

State Board of Education
Discussion Paper
Proposed State High School Graduation Requirements

Since 1999 the State Board has required school district high school graduation policies to include: course completion and grades, a culminating project, proficiency as determined by the district in the state standards not assessed by the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) and proficiency in reading, writing and mathematics on the PSSA or local assessments that are aligned with the PSSA and state standards. The Board believes this policy must be revised to establish a consistent statewide baseline expectation of the minimum knowledge and skills that a public high school diploma signifies.

In building upon the Board's existing Chapter 4 high school graduation requirements the Board proposes to expand and refine the options available to school districts to determine whether students are proficient in reading, writing and mathematics. In addition, the Board proposes to expand the subjects in which students must demonstrate proficiency through state or local assessments to include science and social studies. The Board believes that knowledge science and the social studies are essential in preparing students for their post-high school endeavors including their role as engaged citizens.

The Board believes that establishing a statewide baseline for high school graduate achievement in reading, writing and mathematics is essential for their post high school success. In respect to Pennsylvania's tradition of local control the Board proposes to provide school districts with additional options to determine whether its students attain the state established level proficiency in reading, writing, mathematics, science and the social studies. In addition to the existing PSSA, the Board proposes to permit the continued use of local assessments. However, to assure local assessments are aligned to state standards and proficiency levels, should districts choose this option, they must have the assessments validated through an independent review. In addition, the Department would administer Graduation Competency Assessments (GCAs), which could replace the traditional end of course final exams. They offer an additional option for students to demonstrate proficiency in the core academic subjects. Finally, districts would also be permitted to determine student proficiency through use of Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) exams in the subjects assessed by GCAs as an additional pathway to document student proficiency.

The Board would keep in place its existing Chapter 4 provision that a student with disabilities who satisfactorily completes a special education program developed by an Individualized Education Program team under IDEA be granted and issued a regular high school diploma by the school district of residence. In addition, the Board would require that students with disabilities and those who are English language learners be provided appropriate accommodations following state guidelines when taking state or local assessments.

A total of ten GCAs would be developed: three in mathematics, two in language arts, three in the social studies and two in science. The math GCAs would cover academic content traditionally included in Algebra I, Algebra II and Geometry. The language arts GCAs would cover academic content traditionally included in English composition and literature. The social studies GCAs would cover academic content traditionally included in American History, World History and Civics and Government. The science GCAs would cover academic content traditionally included in Biology and Chemistry.

To be deemed proficient for purposes of graduation through the series of GCAs (in lieu of the PSSA, local assessments or AP/IB), students will need to demonstrate proficiency on both the English composition and literature GCAs, any two mathematics GCAs, either science GCA and one of the social studies GCAs.

GCAs would be offered at least three times each year, at the end of the traditional Fall, Spring and Summer semesters. They would be scored so that schools would have the results for graduating seniors at least 10 days prior to graduation. GCAs would be composed of modules containing course related content to permit a student who fails to achieve proficiency on the GCA to retake only those modules in which they were not successful. This will permit the student and school to focus remediation efforts at the course material in which the student was not successful.

School districts could use any combination of assessment instruments (PSSA, GCAs, local assessments and AP/IB) to determine whether students are proficient in each discipline. Students only need to demonstrate proficiency on one type of assessment in each discipline in order to be deemed proficient for purposes of high school graduation.

The Board believes that diplomas awarded by Pennsylvania's public high schools must provide every student an opportunity for success.

The Board will consider further revisions to these ideas as it continues its review of state high school graduation policies.

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