

CULMINATING PROJECT

Background. The State Board of Education (SBE) established the Culminating Project and High School and Beyond Plan as graduation requirements for all students, beginning with the class of 2008. The Board heard presentations from three school districts in April 2008 (Highline, Kent, North Thurston) about their approaches to both requirements, and reviewed the responses of 145 districts (representing 59% of the 246 districts with high schools) to a survey¹ conducted by staff. The survey asked districts about their current approaches to the two requirements, when they had implemented them, estimated costs to the district, and recommendations they had for the SBE. Districts provided much greater detail and comment about the Culminating Project than about the High School and Beyond Plan.

Currently, four states (Idaho, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Washington) include culminating/senior projects as graduation projects.

WASHINGTON CULMINATING PROJECT: PRACTICE

Based on the 2008 survey, it appears that considerable variation across districts exists in what students are expected to do to complete the Culminating Project. The most common components of the Culminating Project, listed in order of frequency were:

- Presentation (99)
- Portfolio (84)
- Project/Product (58)
- Research Paper (51)
- Reflection Paper (46)
- Community Service (44)
- Job Shadow (18)

In addition, many districts require project proposals or letters of intent; a few require students to complete a college application (2), participate in a senior exit interview (3), or attend a college/career fair (1).

It may appear odd to have a separate category for “project/product” for a requirement called the “Culminating Project.” In some cases, the *project* was a portfolio/presentation, portfolio/presentation/reflection paper, or community service/reflection paper. In other cases, the district clearly stipulated that a tangible product or planned project was required in addition to other components. In one case, the Culminating Project consisted of attending a college/career fair and completing a college application essay.

In those districts where students completed a portfolio, the High School and Beyond Plan was usually part of the portfolio.

Each superintendent was asked the following question: “From your perspective on the ground level, what, if anything, would you want the Board to do about these

¹ Original e-mail sent in January, 2008 to the superintendent of each district; follow-up e-mail to non-respondents sent in March, 2008.

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requirements (e.g., leave as is, provide more specific guidance, attach credit to them, etc.).”

Not everyone chose to write a response, but of the 98 who did, their responses can be categorized as follows:

- Leave as is (37%) (working well, have already invested years of development, too much change going on at this time, local control allows flexibility)
- Attach credit (10%)
- Don't attach credit (8%)
- Eliminate the requirements (2%)
- Fund the requirements (10%)

In addition, several concerns were expressed repeatedly:

- Broad guidelines allow flexibility but create inconsistency of rigor across districts
- The Culminating Project assumes a skill level some students don't have
- The Culminating Project adds to workload
- The purpose is unclear
- The logistics of getting full-time running start students to complete the Culminating Project are challenging.

WASHINGTON CULMINATING PROJECT: POLICY

The Culminating Project is a current graduation requirement, and is part of the SBE's new CORE 24 graduation requirements framework. In July 2008, the SBE approved “maintain(ing) the Culminating Project and High School and Beyond Plan as graduation requirements with modifications developed in consultation with the Board's implementation advisors.”

Relevant WACs, Guidelines, and Statutes. Direction for the Culminating Project is provided in SBE rule, guidelines, and (with respect to CORE 24) recent actions; basic education statute establishes parameters that limit the consideration of attributes in graduation requirements.

WAC 180-51-066. (i) *Each student shall complete a Culminating Project for graduation. The project shall consist of the student demonstrating both their learning competencies and preparations related to learning goals three and four. Each district shall define the process to implement this graduation requirement, including assessment criteria, in written district policy.*

The referenced learning goals are two of the basic education goals, cited in RCW 28A.150.210:

Goal 3: Think analytically, logically, and creatively, and to integrate different experiences and knowledge to form reasoned judgments and solve problems; and

Goal 4: Understand the importance of work and finance and how performance, effort, and decisions directly affect future career and educational opportunities.

