graduate, and what might be causing the disparity in graduation rates. Mr. Lovell said there was not empirical evidence from Indiana, to his knowledge, that would answer her question. His hypothesis was that the rigorous Core 40 standard diploma was likely challenging for students, but he did not think there was data to prove certain students struggled with algebra or other data relevant to courses. Ms. Jowers-Barber added that parents need to know about supports and outcomes from different diplomas, and they need to know what sorts of assistance are available at different schools. She noted that Mr. Lovell had addressed this earlier.

Ms. Fejeran asked whether there has been an examination within the states on pathway exit options to determine the point at which students choose the graduation pathway they will pursue. She added that there is often equal access to opportunities, but students are not all afforded not equal tools. She then asked, looking across states with adequate data, whether there are places with smaller gaps than others that could be attributed to design elements, such as ninth grade supports. She noted that it was beyond the group's purview but wanted to understand that information in order to make a well-considered set of recommendations.

Mr. Lovell didn't know of any data providing correlations between that sort of support and increases in student achievement. He encouraged the TF to examine an approach to high school reform that had been successful in New York City, adding that it would be possible for that team of reformers to join a future TF meeting. This approach, evaluated by research firm MDRC, turned large high schools into small schools of choice. Principals and teachers designed the schools intentionally, and the school models boosted graduation rates, with the largest increases in advanced diploma graduates. Ms. Reilly noted that the MDRC evaluation of this model showed that results were not spread equally across all subgroups.

Mr. Mitchell said that, looking at Ohio's model and other state models, requirements around CCR benchmarks are built around access to 2- and 4-year public schools. He wondered how DC could create similar requirements without building a system around access to 2- and 4-year local college, given that those states have a greater number of local universities. What happens to students who aren't interested in state colleges? Are there other benchmarks for these students, or is an ability to get into a state college sufficient for those who may want to enter private colleges? Mr. Mitchell said language in Washington and other states starts before students enter high school, and he asked for suggestions to do the work starting in 9th grade.

Ms. Zinth said that Ohio has many private institutions with ample in-state enrollment, so the system is not only beneficial to state college students. Students in Ohio have not yet graduated under the new system, but private Kenyon College has ACT/SAT placement scores that are similar to the statewide average. Students are not neglected by preparing for the state benchmarks if they want to matriculate at Kenyon. She added that states that create high school success plans that start with 7th and 8th grade students all have languages specifying that districts should offer career exploration activities in the late elementary/middle school grades. They ensure counselor and teacher PD to make sure the programs are high quality. Texas created counselor academies for secondary school counselors and made significant investments in those professionals.

Mr. Mitchell said this answered his question, but that he was familiar with schools that have higher standards than state colleges. He added that easier routes are not always applicable to District students, and the same pathways found in other states aren't always available. He asked about the best way to overcome that issue.

Ms. Zinth said that many institutions recognize AP exams for placement but the extent to which they provide credit varies.

Mr. Tansey expressed interest in the Ohio plan and its opportunity to provide credits from public-sector experiences. He wondered how many of Ohio's pathways are utilized and how closely they correlate with the dominant industries in given areas of the state. He noted that DC is unique for its white and blue collar work, without many industries in the middle. He wondered, without the capacity to offer 50 sets of experiences like a larger state could, how DC could design a meaningful pathways system.

Mr. Long said that states have been creative with service learning in place of work-based learning, and that states can be innovative with the sectors they have available. Mr. Lovell added that, to the extent the SBOE is interested in a more robust career orientation, he would encourage the TF to invite employers to the meetings. Just as teachers don't like their evaluation systems to be developed without their input, the same is true of business, and California intentionally included employers in the diploma development process. Ms. Zinth said that many states have tried to triangulate between high school, postsecondary, and college. Ohio has a website, ohiomeansjobs.com, designed to bring the three together. She noted that in Indiana, students must demonstrate employability before graduation. Ms. Zinth said she could share more information on how these learning experiences might look when designed to meet local to workforce needs. She added that in Indiana, districts can develop locally created pathways, so schools can partner with their local industries to create options.

Dr. Bibo asked if the panelists could share unintended consequences of changing graduation requirements. She added that DCPS has struggled with two things: even when they identify a certification that is valued by industries, guided by their industry advisory boards, the companies that administer tests won't share the results. A second area of difficulty is around the WorkKeys assessment, which she described as a SAT for work, and she wondered if the panelists could speak to why industries are unaware of a tool that seems so desirable. She said DC has not considered using WorkKeys more widely because it is not well known.

Mr. Lovell said that adding rigor is never a bad idea, but he is concerned when there is a local option, because questions emerge: what does it look like? How will the state oversee it? Is there a degree of comparability? Who will be enrolled in it?

