

High School Graduation Requirements Task Force Meeting #9
February 13, 2018 at 6:00 PM
441 4th Street NW, Room 1114
Washington, DC 20001

Minutes

Attendance:

HS Grad Task Force Members:

Present:

- **Markus Batchelor** (Task Force Co-Chair, State Board of Education, Ward 8)
- **Tom Brown** (Executive Director, Training Grounds, Inc.)
- **Latisha Chisholm** (Special Education Coordinator, Anacostia High School)
- **Celine Fejeran** (Deputy Director, Raise DC)
- **Jerome Foster II** (Student, Washington Leadership Academy)
- **Larry Greenhill, Sr.** (Vice President, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers)
- **Cosby Hunt** (Teacher & Senior Officer of Teaching & Learning, Center for Inspired Teaching)
- **Dwan Jordon** (Senior Advisor, Friendship PCS)
- **Cathy Reilly** (Executive Director, Senior High Alliance of Parents, Principals and Educators)
- **Jimell Sanders** (Parent, Houston Elementary School)
- **David Tansey** (Teacher, McKinley Technology High School)
- **Laura Wilson Phelan** (Task Force Co-Chair, State Board of Education, Ward 1)

Phone:

- **Julie Camerata** (Parent, DC International, Executive Director, DC Special Education Cooperative)
- **Carol Randolph** (Chief Operating Officer, DC Students Construction Trades Foundation)
- **Naomi Rubin DeVeaux** (Deputy Director, DC Public Charter School Board)

Absent:

- **Erin Bibo** (Deputy Chief, College & Career Programs, District of Columbia Public Schools)
- **Cara Fuller** (Principal, Ballou STAY High School)
- **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)

- **Justin Tooley** (Special Assistant for Legislation & Policy, Office of the State Superintendent of Education)

SBOE Staff:

- **John-Paul Hayworth**, Executive Director
- **Kit Faiella**, Policy Fellow
- **Abby Ragan**, Policy Fellow
- **Matt Repka**, Policy Analyst
- **Maria Salciccioli**, Senior Policy Analyst

Executive Summary

Members of the High School Graduation Requirements Task Force (TF), led by Ms. Wilson Phelan and Mr. Batchelor, reconvened for their ninth meeting after taking a strategic pause in January to await new information on high school graduation from the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) and an outside firm, Alvarez & Marsal (A&M). TF members discussed their reactions to the A&M report in pairs, then split into two groups to consider the impact of the new information on the problem statement they defined months earlier. The TF then came together for a whole-group conversation on potential next steps.

After a productive discussion, the TF agreed to keep meeting, at minimum, through March 2018. Ms. Wilson Phelan and Mr. Batchelor thanked TF members and adjourned until the tenth meeting on February 28, 2018.

Welcome

Ms. Wilson Phelan welcomed TF members back and outlined the agenda: discussing the A&M report, revising the draft problem statement, revisiting the steps from last meeting, and making a plan, if any, to move forward. She said it was important to consider that the TF may or may not decide to continue their work. Mr. Batchelor thanked TF members for coming to the meeting and getting back to work; he added that recent information merits concern, but he believed that the TF was still the best-equipped group to forge a path forward as an autonomous body and to push the Board in the right direction.

Ms. Wilson Phelan then asked TF members to talk in pairs about the best course of action, given the newly available, detailed information about graduation in the District.

Discussion of A&M Report and Current Education Climate

TF members paired up to discuss the information that came to light through the A&M report.

Revisit Draft Problem Statement

Ms. Wilson Phelan asked TF members to pause their conversations while she distributed the problem statement they created in fall 2017 and she asked that the pairs move into two larger groups to reflect on whether the problem statement was still relevant in light of the new information published in the report. The two large groups talked for ten minutes and then came back together to share their thoughts with the whole group. Ms. Wilson Phelan asked the groups to focus their report-out around to two questions: at this point, what resonates about the problem statement? How should the TF adjust its work?

Mr. Hunt shared that his group discussed the problems identified in the original document and felt most compelled to address the last one: students graduating from District schools with dramatically varied levels of preparedness. The TF agreed that it is challenging for students to graduate at grade level if they enter 9th grade unprepared, and TF members expressed concern for both 9th and 12th grade levels of preparedness, adding that there is too much citywide pressure to have a high 4-year graduation rate. Mr. Tansey added that that when students enter Thurgood Marshall Academy (TMA) behind grade-level, administrators meet with parents about putting students on a five-year path to graduation that will allow them to finish at-grade level and fulfill the school's graduation requirements. TF members discussed implementing a readiness indicator to assess students' achievement levels when they enter DC high schools; even if this test was not a middle school graduation requirement, it would allow schools to create five- or six-year paths for students. Mr. Hunt and Mr. Tansey's group had also addressed the pros and cons of standards and mastery-based requirements – while this system allows students who have mastered material to move forward, and it supports the needs of non-traditional students who may have missed school and would require greater flexibility, it would also be challenging to integrate this system with existing curricula.

