State of Connecticut

High School Graduation Issues Task Force

Final Report

January, 2012

The High School Graduation Issues Task Force has carefully reviewed the high school graduation requirements that were enacted by the state government. In the course of that review, the Task Force heard testimony from:

- Representatives of the CT State Department of Education
- Representatives of the CT Association of Schools
- Representatives of CT Education Association
- Representatives of AFT-CT
- Representatives of the CT Technical High School System
- Representatives of the NE Secondary School Consortium
- Representatives of the CT PTA
- Representatives of the CT Association of Public School Superintendents

Based on this testimony, on considerable and careful review of a plethora of documents related to graduation requirements in many states across the United States and on detailed and comprehensive discussions, the Task Force first decided that it would recommend that the increased rigor contained in the new graduation requirements be maintained. This *raising of the bar* has to be in place if students are to leave the public education system able to go on to lead decent and productive lives.

Within this context, then, the Task Force has decided to make a number of recommendations to the Education Committee of the Connecticut State Legislature.

The recommendations are divided into the following categories: The Need for Non-Local Funding for Implementation; Revisions of the Requirements Contained in the Secondary School Reform Package that was established by the State Government in 2008; Actions Designed to Advance a Mastery Based Graduation System; Actions Designed to Address the Staff Capacity Needed to Implement Specific Requirements.

FUNDING FOR IMPLEMENTATION

The Task Force received testimony from multiple sources before it began considering recommendations related to the graduation requirements contained in the secondary school reform program that was enacted by the State Government. Two threads ran throughout this testimony.

- The need for a source of funding to cover the cost of implementing the new graduation requirements.
- The need for the source of funding to be at either the state or federal level.

These sentiments are identical to the conditions contained in the agreements that were arrived at when the secondary school reform program was incorporated in Section 10-111. The parties to that agreement were the State Legislature, the Commissioner of Education, the CT Education Association, AFT-CT, the CT Federation of School Administrators, ConnCAN and the CT Association of Public School Superintendents.

These parties agreed that the requirements that would require funding would not be implemented unless CT received federal Race To The Top funds or if this did not occur, the state government provided the funds needed for implementation.

CT did not receive Race To The Top funds. To date, the state government has not provided funding for implementing the new graduation requirements.

Given all of this, it is the Task Force's position that all new graduation requirements that require funding for implementation be postponed until a non-local source of funding is available to cover the cost of implementation.

REVISIONS OF REQUIREMENTS

The Task Force recommends that the following revisions be made to the Secondary School Reform Package while maintaining the 25 credit requirement in the legislation.

- Elimination of the Two Credit World Language Requirement for High School Graduation Replaced by Two Open Elective Credits

  This recommendation is made for the following reasons.

  - Implementing this requirement in the CT Technical High School System would require the System to reduce students' programs by two credits of vocational training. This would unnecessarily diminish the quality of that training which is recognized for its high quality.
  - Implementing this requirement in the high schools with relatively low enrollment would present very challenging staffing problems both in terms of acquisition and affordability.
  - To be clear, the Task Force is in no way stating that World Languages are not important, nor are we saying that districts should eliminate their world language programs.

- Elimination of the Eighteen Hour Requirement for Drug and Alcohol Abuse Education and Incorporation of This Topic in the Health Education Requirement.

  This recommendation is made because addressing drug and alcohol abuse education within the context of a health education curriculum is a more effective method for giving students the knowledge and motivation to not abuse drugs and alcohol than treating this topic outside of that context. Drug and alcohol should not be abused primarily because of the damage that such abuse causes to a person's physical and mental health. The topic, therefore, is much better understood and appreciated when presented as a component of a set of topics that address overall physical and mental health as opposed to a presentation that is outside of that set of topics.

- Revision of the math requirement to read:

  Four credits that will include Algebra I; Geometry; Algebra II or Probability and Statistics and/or other comparable mathematics curses that are aligned to the high school conceptual categories and practices contained in the CCSS. Such comparable course can include integrated mathematics, financial algebra, college algebra applied mathematics, discrete mathematics and mathematical modeling.