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SBE Guidelines. Currently, the Culminating Project is described in this manner on the on the SBE Web Site (<http://www.sbe.wa.gov/gradcproject.html>): **(bold added)**

Basic content knowledge is tested through the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), Classroom Based Assessments (CBA), and various alternative assessments. However, there is no state-level test that assures the student knows **how to apply what they have learned to do** with that content. This experiential, hands-on project gives students a formal opportunity to **demonstrate in a variety of ways their learning competencies related to Washington's learning goals three and four.**

Each student shall complete a Culminating Project, and they will have the **flexibility to construct his/her own Culminating Project.** As part of the Culminating Project, each student will **demonstrate essential skills** through reading, writing, speaking, production, and/or performance (Essential Academic Learning Requirements). There are many ways a student may demonstrate their skills of analysis, logic and creativity; and, to integrate experience and knowledge to form reasoned judgments and solve problems. **The intent is that the student be able to guide their own process in completing the Culminating Project.**

School districts should clearly identify Culminating Project student outcomes and develop and publish assessment criteria to support those outcomes. Each district should have a clearly identified Culminating Project management system designed to support the students and staff. Districts should also have policies in place to handle special circumstances, such as district transfers, parental challenges to the project, etc.

Districts may opt to include the community in project planning, support, or feedback.

There is no state-level prohibition against doing joint projects of two or more students.

School districts shall ensure the safety of each student by complying with legal and risk management guidelines

RCW 28A.150.211. This statute recognizes the importance of certain values and traits but specifies that they “are not intended to be assessed or be standards for graduation.” Specifically:

The legislature also recognizes that certain basic values and character traits are essential to individual liberty, fulfillment, and happiness. However, these values and traits are not intended to be assessed or be standards for graduation. The legislature intends that local communities have the responsibility for determining how these values and character traits are learned as determined by consensus at the local level. These values and traits include the importance of:

- (1) Honesty, integrity, and trust;*
- (2) Respect for self and others;*
- (3) Responsibility for personal actions and commitments;*
- (4) Self-discipline and moderation;*

- (5) Diligence and a positive work ethic;
- (6) Respect for law and authority;
- (7) Healthy and positive behavior; and
- (8) Family as the basis of society.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Since the decision was made in 2000 to add a Culminating Project as a graduation requirement, the SBE has: 1) adopted a new purpose for a high school diploma², and 2) adopted a CORE 24 graduation requirements framework that includes 24 credits, a Culminating Project, and a High School and Beyond Plan³. In light of these changes, and in response to some of the concerns expressed in the 2008 survey of districts, it would be helpful to revisit the purpose and structure of the requirement to address the following issues. The Culminating Project:

- Has a purpose that is unclear to some districts
- Is implemented differently across districts
- Is connected to a framework (goals three and four) of essential skills that was identified before the SBE wrote the purpose of a diploma and developed CORE 24, and may or may not still be relevant
- Is an unfunded mandate that requires districts to invest resources to implement

POLICY DISCUSSION

- What are the intended outcomes of the Culminating Project?
- How does the Culminating Project fit with the aims of CORE 24?
- What, if anything, needs to be done to assure greater consistency across districts?

Possible recommendations to forward for further consideration by the SBE:

1. Leave the rule as is, and find ways to more clearly communicate the purpose.

Rationale: The requirement is still relatively new. Although districts are implementing the requirement in different ways, current policy gives districts flexibility to design a requirement that addresses the state's interests with the resources they have at their disposal. From the perspective of state policy, the purpose of the requirement is clear and the outcomes explicitly stated. However, the SBE could direct staff to find ways, in

² "The purpose of the diploma is to declare that a student is ready for success in postsecondary education, gainful employment, and citizenship, and is equipped with the skills to be a lifelong learner. The diploma represents a balance between the personalized education needs of each student and society's needs, and reflects at its core the state's basic education goals. The diploma is a compact among students, parents, local school districts, the state and whatever institution or employer the graduate moves on to—a compact that says the graduate has acquired a particular set of knowledge and skills. How the student demonstrates those skills may differ. Whether a student earns the credit by participating in formal instruction or by demonstrating competency through established district policies is immaterial; they are equally acceptable."
(January 2008)

³ July 2008

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addition to the SBE website (e.g., handouts, presentations) to better communicate the purpose.

Caveat: In light of the different levels of understanding by districts about the intent of the Culminating Project as it exists now, and in light of the changes to the purpose of a diploma and the development of the CORE 24 framework, it would be helpful to describe how the culminating project helps to fulfill the purpose of a diploma and the aims of the new CORE 24 framework.