Mr. Brown said the other group, which he was a part of, had a wonderful, productive discussion. His focus at the beginning of the conversation was integrity – he said that all District students need to receive a high-quality education but he perceived citywide quality as declining. After listening to his TF colleagues, Mr. Brown said he realized that even after the report, schools collect information that they are not required to share, but that is nevertheless part of the complete story of what happens in schools. His discussion group discussed how the graduation crisis is a great opportunity to make the TF's work more relevant than it was before; prior to the release of the A&M report, he was unsure of what would happen to the TF's work after the group made its final recommendations, and he struggled with finding value. He was encouraged, however, by events such as the Chancellor holding an open dialogue about community observations and concerns at ward 8's Ballou High School . He noted that in the past, politics would have prevented this event from taking place.

Ms. Fejeran expressed dissatisfaction with the granularity of A&M's data and said that the District does not consistently monitor data at a high level, and stakeholders are not always permitted to see metrics like attendance, course selections, and grades because of the number of entities involved in education across the city. She said that looking at this level of data on a consistent basis to understand patterns over time would allow stakeholders to see where they could help.

Ms. Fejeran indicated that for the duration of the TF, she has heard two perspectives but struggles to find middle ground - but despite the lack of agreement, District schools have existing expectations on where students should be and what they should achieve. Ms. Fejeran said she thought these expectations were valuable, but there is a lot of work that DC schools are responsible for, and she found credit recovery to be an honest response to the problem of 18-year-old students who only have half of the credits they need. She said she believed that DC must reposition its expectations for what students are learning.

Ms. Reilly added that Ms. Fejeran's responses pulled the issues together for her, and she is troubled by the way that sharing data is attached to high-stakes negative consequences. Ms. Reilly suggested that despite state and federal requirements, the TF should decide how they want to measure success and to create a framework for where they want students to be. She asked how the TF could provide supports to help students reach their goals, and she wondered what should be done when the supports do not exist. Ms. Reilly added that credit recovery emerged from attempts to solve this problem, and that it would be difficult for the TF to propose the right set of policies. The TF keeps debating between where students should be and how they can get to that point, and Ms. Reilly expressed uncertainty that the TF could find a solution.

Mr. Foster said that rather than asking schools to provide more data to help the TF make more judgments, the TF could solicit feedback directly from students: ask students to take surveys about why they left their schools, understand whether they have family concerns or are disengaged, etc. For students who are currently enrolled, he suggested administering a survey asking the major reason they would consider dropping out, with a goal of understanding student motivations.

Ms. Chisholm said it was difficult to talk about the future when, as a result of the report and the District's attempts to quickly remedy the situation, there are serious and immediate consequences for the class of 2018. She said the class would be treated the most unfairly of any students in DCPS history, and that as a staff member at a DCPS high school, those consequences feel like a cloud hanging overhead. She said the unintended consequences are severe, and the pendulum is swinging so far away from a lack of accountability that she feels this class should instead be grandfathered in and any reforms should start with the class of 2019.

Mr. Brown said he appreciated Ms. Chisholm's remarks because he is similarly concerned about the students who would stay home along from now until the end of the school year because they have no path to graduate. He added that DCPS has not provided a plan to support these students. Ms. Chisholm said they have failing grades on their transcripts for full-year courses, so there is no incentive for them to come to school. Mr. Brown added that the effects of this disengagement filter into homes and streets, particularly in wards 7 and 8. He said the TF may not be able to solve these problems, but they must nonetheless be addressed. Ms. Reilly and Ms. Fejeran agreed that students' decisions to skip school were completely rational responses to hearing that they would not be able to graduate.

Mr. Tansey said that he found it important to continue to meet, and Ms. Chisholm agreed. Mr. Tansey added that credit recovery, as Ms. Reilly mentioned, was an attempt to solve a real problem, and if the TF does not come up with a framework to solve the issues, the District will simply fail a lot of students who will then stop coming to school. He said the timeline for a solution might be too long for spring 2018, but the TF could keep the discussion relevant, because the Chancellor's statements have focused on policy reform but haven't identified what teachers can do when students miss school and don't master concepts. He relayed the story of a student who passed the first semester of biology, but failed the second. Because the student was then mandated to retake the whole course, he stopped coming to school because he didn't want to review the concepts he had mastered.