  The present requirement reads Algebra I, Geometry, Algebra II or Probability and Statistics. The revision is recommended because different students with different levels of math ability and different career aspirations may or may not need an Algebra II or Probability and Statistics course. Revision of the requirement enhance the ability of schools districts to tailor high school mathematics programs to the needs of the students instead of requiring all students to fit a *one size fits all* mode.

  Two things need to be made clear regarding this recommendation.

  1. The Task Force is not recommending any change in the four mathematics credits requirement
  2. School districts offerings in lieu of Algebra II or Probability and Statistics must be the equivalent of these two subjects in terms of rigor.

- Revision of the Science Requirement to Read:

  The three required credits in science must be in courses that are aligned with the content, practices and cross cutting concepts contained in the framework that has been developed by the National Science Research Council

  The revision is recommended in order to align CT's science graduation requirements with requirements that either will be or are already in place throughout the United States.

- Elimination of the requirement that students take end of course exams in specific subject areas.

  The reasons for this recommendation are the following.

  - The degree of standardization that would result from this requirement would stifle ongoing curriculum development and improvement due to the need to change the end of course exams every time a substantial change needs to be made in the content of the course. Changing end of course exams would be a time and money consuming project and as such, would be a motivator to not engage in curriculum development and improvement.

- Lack of funding has itself stifled the development of end of course exams to date. Presently only one of the specified exams, Algebra I, is being developed. There are presently no funds available for the development of any other exams and there may not be sufficient funding available for even the completion of the Algebra I exam.

- The implementation of the Common Core standards and the Smarter Balance Assessment System will result in the set of common expectations for student performance and the promotion of rigor that the end of course exams were intended to produce.

MASTERY BASED GRADUATION SYSTEM

By majority vote, the Task Force has adopted the following recommendation.

Over the last decade there has been an increasing consideration nationwide of revising high school graduation requirements so that students would have to demonstrate that they have specific content knowledge and skills before they are awarded a high school diploma. Among the factors that have spurred this consideration are the following.

- The position that indicates that the relationship between time and learning that presently exists in all educational institutions needs to be reversed if all students are to graduate from high school college and career ready. Presently, time spent in schooling is constant and how much students learn as a result of spending that time is variable. This needs to be reversed so that time spent in schooling is the variable and student learning is the constant. Such a reversal would require graduation requirements that insure that all students actually meet specific standards of learning as opposed to earning Carnegie Units by virtue of getting a least a passing grade in specified courses of study.

- The increasing advocacy for a personalized learning approach. A by no means exhaustive list of examples of this advocacy are:

    - The work of the New England Secondary School Consortium which includes advocacy for mastery based diplomas as opposed to Carnegie Unit based diplomas.

    - The work of the Nellie Mae Education Foundation which has as its core purpose the promotion of personalized learning.

    - Relevant components of the present status of school districts in CT

    - The latest round of the federal Race To The Top Program which targets funds for school districts to use to implement personalized learning

In Connecticut over the past twenty years, there has been movement both in particular school districts and statewide away from graduation requirements that are based solely on Carnegie Units. This movement started when a few school districts established performance standards that students had to meet in addition to earning sufficient Carnegie Units to graduate. Students could meet those requirements by either meeting the state goal on the CT Academic Performance Tests (CAPT) or by demonstrating specific levels of mastery on locally developed assessments.

What began in these districts resulted in passage of legislation that required all districts to somehow factor in CAPT results as part of local graduation requirements.

A few schools and districts have gone beyond this level of movement away from Carnegie Units as the sole basis for graduation. Presently, there are nine high schools that belong to the League of Innovative Schools and they are actually developing mastery based graduation systems.

Recently, federal and state initiatives have given a major boost towards the implementation of mastery based systems. Specifically, the establishment of the Commissioner's Network of Schools has resulted in one of the four schools identified to date deciding that a major component of its turnaround strategy will be the implementation of a mastery based system. In addition, seven CT school districts have announced intentions to apply for federal Race To The Top funds that are targeted for the implementation of personalized education, a major component of which is a mastery based diploma system.

