



Center for **Inspired Teaching**

Center for Inspired Teaching's Testimony before the

District of Columbia State Board of Education

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Good evening, and thank you for this opportunity to testify on the very important matter of high school graduation requirements.

My name is Cosby Hunt, and I am the Manager of Teaching and Learning at Center for Inspired Teaching. For 17 years, Inspired Teaching has invested in DC teachers through professional development programs that improve their practice so that they can raise student achievement, strengthen students' imaginations, and create classroom communities in which all students thrive.

This time last year I testified to you on this same topic of high school graduation requirements as a former DCPS teacher, an employee of Inspired Teaching, and the 2008 District of Columbia History Teacher of the Year. Today I come to you also as the recent victim of an armed robbery; last Tuesday night I was held up at gunpoint on my block as I walked home from the Ward 5 Council on Education meeting. I am pleased to report that the police have made an arrest in the case; I am not pleased to report that both suspects are from the District and in their mid-20s, so chances are they were in a DC public school not too long ago.

I can't help but wonder what kind of middle and high school experience these two young men had. Let's assume for a minute they both dropped out of school. What kind of relationship did they have with their teachers? Were they ever able to pursue a passion in school? When and why did they begin actively disengaging from school? These men probably cannot tell you what the high school graduation requirements in the District of

Columbia are, but they probably can tell us how much was expected of them and what was provided to them in their schooling. A judge and jury will decide what happens next for my two assailants at the same time that this Board will decide the direction of the high school graduation requirements.

In this context of education, crime, and punishment, I have two concrete recommendations. The first is simple: there should indeed be a “diploma of distinction” for our city’s public school students; completion of a quality senior thesis, however, should be required *only* of those students who choose to graduate with that diploma. To paraphrase the words of David Heckler, one of my graduate students at UDC and a first-year social studies teacher at Woodrow Wilson High School: *every required course is less desirable than an elective*. Making the senior thesis an attractive, rigorous option is a better choice than requiring it and inevitably – at least in some buildings -- watering it down.

In yesterday’s *Washington Post*, author Marion Brady recommends that every required course at the high school level be an elective. At Inspired Teaching, we applaud this approach to making students the experts and drivers of their own learning, just as we applaud the Board’s investigation into competency-based education. We recognize, however, that moving away from requirements altogether in the immediate future is too radical a step. Making the senior thesis something that one *elects* to do as part of a diploma of distinction allows the Board of Education to use the carrot of aspiration rather than the blunt instrument of a mandate.

There may be those who would accuse the diploma of distinction approach of reinforcing what journalist Jonetta Rose Barras calls the District’s increasingly three-tiered educational system of “quality traditional schools, charters, and crummy institutions in low-income neighborhoods.” The decision to make this an unequal public education system started long ago when we instituted “application schools” in our city. A diploma of distinction available to students at any of our public high schools should close the gap between some of those schools.

How will we compare the outcomes for our young people in application and comprehensive high schools? This question brings us to my second recommendation:

The DC State Board of Education should work with its various stakeholders to conduct a citywide longitudinal study of a graduating high school class. Rather than focusing just on their standardized test scores and college acceptance letters, let's look at what happens to the students' lives over time. Let's follow our DCPS and charter school graduates for six to eight years after their graduation. Let's find out where they go to college, in which schools they stay enrolled, and from which schools they leave. Let's track where they find employment as entry-level workers and where they find themselves deployed as members of the military. Let's follow them as they enter PhD programs and, alas, as they enter penitentiaries.

Most importantly, let's interview these graduates as time goes on. We need to find out what aspects of their secondary education they feel are valuable to them in their post-secondary lives and what are we doing in our schools that simply wastes their time. The Board can learn from the data and expertise that the Thurgood Marshall Academy and KIPP schools have gathered in tracking their graduates. This Board should reconsider graduation requirements every ten years or so, and a longitudinal study like this should be an integral part of that process.

And what better class to study than the *class of 2014*—the year when all K-12 students in the United States should be “proficient” in reading and mathematics according to the No Child Left Behind legislation?

Would a senior thesis and diploma of distinction have kept me from being mugged? Perhaps not, but we need to create more opportunities for students to make good educational decisions up front before they are left with only bad choices later.