Ms. Fejeran asked if there was a way to structure the policy change – she noted that the GED had transitioned from a full course to modules, and she wondered if the TF could create a parallel structure in traditional public high schools. She asked whether it would be possible to right-size expectations for what schools should ask of their students, based on the level of achievement they have when they matriculate, explaining that doing so might give schools space to address quality issues.

Ms. Reilly asked if Ms. Fejeran meant that students should go to particular schools based on how far behind they are, and Ms. Fejeran explained that she did not mean this, but instead was talking about programs like Raise DC's Bridge to High School, where student-level data is shared with high schools between 8th and 9th grade. Schools are already asked how many students are not on-level for math, and she wondered if providing that information to high schools up front could help create realistic expectations.

Ms. Rubin DeVeaux said that some of this work should happen at the local education agency (LEA) level, rather than through TF policy action. She asked if it would be possible for the state to offer GEDs to those current seniors who are significantly off track for graduation in 2018. She said this might be a better option than doing nothing in the short-term. Ms. Rubin DeVeaux added that the city is trying to push all students toward the same requirements, but she suggested it might be possible to keep students engaged if they could to graduate through pathways such as a career and technical education (CTE) pathway, so they could finish in four years despite entering high school far behind grade-level in core subjects.

Mr. Tansey said that the issue is one of data transparency – the city is just starting to have conversations at a citywide level, because DC doesn't have accurate measures of rising 9th graders' preparedness. He said that if the numbers of unprepared students are as high as he imagines, it is crucial to have these conversations so that expectations are realistic. He added that he appreciated Ms. Rubin DeVeaux's point that there are multiple pathways through high school. He said that many of his former students did not appreciate the fact that the college-ready path was the default, and he suggested increasing flexibility to ensure a broader range of courses meet the city's requirements.

Mr. Greenhill said that he agreed with Mr. Tansey and that he found the TF very innovative. He said that, having read the problem statement, he was worried that some students in their fourth year of high school might not qualify academically for CTE. Ms. Chisholm agreed. Mr. Greenhill said that students must pass algebra to become electricians, and electrical workers evaluate science achievement as part of career-readiness. In addition, prospective electricians take entrance exams that some of the District's students may not be prepared for. Ms. Fejerman said that the majority of alternative school students are achieving at roughly a 6th grade level. Mr. Greenhill said that he didn't want to water down the rigor of CTE, but some current students would have to work very hard to enter a high-skill trade. Ms. Randolph said that CTE is considered lower quality than a four-year college route, and Ms. Chisholm said that the same could be said of the GED relative to a high school diploma.

Ms. Rubin DeVaux said that some students currently below grade level are capable of functioning on grade level, and some would stay engaged and see the point in trying harder to learn if they saw how the system could impact their lives. She said struggling to read, write, and think critically is a problem across the city. Ms. Randolph said that the CTE Academy's student members had shared that greater engagement in trades might encourage students to come to school, but this was hard to communicate to other the academy's adult members.

Mr. Jordon said that the TF should think about increasing student engagement through individual learning plans. He suggested scoping out each student's educational future, which would force schools to educate differently. The primary goal of schools would be providing the time, support, and skills students need to stay on track, either for college or careers. He said the engagement conversation is frustrating, and he added that the work may not fall to the TF, but every student in every school should have his/her own plan, just as schools provide for students who are on individualized education programs (IEPs) for their special education needs. Ms. Fejerman asked how that was different than the existing DC regulations that require 9th grade plans for every student and wondered who should be enforcing these plans and what the expectation is for these plans to transfer from one school or LEA to another. She added that there are significant challenges with IEPs, and they are federally mandated, indicating that challenges would increase for plans that were not legal requirements. Ms. Fejerman asked whether any of her TF peers could share the outcomes of individualized plans from any schools that currently use them.

Mr. Hunt said that he thought the conversation about five-year plans made sense, but the conversation about graduation rates should not focus on numbers, because if it did, five would become the new four. He added that this was an opportunity to shift the conversation, because we know that nationally, students are not graduating from college within six years.