Having said all of this, the Task Force is also cognizant of the tasks facing Connecticut's school districts.

These districts are presently faced with two major implementation initiatives. One is the new teacher and principal evaluation program and the other is the implementation of the new Common Core Curriculum Standards. Both challenges require the allocation of noticeable financial and human resources if implementation is to be successful. Almost all districts do not presently have the level of resources necessary for successful implementation.

Almost no district in the state, therefore, has the capacity to take another mandate with the dimensions of a movement from a Carnegie Units based graduation system to a mastery based system.

The Task Force, therefore, seeks to not add an additional burden to school districts when they may not have the capacity to address that burden but also seeks to encourage those districts that have already decided to move towards a mastery based graduation system and those that are considering such an action. The Task Force, therefore, recommends the following.

- There should be no mandate for any district to implement a mastery based graduation system.

- The State Board of Education should be given the authority to grant permission to school districts that want to implement a mastery based graduation system to do so. This authority would include the ability to waive any and all statutory, regulatory and State Board of Education policy requirements that might prevent a school district from implementing a mastery based system.

- The State Government should establish a competitive grant program that would provide a financial incentive for school districts to move towards a mastery based graduation system. Funds acquired under this grant program would enable districts to cover the costs incurred by movement towards such a system.

- Establishment of a procedure whereby districts that want to pilot multiple pathways for graduation requirements can do so with permission from the Commissioner of Education which permission would be granted if the proposed multiple pathways meet pre-established requirements.

The members of the Task Force that did not support this recommendation did so for the following reasons.

We believe that discussions of mastery-based graduation systems are outside the charge of the Task Force. This Task Force was implemented to evaluate the issues surrounding the graduation requirements as adopted in Public Act 10-111. In this law, there is no mention of alternative learning or mastery based learning programs. Furthermore, granting authority to the SBE or the Commissioner "to waive any and all statutory, regulatory and State Board of Education policy requirements…" does not allow for the legislative process to work. There was no discussion with the Education Committee, General Assembly, SBE, practitioners, parents or the general public.

Currently, school districts are struggling with implementation of the Common Core, new teacher/administrator evaluation system and budget deficits. We feel that any money made available to districts should be used to implement programs that are already in existence.

ACTIONS RELATED TO STAFF CAPACITY

There are two graduation requirements that are being already implemented but regarding which the Task Force has concerns related to staff capacity. The requirements are the Students Success Plans (SSP) and the Senior Demonstration Project frequently referred to as the Capstone Project. The concerns are based on the very real probability that insufficient staff capacity will result in an implementation pattern that includes compliance with the mandated processes and nothing else. In other words, if there is

insufficient staff capacity for implementing these requirements, the intended effect of the requirements will not be realized. Instead, all aspects of compliance will take place but there will be no impact on the experience that students have within the education system.

The Task Force, therefore, makes the following recommendations regarding the SSP.

- SSPs need to be monitored annually.
- The CSDE, with the real involvement of all relevant parties, needs to determine the level of staffing necessary for effective implementation of development and annual reviews of SSPs after students complete the ninth, tenth and eleventh grades.

- The CSDE needs to develop:

    A. The core requirements for SSPs
    B. A training program available at no cost to districts to assist in the development and of the annual reviews of SSPs
    C. A system to monitor the effectiveness of the implementation of SSPs as an educational tool and report annually to the SBE

The Task Force makes the following recommendations regarding the Senior Demonstration Project.

- The CSDE, with the real involvement of all relevant parties, needs to determine the level of staffing necessary for effective implementation of the Senior Demonstration Projects.

- The CSDE needs to develop:

    A. The core requirements for Senior Demonstration Projects
    B. A training program available at no cost to districts in assist in the implementation of the Senior Demonstration Projects.
    C. A system to monitor the effectiveness of the implementation of Senior Demonstration Projects as an educational tool and report annually to the SBE