



Anne Abbott, Policy Analyst
DC Alliance of Youth Advocates
Testimony to the DC State Board of Education
Proposed Graduation Requirements
January 23, 2012

Good evening State Board members, staff and community members. Thank you for the opportunity to testify at tonight's hearing on the proposed changes to graduation requirements for schools in the District of Columbia. My name is Anne Abbott and I am a policy analyst at the DC Alliance of Youth Advocates (DCAYA), a city-wide coalition of over 120 youth serving organizations here in DC.

The manner in which the city as a whole delivers educational services to its young people and especially young people who are at the greatest risk of not transitioning into a self-sustaining adulthood is of great importance to our coalition. As such, I would like to offer up some comments on the proposed changes.

To begin, while we appreciate the Board's intent to ensure all students are well prepared for college and careers we strongly feel that more attention needs to be paid to ensuring students across the academic spectrum are helped and not hindered by this set of requirements. Currently, DCPS and charter students who are severely "off track" for four year graduation and those students who have disengaged from education (former drop-outs) face a steep uphill battle when it comes to obtaining a high school diploma due to seat time requirements for credit bearing coursework.

The current focus on "seat time" requirements for graduation are unnecessarily burdensome for students who wish to obtain a high school diploma, but have life circumstances such as family obligations or employment that stand in the way of being able to commit longer durations of class. The impact of these seat time requirements (rather than applying a competency based approach) forces many youth into a GED track because it's faster and more flexible.

Yet, we also know that the costs associated with the GED (for student and LEA) are about to increase. The cost of the test itself is set to rise, presenting a clear and immediate barrier to obtaining a high school credential for those students in greatest need. For LEAs, given the alignment of the GED to the common core state standards, we anticipate that the costs associated with test preparation will also increase resulting in a financial strain on community-based organizations and charter schools that offer GED services. These two factors could significantly disrupt high school credential attainment. Rather than continuing to rely solely on the GED and absorbing these anticipated social and financial costs; the District could switch to a competency based model. This would allow the flexibility of GED, increase the number of students who obtain a high school diploma and ultimately facilitate the successful progression of these non-traditional students into post-secondary options or employment that would be otherwise unattainable.

With regard to the proposed “Diploma of Distinction”, we recommend that the Board strongly consider the needs of students to be prepared not only for post-secondary coursework but also for eventual careers. While high standards for academic coursework especially in advanced placement, international baccalaureate and college level courses should be encouraged and appropriately recognized, we implore the Board not to exclude students who excel in career and technical coursework and intentionally prepare themselves for more immediate success in the labor market or a technical/skill based pathway.

Lastly, as a staff member of a coalition of youth service providers I would be remiss if I did not mention that high-quality community based providers of services such as health, nutrition, physical activity, the visual, performing and media arts and a wealth of other areas are a largely untapped resource here in the District. The services these organizations provide could go a long way in ensuring that non-academic coursework and non-core academic coursework is offered at the majority of high schools here in the District if their services were leveraged appropriately. On the elementary and middle school levels, many organizations are already helping to expand the amount of time students spend engaged in their education.

I urge the Board to take a leadership role in this area and ensure that entire communities are engaged in the facilitation of positive youth outcomes especially at the high school level. As the Board seeks to create students who are well prepared and well rounded individuals with a range of cognitive and non-cognitive skills that have real world applications, extending students’ ability to earn credits from non-school entities seems a natural fit. Furthermore, if the Board truly wishes to move towards competency based education, the contributions that high-performing organizations make towards helping students achieve both their academic and non-academic goals must be better recognized.

Again thank you for allowing me to testify at today’s hearing. I look forward to any questions you may have.

Anne Abbott
Policy Analyst
DC Alliance of Youth Advocates
1012 14th Street, NW Suite 610
Washington, DC 20005