Ms. Wilson Phelan said she shared Mr. Brown's concern about whether or not this work would have an impact, given that we have legislation for 9th grade plans. She asked if the group would consider an opportunity to experiment with these ideas. She noted that DC is not the first city or state to talk about an innovation zone, where clustered schools

experiment with these ideas. Ms. Fejeran said this was the competency-based education (CBE) work, and Ms. Wilson Phelan said that did not establish an innovation zone, that provided schools with the opportunity to petition to create a single CBE course. Ms. Chisholm asked where students go when they master material faster or slower. She added that the TF was discussing the problem of high school without paying sufficient attention to the years immediately preceding ninth grade. Mr. Jordon's suggested plans should start in 3rd or 6th grade. Third grade is the first year where the city receives data. She noted that data indicates that certain schools are only 20% proficient, and the feeder middle schools are only at 30%, so it stands to reason that high school proficiency will be similar. Ms. Chisholm added that establishing interventions for third-grade students would allow elementary schools to intervene at a much higher rate than would be possible at the middle- or high-school level. She asked how to keep track of students across the city.

Mr. Foster asked why students couldn't take exam instead of multiple exams, adding that he knows 3 - 4 students who have considered dropping out due to frustration at the way curriculum spirals and courses are repeated through middle and high school. Ms. Fejeran wondered what framework could be put in place, and suggested dual-enrollment between middle and high schools. Mr. Tansey agreed with his colleagues that if high school is high-stakes, the conversation about preparedness should start as far back as third grade. He shared that in his experience, students are considered "high-cost" or "low-cost," but all students need the same sets of resources.

Ms. Fejeran said that a scaffolded three-, four-, or five-year graduation plan could have many unintended consequences, including resource allocation issues, which Ms. Chisholm agreed with. Ms. Reilly mentioned that many students graduate in three years, but these fast-track diplomas do not always translate to success. She asked whether it would be possible to give students a pre-high school year, where students began completing their requirements in 8th grade. Ms. Fejeran asked how this would reflect on the District and said that it would still be necessary for the District to calculate an adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR). Ms. Rubin DeVaux added that in Montgomery County, Maryland, some middle school classes could ninth-grade credit; for example, students could take algebra and geometry in middle school, but these courses would count for high school, even if the ACGR didn't start until students were in ninth grade. She suggested evaluating career and college readiness rather than high school readiness.

Ms. Chisholm said that an unintended consequence of lengthening high school is the problem that social promotion tried to fix – when some students have to stay in school and others go, there are social-emotional consequences. If everyone knows a student has been failed since third grade but no one tries to fix it until the summer between eighth and ninth grades, keeping students in school longer will not help and will feel punitive. She said that this was her primary concern with a diploma that required more than four years of high school. Ms. Reilly said she believed the only reason high school students are put into grade bands is for standardized tests.

Mr. Brown said that he had seen a system that integrated Ms. Chisholm's concerns and Mr. Hunt's suggestions, where the numbers attached to high school graduation rates

started earlier, so the ACGR isn't the emphasis of a teenager's success or failure. He said he had been offered a spot in the U.S. Air Force Academy, but successful matriculation would have first required two extra years of school at a preparatory academy; as an 18-year-old, he felt overwhelmed by that requirement and declined the opportunity despite his interest. He also mentioned that young adults and parents would be confused by an extended high school experience, and it would be difficult to present that concept to stakeholders. Mr. Hunt said that society has made seismic shifts in our thinking about many issues in a short period of time, but that such a shift had not yet happened on the subject of high school graduation requirements.

Plan to Move Forward

Ms. Wilson Phelan asked the TF what their role should be – should the TF continue discussing shifts in credits, or should they pursue other options, including working with CTE-focused TF members to build out CTE pathways that are as robust as college pathways, considering competency-based education, and thinking about further possibilities.

Ms. Fejeran suggested starting with the number of credits associated with specific courses. She added that the TF could make tweaks, but she didn't hear many people saying that it wasn't the right configuration. She said that rather than making a dramatic shift, it might make sense to instead reconsider the existing paths that allow schools to grant diplomas. This could mean opening a conversation about a differentiated timeline, allowing a path for students who take relevant courses in middle school to demonstrate proficiency and earn early credits. She said they could also address quality in elementary and middle school education; regulations have cornered the group into focusing on high school, but there are important considerations that are outside of the SBOE's and schools' purview. Her interpretation of her colleagues' remarks is that the existing required credits that are generally acceptable, but education in the District is still plagued by structural problems because students aren't achieving on grade-level. She said that even if the credits system remains unchanged the District would still need to take steps to get students where they need to be. This could mean encouraging competency-based education, creating middle school achievement plans, or other options. Ms. Fejeran said there would still be landscape questions that the TF and District would need to address and that the TF could make some changes, but that there would remain large problems outside of its scope.

