

## **POSITION PAPER ON MASTERY BASED GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS**

This paper has the following purposes.

- Set the context for a discussion of mastery based graduation requirements
- Present the movement towards mastery based graduation requirements in CT
- Articulate a position on the issue for Task Force consideration.

### **The Context**

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

### **Mastery Based Graduation Requirement in CT**

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.

### **Relevant Components**

School districts in CT 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.

### **A Position**

Given the value of movement towards a mastery based graduation system and given the present capacity of school districts in CT, the High School Graduation Issues Task Force seeks to spur action that will enable school districts that have such a system under serious consideration to move forward and that will encourage other school districts to consider moving towards such a system while at the same time not adding another burden to already over burdened school districts. The Task Force, therefore, makes the following recommendations.

- The Commissioner 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.