He said that these are not reasons not to make changes, but given the recent controversy over inflated graduation rates at Ballou, it is important to build more opportunities for deeper learning, rather than increasing loopholes. He also said that when making changes, one should consider what it takes to provide a more career-oriented education - preparing youth for the world and giving them the chance to build applicable skills. He cited Linked Learning, a program in California that incorporates employers into grading for in-depth projects, which gives students a richer learning experience.

Mr. Lovell added that in the District, many students are not academically on-level, so workplace learning might not be the solution to boosting achievement, although it might increase engagement and offer students better information about the relevance of their coursework and diploma). Mr. Long noted that the state of Washington considers college readiness and career readiness to be very similar to one another.

Next Steps

Ms. Wilson Phelan said that, in light of the relatively small group of in-person participants, she would like to jettison the small groups in favor of a whole-group discussion. She asked the TF how they wanted to proceed, given the information they had just learned and keeping in mind the work they'd done thus far.

Mr. Hunt said he was glad to begin a conversation about creating an advanced diploma, and rather than tweaking the existing diploma, it might be possible to create a second, parallel set of requirements. Ms. Reilly expressed concern about the approaching deadlines and wondered whether it would be possible to extend the TF timeline, since she did not want to risk creating a hasty set of recommendations that were not reflective of stakeholder needs. Ms. Wilson Phelan replied that the timeline was fluid and that the task force would make a decision about updating the timeline collectively.

Dr. Jowers-Barber said that based on feedback she had received, there were a lot of people who were surprised that the level of chronic absenteeism seen at Ballou High School was even possible. She said she'd heard concerns about the number of required credits in DC, the content covered in schools, and the school environment across the city, adding that school environment was most frequently cited. She worried that the TF was examining the wrong issues.

Ms. Fejeran said that requirements can sometimes impose additional barriers on students and high schools that trying to fill in gaps from elementary and middle school. She expressed a belief that graduation is one of many challenges students face in the District, and addressing graduation requirements will provide one solution, although many more solutions are needed. In her view, the TF must calibrate its expectations accordingly.

Ms. Chisholm cited the Ohio remediation structure as a possible exemplar. Mr. Foster addressed the disconnect between the PARCC exam and high school grades. He said that he was not particularly invested in the PARCC exam, since it would not impact his college applications. He suggested that the District use a test that would indicate college readiness.

Dr. Bibo said the expert panel was helpful, and her takeaway was that DC's existing graduation requirements get a lot of things right. They are unified, discourage tracking, and are rigorous.

Ms. Fuller said that the current requirements present problems for school leaders. She added that she finds the requirements restrictive, and they should be more flexible to support student success.

Mr. Tansey felt that, despite good intentions, the existing system is easily abused. He added that without transparency about student attendance and its impact on student achievement, the system encourages teachers to promote students who have not learned required material.

Ms. Reilly said two different discussions were taking shape – the TF is concerned about whether students who fulfill diploma requirements are truly ready, but is also concerned the existing diploma does not equate to readiness.

Mr. Mitchell said that he was opposed to creating an advanced diploma, because in conversations with postsecondary institutions, DC’s current requirements already meet their standards. He added that colleges want to see a minimum of precalculus in students’ math coursework. He and his colleagues have discussed how to leverage partnerships with UDC to increase preparedness, but challenges persist for students who are not meeting grade-level targets. Mr. Mitchell suggested a partnership between District high schools and a 2-year college, thereby creating a post-secondary option for students who are on grade level and want to pursue a program that aligns with their interests.

Mr. Hunt said that no one had proposed lowering the requirements, and Mr. Mitchell replied that the requirements were fine, but that the TF needed to find ways to support students who are not on track without ostracizing them. Ms. Fuller said that her suggestions were not designed to reduce rigor, but were focused on offering new options to students and schools. Dr. Jowers-Barber added that DC has not taken advantage of potential pathways, and a potential solution would be to make requirements more expansive and more flexible.

Citing time constraints and the absence of several members, Ms. Wilson Phelan proposed that the TF continue the discussion at its next meeting, resuming where they left off and refraining from making any conclusions about the future of the TF until the next meeting. Mr. Tooley requested that the TF open the next meeting with an overview of previously agreed-upon definitions, including the definition of the problem the task force sought to address.

Closing

Ms. Wilson Phelan thanked the TF members and panelists and adjourned the meeting. The TF will reconvene on January 10, 2018*, from 6:00 – 8:00 PM.

*The TF later decided to suspend its meetings until TF members have an opportunity to review the results of an investigation into District graduation policies. The investigation, commissioned by OSSE and conducted by the firm Alvarez and Marsal, will examine DCPS policies, with a particular focus on the graduation and attendance policies at Ballou High School.