

Testimony submitted by Susan A. Bell, Superintendent of Schools, Windsor Locks Public Schools
Representative of High School Graduation Requirements Task Force

IN SUPPORT OF: SB 378

AN ACT CONCERNING THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION TASK
FORCE.

Thank you to the Education Committee for considering the following testimony in support of Senate Bill 378. In August, I was appointed to the High School Graduation Task Force by Commissioner Wentzell. The Task Force's proposal is the result of a very focused synthesis of the present challenges Connecticut faces to ensure all students are ready for college, career, and life, and the need for significant, sweeping change to improve learning outcomes and life readiness for all future generations. In other words, Connecticut really needs to get this right.

Following Chairman Cirusuolo's comments, I'll comment on specific recommendations included in the report. The elimination of end of course examinations is a significant departure from the original set of graduation requirements. I currently serve as the Superintendent of a school system that is undergoing sweeping change towards a mastery-based, student-centered learning system, and I can honestly say that the imposition of end of course exams represent one more layer of testing that is fundamentally contrary to ensuring that students master rigorous course standards. Students demonstrating mastery of content and skills should be able to authentically apply the skills and knowledge they have learned both consistently - across multiple demonstrations - as well as independently. We all know that both children and adults learn best by applying what they have learned - *doing* rather than simulating. End of course exams, similar to the final exams most high schools already administer each at the end of each semester and year, are a very low-level simulation that can never reproduce authentic application of skills and content, and in turn, only promote short-term retention of content and skills. The elimination of end of course exams allows for multiple and varied authentic applications, which lead to deeper learning, and shifts our collective educational culture away from "teaching to the test" to a culture defined by students challenging themselves to grow and learn for the SAKE of learning.

The Task Force report also recommends the elimination of some of the prescriptive and varied course credits, and instead provides flexibility within specific disciplines - namely the Humanities and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). Prescribing more and fragmented course credits for students to attain - within an already highly prescribed schedule and day in high school, further departs from the mastery-based, student-centered approach many districts are working to create across their schools. Maintaining physical education and arts credits, however, are essential. The arts, physical education, Career and Technical Education, and the like are critical components to a well-rounded high school experience - promoting effective decision making in wellness and expressive creativity and innovation through the arts. These skills are critical to helping all of Connecticut's graduates live, work, and contribute positively and successfully to our ever-changing global society.

Finally, the Task Force realized this intermediary step does not meet our goal of establishing a long-term solution to creating a vision-driven set of high school graduation requirements for Connecticut's students. Connecticut must create a complete, collaborative, and far-reaching strategic plan for the implementation of new graduation requirements. Numerous policies and laws must be reviewed and changed, a compelling vision for the Connecticut graduate developed and adopted by all state stakeholders, and red tape eliminated in order for school districts to do the important work of creating the authentic learning opportunities students will need to successfully learn, work and live in our 21st century.