Mr. Hunt turned to [chapter 22](#) of existing graduation policy, suggesting it starts a new conversation with families. Ms. Fejeran pointed out that there is research that should allow DC to design a predictive model for graduation. Ms. Chisholm noted that the nation builds prisons based on 3rd grade achievement data, so it should be possible to create high school plans. Ms. Reilly added that certain groups have figured this work out, so it might be possible for the TF to address. She didn't feel that TF members were excited about credit recovery reform, but there is energy and passion about graduation plans. Mr. Tansey said while the energy exists, the authority might not. He said that early interventions are more important to him than college readiness, because high school is

too late to intervene. At Dunbar High School, his former employer, he noted that the administration doubles down until 10th grade students take the PARCC exam, at which point students can coast. Mr. Foster was opposed to changing high school graduation requirements, noting that it is simply an attempt to clean up middle schools' messes, and the emphasis should be at the middle school level. Ms. Wilson Phelan said she heard the TF gravitating toward minor changes to the requirements, such as combining art and music and clarifying the world language requirement. Ms. Reilly said the public would push back at the idea of combining art and music. Ms. Fejeran said that the city's responses to the graduation crisis have been very technical in nature, but it is critical to acknowledge that schools are taking action based on their best ideas for the students they have. She said the District would need to push for a quality education for all students who enter District schools.

Ms. Chisholm said she thought the TF had already done a lot of the work necessary to make specific recommendations to change required courses, and she suggested that the TF use prior meeting notes to inform these changes, rather than spending more time researching and debating. Mr. Tansey said he was nervous about making middle school courses count for high school, and he preferred the idea of a competency-based test to allow students to test out. Ms. Wilson Phelan said she also heard TF members gravitating to small, adaptive changes, like investigating pathways to get credit for competency and third-grade achievement plans. Mr. Greenhill said he was particularly amenable to plans that require taking action before students reach high school.

Mr. Brown said that he was particularly moved by the discussion about going beyond the letter of the requirements and into the spirit of them. He added that the State Board has a clearly-defined purview, but others will come into contact with the TF's final recommendations and may have power to make more sweeping changes.

Ms. Fejeran said the TF should consider the events that led to the graduation scandal and the large number of unprepared graduates in the city. She added that many stakeholders should be held accountable, not just those in high schools. She said that while there are specific recommendations in the TF's scope, it would also be possible to share the TF's hopes for the future and indicate who would be responsible for taking those next steps. She added that there were also opportunities for community engagement.

Ms. Sanders said the TF must first focus on the structural issues in elementary and middle schools before addressing high school readiness. She says people are looking to the TF to rally behind because there is a lot of distrust in DCPS right now. Parents who no longer see inherent value in the high school diploma want to know what they can do for their students to support the college entrance process. Mr. Batchelor said it is fortunate that DC has an activist group of residents and that was encouraged by what he had heard from the TF members.

Ms. Reilly said she thought a lot of energy had been put into figuring out how DC arrived at its current state of affairs. She expressed sensitivity to the position class of 2018 was now in and asked if the TF could come together at its next meeting and consider solutions

for those students. Mr. Foster said that he represented both a student perspective and a business leader's perspective, and his work with his business has meant that he has received absences from school, even though his school supports his work. He wondered if it would be possible to indicate those special circumstances on a transcript, so that more students would be able to start businesses without worrying about attendance.

Ms. Wilson Phelan suggested that it made sense to continue meeting through, at minimum, the end of March, and TF members agreed. She recommended that the TF consider Ms. Chisholm's and Ms. Reilly's idea of publishing a TF op-ed and directed TF members to continue thinking about policy-level changes within the scope of the group.

Closing

Ms. Wilson Phelan said that the TF would be most effective if all perspectives were at the table, and she asked the TF members in attendance to reach out to their colleagues and encourage them to participate. She added that in-person attendance at TF meetings was preferable when possible.

Mr. Batchelor remarked that the community meeting at Ballou had just started and the Chancellor and several members of the DC Council were currently sharing next steps with the community. Ms. Fejeran said that she would be interested in hearing updates about what would happen to students in the class of 2018.

Ms. Wilson Phelan thanked the TF for their work and adjourned the meeting. The TF will reconvene on February 28, 2018, from 6:00 – 8:00 PM.