2. Refocus the purpose of the Culminating Project by connecting it to essential skills represented by different or additional frameworks than goals three and four—or by identifying additional skills that the Culminating Project should address.

Rationale: The Culminating Project is currently connected to the essential skills represented by the framework of basic education learning goals three and four. Other frameworks have emerged since 2000 (see table on page 7). Furthermore, in the intervening years, more attention has been drawn to the knowledge and skills that will be needed to be thoughtful citizens and productive workers in the 21st century world and workplace.

Caveat: Any changes to the Culminating Project will likely be viewed as compounding an unfunded mandate, so if changes are to be made, it might be helpful to combine them with a recognition of the impact on district resources, and a commitment to advocate for funding.

Following is a context for the frameworks referenced in the table on page 7.

College Readiness Attributes

Washington's Transition Math Project (TMP) and the Higher Education Coordinating Board's Science and English College Readiness Definitions call attention to "attitudes or habits of mind that can lead to better learning" and suggest multiple "evidence of achievement" indicators that provide examples of specific behaviors that reflect the attribute. TMP is a collaboration among the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC), Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB), Office of State Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), and Council of Presidents (COP) funded by the Gates Foundation and the State of Washington to establish college readiness standards in math. The HECB, with limited funding, has expanded the concept to science and English college readiness definitions. See:

College readiness attributes identified by Washington's Transition Math Project.
<http://www.transitionmathproject.org/standards/doc/Student%20Attributes.doc>

College readiness attributes identified by Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board English College Readiness Definitions
http://www.collegereadinesswa.org/resources/docs/Eng%20Preliminary%20CR%20Definitions_010807.doc

College readiness attributes identified by Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board Science College Readiness Definitions.

http://www.collegereadinesswa.org/resources/docs/Sci%20Preliminary%20CR%20Definitions_010807.doc

Equipped for the Future (EFF)

EFF is an initiative of the National Institute for Literacy that identifies what new workers in entry level jobs need to be able to do well enough to successfully carry out critical entry level tasks.

<http://eff.cls.utk.edu/fundamentals/default.htm>

Framework for 21st Century Learning

The Framework for 21st Century Learning was developed by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, a partnership of business and education organizations. The Framework categorizes the skills in the following ways: Content, Learning and Thinking, Information and Communications Technology Literacy, and Life Skills.

http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/index.php?Itemid=120&id=254&option=com_content&task=view

Oregon

Oregon has identified “essential skills” that it is currently in the process of defining and determining how to assess. Beginning in 2012, students must demonstrate proficiency in reading and comprehending a variety of text. Students in subsequent classes must also demonstrate the skill of “writing clearly and accurately,” (2013) and “applying mathematics in a variety of settings”(2014). It is not clear how skills like “global awareness” or “civic literacy” are to be assessed. Assessment will not occur at the state level, but the state may develop rubrics for local assessment.

<http://www.ode.state.or.us/news/announcements/announcement.aspx?=5119>

Conference Board Survey of Employers

The Conference Board, in collaboration with other organizations, conducted a survey of “the corporate perspective of the readiness of new entrants into the US workforce by level of education attainment.”⁴ Employer respondents were asked to rate the importance of 20 areas of basic knowledge and applied skills to the job success of new entrants to their U.S. workforces at each of three educational levels—high school diploma, two-year college or technical school diploma, or four-year college diploma. Three choices were provided to employer respondents for the level of importance for each of the skills: “not important,” “important,” and “very important.” Four hundred thirty-one employers, representing a combined workforce of over 2 million U.S. based employees, responded to the survey.

