

BRIEFING

SESSION SPOTLIGHT



Proposed Changes to High School Graduation Requirements

APRIL 2013

Bills Addressed

HB 7091

SB 1076

The Florida Legislature is considering legislation to fundamentally revamp high school graduation requirements for public school students. Under HB7091, the requirements would be revised to provide three distinct pathways, a “College and Career” designation, an “Industry” designation, and a “Scholar” designation (which is commensurate with current requirements). The Senate bill includes substantially similar provisions, although proposed amendments would establish a “Merit” designation in lieu of and similar to an Industry designation. The rationale for the separate pathways appears to be well researched and supported by many school districts throughout the state.

The state’s poor performance to date on the Algebra I End of Course Assessment (EOC) was cited as a primary reason for revisiting the current graduation requirements. As the concept of the bill was being “work-shopped” in committee meetings, proponents of the bill testified that given current performance data, many high school students would not be able to graduate with a standard high school diploma.

Unfortunately, these discussions never attempted to understand why students were failing to master Algebra I content—a course often considered the gatekeeper for all other mathematics pursuits—nor was there any discussion devoted to the need for professional support for Algebra teachers aimed at enhancing effective instructional strategies.

Conceptually, the Taxwatch Center for Educational Performance and Accountability supports the proposed alternative requirements as they aim to address the needs of diverse student populations and the dynamics of emerging workforce opportunities. However, the new designations raise concerns regarding actual implementation and the potential to limit future options for students who select a designation other than “Scholar.”

College and Career Designation

The College and Career designation is a worthy undertaking, provided the pathway truly furthers the attainment of academic skills necessary in both postsecondary and workforce settings.

The College and Career designation requires passage of the EOC for Algebra I (among other provisions); but unfortunately only the 10th grade level of the Common Core Assessment in English Language Arts (ELA).

This is problematic for two reasons: First and foremost, a student cannot succeed in a competitive job market or college level coursework if the extent of their literacy and communication skills is no higher than a 10th-grade level.

Secondly, the state is currently expected to adopt and administer a similar EOC for 11th-grade ELA, a major undertaking and expense for an assessment that will not be required for many, if not most, high school students.

Industry Designation

The Industry designation is a logical addition to a one-size-fits-all diploma. Current and emerging workforce requirements include high-level industry certifications, many of which require an Associate's Degree (AS). The encouraging news for Florida is that high numbers of students are graduating high school with Industry Certifications in high-skill, high-wage, high-demand occupations, and the majority of certifications earned include postsecondary course credit. The Industry designation requires mathematics and science courses in addition to Algebra I, courses that must be aligned to the specific industry certification the student is seeking.

Therefore, it will be critical for the Department of Education to engage the various industry sectors in order to determine the specific courses needed for specific occupations.

In order to offer the variety of mathematics and science courses needed to satisfy the industry certification requirements, most schools—especially those in rural areas—will depend to a great extent on virtual offerings, a conversation that needs to begin immediately to meet demand. The Senate bill appears to address this need, and calls for the Department of Education to establish a list of courses appropriate to an individual industry certification.

Additionally, the 10th-grade ELA assessment is of concern, as industry certifications often require technical reading skills at levels

even more demanding than entry level college texts. Both the Senate and House versions of the bill require passage (only) of the grade 10 ELA assessment for the College and Career designation.

Scholar Designation

The Scholar Designation maintains existing high school graduation requirements. Virtually all students who plan to attend a state university will enroll in coursework well beyond the level of rigor required for the Scholar diploma. These students will be required to pass the 11th-grade ELA assessment and although this sets the bar too low, these students will have far surpassed this level of literacy through much more demanding coursework.

In Conclusion

Conceptually, the TaxWatch Center for Educational Performance and Accountability supports the goal of creating multiple pathways to graduation, and believes these efforts will enhance the needs of a diverse student population and a diverse state economy. However, it is critical that the limitations of the new requirements as proposed be considered.

In essence, they must be certain that the alternate pathways do not close doors to students in the future as a result of decisions made while they are still in high school.

Additionally, both bills could be strengthened through attention to more rigorous ELA instruction for all graduates, and increasing teachers' professional development.

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