



VIA EMAIL

January 23, 2013

D.C. State Board of Education
441 4th Street, NW, Suite 723N
Washington, D.C. 20001

Re: Proposed Revisions to High School Graduation Requirements

Dear State Board of Education:

University Legal Services (ULS) is the federally mandated protection and advocacy program for individuals with disabilities in the District of Columbia. One of our roles is to advocate for the educational rights of students with disabilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and similar laws. We also participate in D.C. Partners in Transition and the D.C. Secondary Transition Community of Practice -- collaborative groups of D.C. stakeholders including members of the D.C. government and community-based organizations who are interested in improving outcomes for students with disabilities as they transition from high school to post-secondary education, employment, and independent living. We are writing to provide comments on the Board's Proposed Revisions to High School Graduation Requirements dated December 19, 2012.

ULS strongly believes that both the current graduation requirements and the proposed graduation requirements adversely affect the ability of students with disabilities in D.C. to graduate from high school with a high school diploma. The District must respond to the reality and needs of its student population. According to statistics submitted by the District to the U.S. Department of Education's ED Facts Report System, in the School Year 2010-11, only 59 percent of D.C. students graduated in four years. D.C. was the lowest performing state in the country. The statistics are worse for students with disabilities with only 39 percent graduating.

Though some students with disabilities age out of special education services at age 22 with an IEP certificate, most colleges and many employers do not accept the certificate as a substitute for a high school diploma, so it is difficult or impossible for those young adults to further their education or get a job. Most students choose to drop out of school rather than continue on a path that they know will not lead to a high school diploma. The current diploma system is clearly not structured to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

Both the current and the proposed course requirements are very rigorous and will most benefit students planning to attend a four-year post-secondary institution. However, not all students want or plan to go to college. Holding all students to this level actually limits their ability to be successful during and after high school. The currently proposed requirements could

be used to award students who are able to meet that rigor with an “honors diploma” or “distinguished diploma,” which will help them stand out when applying to college.

However, for those students who are either not able to meet the standards described or not motivated by the required subject matter, other options must be made available that are just as rigorous and challenging, taught by highly qualified educators, to keep students with disabilities from dropping out of school. As it develops new diploma standards, the State Board of Education should use this opportunity to recognize that students have widely varied aptitudes and skills. Certainly, students with disabilities must be given all the accommodations necessary to achieve a “distinguished diploma.” Nevertheless, the District must respond to the seriously unmet needs of students with disabilities, whose aptitudes and talents are being ignored, resulting in such a high drop-out rate. These students must be challenged through alternative courses that train them for a vocation, permit them to graduate with a diploma that reflects this training, and enable them to obtain a job and be a part of the community. Insisting that these students complete two years of a foreign language, for example, to obtain a basic high school diploma may be an invitation for these students to drop-out.

ULS does not believe that the overall number of credits required should be reduced or waived to accommodate students with disabilities. Nor should the rigor of the subjects offered be diminished. Of course, where modifications are required to enable students with disabilities to participate in rigorous courses, those modifications should be provided and can be noted on the diploma. It is essential, however, that the basic diploma requirements not be so proscriptive as to say that each student has to take specifically identified classes to be promoted to 10th, 11th, or 12th grade or to graduate with a high school diploma. School districts should be allowed to create their own curriculum in each subject area to ensure that a variety of course offerings are available to students with a variety of ability levels, including students with disabilities. The transcript can state the level of the course. To ensure students are not being limited to remedial courses and are taking as rigorous a course load as possible, the Board could require that students take “higher-level” courses in the subject area of their specialty to graduate.

With rigorous requirements for all students to graduate, but more flexibility in how they get there, students with disabilities will have the same opportunity as students without disabilities to graduate, further their education, and get a job.

ULS welcomes the opportunity to discuss these recommendations further. Please feel free to contact me at (202) 547-0198, ext. 141 or sullman@uls-dc.org with additional questions.

Sincerely,

Shawn R. Ullman
Staff Attorney

cc: Amy Maisterra, Assistant Superintendent, OSSE