⁴ Conference Board (2006). Are they really ready to work? p. 2. <http://www.conference-board.org/Publications/describe.cfm?id=1218>

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Frameworks for Essential Skills

Skill	SBE Public Outreach 2007	WA Basic Education Goals 3 & 4	College Readiness Attributes	Equipped for the Future	21 st Century Learning	Oregon Essent. Skills	Employers' 2006 Survey More Import. in Next 5 Years	Employers' 2006 Survey Most Import. (HS grads)
Adaptability					√			
Attention to Detail			√					
Civic Literacy/Responsibility	√ (3)				√	√		
Collaboration/Teamwork	√ (4)				√	√	√ (3)	√ (2)
Communication (oral/written & across audiences)	√		√	√	√	√		√ (3) (oral)
Conflict Resolution				√				
Creativity/Innovation	√ (5)	√			√	√	√ (4)	
Critical Thinking/Problem-solv.	√ (1)	√		√	√	√	√ (1)	
Education/Work/Career Connections		√						
Ethical Behavior or Ethics/Social Responsibility	√		√		√			√ (4)
Decision-making		√						
Financial Literacy	√ (2)	√			√	√		
Global Awareness/Literacy	√				√	√		
Information Literacy	√			√	√			
Information Tech. Application							√ (2)	
Intellectual Engagement			√					
Leadership	√				√			
Media Literacy	√				√			
Perseverance			√					
Personal Accountability/Responsibility					√			
Personal Productivity					√			
Professionalism/Work Ethic								√ (1)
Reading Comprehension								√ (5)
Responsibility for Learning		√	√	√	√			
Social Responsibility					√			
Technology Literacy	√			√	√	√		
Wellness/Nutrition	√				√	√		

3. Define minimum components that all Culminating Projects must have.

Rationale: Minimal requirements would create greater consistency of student expectations across districts.

Caveat: This action would need to be weighed against the precedence of local control established in the Board's initial approach to the Culminating Project and the recognition that some districts have well-developed senior/Culminating Project requirements established over time.

4. Establish state-level rubrics or definitions for the criteria students should meet to satisfy expectations for the Culminating Project.

Rationale: State-level criteria would create greater consistency of student expectations across districts by more clearly stating the intended outcomes and level of performance.

Caveat: The SBE would need to seek resources to convene the state-level groups needed to develop state-level rubrics.

5. Advocate for funding for the Culminating Project.

Rationale: Despite the SBE's intent, as expressed in the guidelines, that "the student be able to guide their own process in completing the Culminating Project," districts report that the project requires both an investment in personnel and materials to guide students and manage the process.

Caveat: This request would need to be built into the overall funding needed to implement new graduation requirements.

HIGH SCHOOL AND BEYOND PLAN

Background. Districts provided much less detail about the High School and Beyond Plan in the 2008 survey conducted by staff and referenced in the first part of this brief.

Currently, four states (Hawaii, New Mexico, Rhode Island and Washington) include high school and beyond plans as part of graduation requirements.

WASHINGTON HIGH SCHOOL AND BEYOND PLAN: PRACTICE

Considerable variation existed in districts' approaches to the High School and Beyond Plan (HSBP), with some districts treating it as a static, "check-off" requirement, and others making the HSBP a dynamic process revisited frequently. Districts with comprehensive career guidance systems such as Navigation 101 or Advisories were more likely to be in the latter category. There was also variation in the initiation of the HSBP; some districts introduced the HSBP in middle school; others waited until the ninth grade or later.

The HSBP and Culminating Project are separate, unrelated requirements, although some districts have linked them by making the HSBP part of a portfolio, and a portfolio

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part of the Culminating Project. Based on conversations with Board members who were either part of, or closer to the discussions that led to the requirement, the 2000 Board did not intend for the HSBP and Culminating Project requirements to be linked because they did not want the Culminating Project to be limited only to projects connected to a student's educational or career goals.

WASHINGTON HIGH SCHOOL AND BEYOND PLAN: POLICY

The High School and Beyond Plan is a current graduation requirement, and is part of the SBE's new CORE 24 graduation requirements framework. In July 2008, the SBE approved "maintain(ing) the Culminating Project and High School and Beyond Plan as graduation requirements with modifications developed in consultation with the Board's implementation advisors. Begin the High School and Beyond Plan in middle school." However, the SBE does not currently have authority to define graduation requirements to begin in middle school.

Direction for the High School and Beyond Plan is provided in rule, statute, and SBE guidelines.

WAC 180.51.066. *Each student shall have an education plan for their high school experience, including what they expect to do the year following graduation.*

RCW 28A.230.090. *Any decision on whether a student has met the state board's high school graduation requirements for a High School and Beyond Plan shall remain at the local level.*

SBE Guidelines. Currently, the High School and Beyond Plan is described in this manner on the on the SBE Web Site (<http://www.sbe.wa.gov/hsbeyondplan.html>):

The High School and Beyond Plan gets all students thinking about their future and how to get the most out of high school, so that they're ready to pursue their adult lives, no matter what direction they plan to take.

