



Washington State Graduates: Course-Taking Patterns and School District Size

Education leaders and policy makers have debated about the benefits of having many small districts or to consolidate and have fewer, but larger districts. Some argue larger districts can provide students with more diverse course options; others argue smaller districts may be able to provide more personalized classes for students that may be more tailored to their specific interests.

The Washington State Board of Education (SBE) is revising high school graduation requirements to better prepare students for career, postsecondary education, and citizenship. The proposed Core 24 graduation requirements framework, approved in July 2008 with implementation contingent on funding, is more rigorous than current Washington State graduation requirements, and in some content areas, equivalent to or more rigorous than the minimum college admission standards set by the Washington Higher Education Coordinating (HEC) Board. Table 1 summarizes graduation requirements, including notation about course levels, for each plan.

Prior to proposing new requirements, the SBE commissioned a transcript study. Researchers from The BERC Group examined course-taking patterns for 14,875 students who graduated in 2008 from 100 schools in 100 districts across Washington. This research brief, with an emphasis on district size, is one in a series of research briefs. More information about the study can be obtained at http://www.sbe.wa.gov/documents/SBETranscriptStudy2008_FINAL.pdf.

This study was conducted to provide a baseline of information that would inform the SBE's graduation requirements initiative. The proposed Core 24 requirements were not in place for the class of 2008, and students were not trying to meet these requirements.

For the purposes of this study the following delineations were used to categorize school district size:

- Small School District: < 700 students
- Medium School District: 700-3,000 students
- Large School District: > 3,000 students

Table 1.
Credits Required or Proposed for High School Graduation and Required for 2008 WA Public Four-year College Admission

Subject	2008 State Minimum Graduation Reqs.	2008 HEC Board Reqs.	Core 24 Default Reqs.
English	3	4*	4*
Math	2	3**	3**
Science	2***	2***	3
Social Studies	2.5	3	3
Arts	1	1	2
World Language	0	2****	2****
Career Concentration	1	0	3
Health & Fitness	2	0	2
Electives	5.5	0	2
Total	19	15	24

*Including 3 credits of literature

**Algebra I, II, and geometry or Integrated Mathematics I, II, III

*** Including at least 1 credit of laboratory science (2 labs in 2010)

****Including 2 credits of the same world language

Note: The Core 24 default college and career ready requirements align with the Higher Education Coordinating Board minimum college admissions requirements. Some students may choose an alternative Core 24 pathway.

Districts around the state vary widely in the number of credits required for high school graduation. The majority of districts require 22 credits, with a statewide mean of 24.5 (SBE database, 2008). Larger districts, which serve the majority of students, tend to require fewer credits. According to the State Board of

Education’s database of district graduation requirements (2008), 125 districts require fewer than 24 credits, and 121 districts require 24 or more credits.

The percentages of students meeting HEC Board and Core 24 default college and career ready requirements are similar for students attending small and medium districts (see Figure 1). However, large school districts had a higher percentage of students meeting HEC Board requirements, but a lower percentage meeting Core 24 default requirements compared to small and medium school districts.

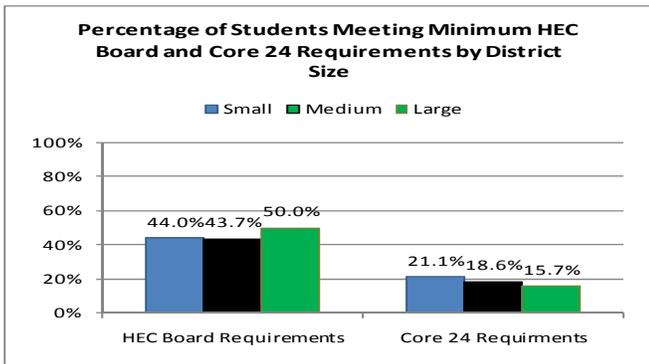


Figure 1. Percentage of Students Meeting Minimum HEC Board and Core 24 Default College And Career Ready Requirements by Size of District

Examination of district size and students meeting HEC board requirements by subject area revealed some differences. Large school districts had a higher percentage of students meeting HEC Board requirements in math and world language, with fewer students meeting HEC Board requirements in English and social studies (see Figure 2).

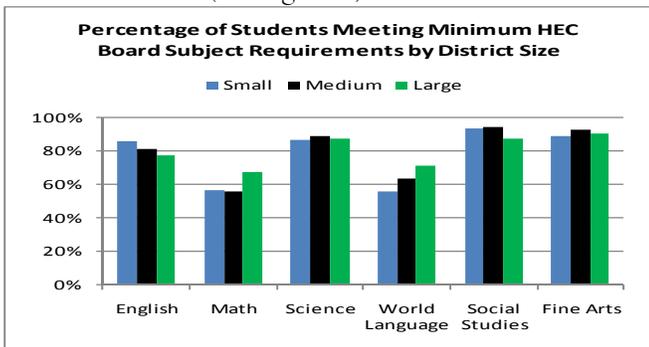


Figure 2. Percentage of Students Meeting Minimum HEC Board Requirements in Each Subject by Size of District

Among the subjects were the proposed Core 24 default requirements differ from HEC Board requirements, small districts had a substantially higher percentage of students meeting the career concentration requirements

(see Figure 3). Smaller differences were evident in other subject areas.

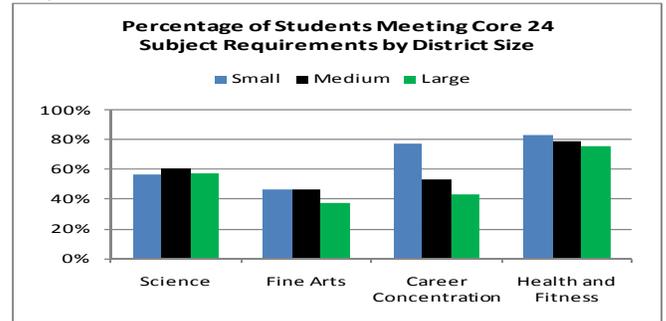


Figure 3. Percentage of Students Meeting Minimum HEC Board and Core 24 Default College and Career Ready Requirements by Size of District

Note. Although the SBE’s definition of career concentration is more broad than occupational education and career and technical education (CTE), only occupational education and career and technical education (CTE) courses were analyzed to address the career concentration requirement.

Large districts had an advantage over small and medium districts in the percentage of students meeting HEC Board requirements in math and world language. It is noteworthy that a greater percentage of students from large districts took math or world language prior to the 9th grade compared to students in small or medium districts (see Table 2). Further, more students in large districts took at least one AP/IB course, and more students from medium and large districts took at least one Running Start course (see Table 3).

Table 2. Percent Earning Credits in Middle School

	Math	World Language
Small Districts	18.5%	0%
Medium Districts	21.2%	0.7%
Large Districts	27.7%	8.1%

Table 3. Percent Earning AP/IB and Running Start Credits

	AP/IB	Running Start
Small Districts	26.8%	6.0%
Medium Districts	28.9%	14.4%
Large Districts	37.0%	13.2%

Findings suggest that district size has a small impact on meeting HEC Board and Core 24 default college and career ready graduation requirements. More students in larger districts met HEC Board requirements, while more students in small and medium districts met Core 24 default requirements.

References:
SBE database.(2008) <http://www.sbe.wa.gov/documents/Copy%20of%20Graduation%20Requirements%20Database%202010.xl>