Ideally, students write their plan in eighth or ninth grade and then continue to revise it throughout high school to accommodate changing interests or goals. Students should be encouraged to include the following elements in their plan:

Their personal story – what experiences, interests and goals are shaping who they are now and who they want to become.

Their learning style.

Their goals for high school – What will their four years of high school look like, including classes, extracurricular activities, sports, a job, etc.?

Their goals for immediately after high school – Do their goals for high school get them ready for what they want to do after graduation? A student's plan should include the classes needed in preparation for a 2- to 4-year college, vocational or technical school, certificate program or the workforce.

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Each school district determines the guidelines for the High School and Beyond Plan. Please contact your local school district to obtain a copy of the guidelines that have been established for your district.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Since the decision was made in 2000 to add a High School and Beyond Plan as a graduation requirement, the SBE has: 1) adopted a new purpose for a high school diploma, and 2) adopted a CORE 24 graduation requirements framework that includes 24 credits, a Culminating Project, and a High School and Beyond Plan⁵. In light of these changes, and in response to some of the concerns expressed in the 2008 survey of districts, it would be helpful to revisit the purpose and structure of the requirement to address the following issues. The High School and Beyond Plan:

- Is seen by some districts as a product; others see it as process and product
- Is implemented differently across districts; in some districts, it's a one-time event; in others, it's revisited and refined at regular intervals in a student's education
- Is an unfunded mandate that requires districts to invest resources to implement

POLICY DISCUSSION

- What are the intended outcomes of the High School and Beyond Plan?
- How does the High School and Beyond Plan fit with the aims of CORE 24?
- What, if anything, needs to be done to assure greater consistency across districts?
- What authority would the Board like to have with respect to graduation requirements in middle school?

Possible recommendations to forward for further consideration by the SBE:

1. Leave the rule as is, but modify the guidelines to more clearly convey the SBE's intent; in particular, the relationship of a dynamic, planning process to the underlying guiding principles and core tenets of CORE 24.

Rationale: The guidelines provide "soft" direction (what would be "ideal") without prescribing it, providing local districts with maximum flexibility. At a previous MHSD meeting, the possibility of altering the second paragraph of the guidelines was discussed; no decision was made.⁶ Since that meeting, changes in the SBE's math requirement (e.g., the election process for the third credit) and CORE 24 have emerged. Both assume that the HSBP is a dynamic part of a student's education.

⁵ July 2008

⁶ Previous modification discussed by the MHSD Work Group in May 2008: ~~Ideally, Students shall write their plan in eighth or ninth grade and then continue to revise it throughout high school to accommodate changing interests or goals. Students should be encouraged to~~ *shall* include the following elements in their plan:

Caveat: Any prescription for the requirement to begin in eighth grade is not currently within the SBE's authority; however, guidelines that suggest the requirement begin in eighth grade are fine. The SBE can revise guidelines more easily than rules.

2. Reiterate the importance of funding for a comprehensive education and career guidance system, as expressed in the SBE's July 2008 approval of the CORE 24 Graduation Requirements Framework.

Rationale: The SBE's graduation requirements actions to date, and the ideas emerging from the CORE 24 Implementation Task Force, reinforce the need for a robust comprehensive and guidance system.

Caveat: The Quality Education Council, in its discussion of the prototypical school funding model, will be considering the importance of a variety of factors, including school staffing of guidance counselors, so there may be some urgency to weighing in on this issue sooner rather than later.

3. The SBE may want to seek authority for middle school preparation essential for students to enter high school prepared to meet graduation requirements.

Rationale: The SBE recognizes that a student's best chance to meet more rigorous high school graduation requirements is to enter high school prepared for high school level work. Yet the SBE currently cannot prescribe the opportunity to plan and prepare (through the HBSP), nor does it have any way of directly impacting middle school preparation.

Caveat: The SBE may want to consider a study of middle school interventions likely to increase high school success before asking for legislative authority.