### APRIL 11, 2017

### Graduation Debate Moves to Legislature after School Board Votes on Alternatives

The State Board of Education officially asked lawmakers Tuesday for the authority to temporarily add new options for students to earn a diploma next year in response to warnings of a potential graduation crisis.  
  
Board members spent hours in committee and full session debating how quickly they needed to act and how specific to be in their recommendations to the General Assembly. By mid-afternoon, they agreed to adopt a resolution asking lawmakers to "take into consideration the specific recommendations" from a workgroup that recently submitted two proposals, and to give board members authority to "develop alternative pathways to graduation" for the class of 2018.   
  
That resolution passed 16-3, with dissenting votes from Board President Tess Elshoff and members Charlotte McGuire and Kara Morgan. Voting in favor were Vice President Nancy Hollister and board members Pat Bruns, Stephanie Dodd, Joe Farmer, Cathye Flory, Sarah Fowler, Linda Haycock, Meryl Johnson, Laura Kohler, Martha Manchester, Kathleen McGervey, Antoinette Miranda, Nick Owens, Eric Poklar, Lisa Woods and Rebecca Vazquez-Skillings.  
  
Final recommendations presented Tuesday by Superintendent Paolo DeMaria, slightly expanded from those discussed at the workgroup's last meeting, give students two new pathways to earning a high school diploma.   
  
The first option requires students to take all required high school courses; take all required end-of-course exams and retake once any math or English exams on which they scored only one point; and meet two of the following eight conditions:   
  
- Senior-year attendance rate of 93 percent  
- 2.5 senior year GPA, based on taking at least four full-year courses or the equivalent  
- Completion of a senior capstone project, as defined by the local district  
- Completion of 120 hours of work experience or community service, as defined by the district  
- Earning three or more credit in a College Credit Plus course  
- Successful completion of an Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) and earning a score on the related exam that's sufficient to earn college credit  
- Scoring at least at Level 3 on three sections of the WorkKeys exam, for nine total points  
- Earning an industry recognized credential or group of credentials approved by the State Board of Education worth at least three points.   
  
The workgroup discussed the first six of those eight conditions at its final meeting, and added the last two before final submission of DeMaria's official recommendation to the board.   
  
A second option, specific to career-technical students, would grant a diploma for those who achieve the following:

- Complete all required high school courses  
- Take all required end-of-course exams  
- Successfully complete a career-technical training program approved by the Ohio Department of Education that includes at least four vocational-technical courses   
- Achieve at least one of the following: a score of proficient or better on the average performance across all end-of-course tests or test modules (WebXams) for the career-tech program; earn an industry recognized credential or group of credentials approved by the State Board of Education and worth at least 12 points; or show successful workplace participation agreed to by the student, school and employer/supervisor, documented with records or 250 hours of experience and evidence of written positive evaluations from the employer and school  
  
Under the current system, students can graduate by achieving one of the following:

- Earning 18 points across seven end-of-course exams, each of which is worth a maximum of five points  
- Achieving a "remediation free" score on the SAT or ACT  
- Earning an industry recognized credential or group of credentials and pass the WorkKeys job skills assessment  
  
Local school officials have been warning the board that too many members of the class of 2018 are not on pace to graduate under the current standards. DeMaria and his staff presented data to the board in late 2016 showing about 30 percent of students are at risk of not graduating on time based on end-of-course exam scores. However, he cautioned that those figures don't tell the whole story, since statistics on testing re-takes, alternative AP and IB assessments and college entrance exams weren't yet available, and schools have the opportunity to intervene and give additional support to those students at risk.   
  
The board started discussions Tuesday in the Achievement and Graduation Requirements Committee with a recommendation from DeMaria to support a resolution seeking broad authority from lawmakers to develop two additional graduation pathways "based on assessment results and/or other student accomplishments as deemed appropriate" by the board. He urged the board to act quickly to balance the time constraints of the legislative process with board members' need to further understand and refine the alternative pathways.   
  
Sen. Peggy Lehner (R-Kettering), however, quickly objected to such a broad grant of authority.   
  
"I'm a little concerned about that, because basically what you're doing is asking the Legislature to authorize you to change the pathways without knowing what those pathways are, and I think that's full of lots of risks. I have a feeling the Legislature's going to say we need to know what they're going to do, or you'll maybe have  the Legislature coming back and sort of dictating something that does not reflect the work of the workgroup," said Lehner, who chairs the Senate Education Committee. "My feeling is you would be ahead of the game if the board were to recommend a specific pathway ... and ask the Legislature to enact that."   
  
DeMaria said he was hesitant to seek codification of detailed pathways, noting many nuances of the existing three graduation pathways were left to the board to develop.   
  
"I think it's entirely possible you could get back from the Legislature a change in the number of end-of-course exams and things that could blow up this entire process," Lehner responded. "It would be my recommendation you be as specific as possible."  
  
On a motion from Bruns, the committee adopted a resolution approving the workgroup recommendations and urging lawmakers to give the board authority to enact them. But over the lunch break, a handful of board members drafted new language seeking to bridge the difference between those urging greater specificity and those urging less. However, that new language, offered as an amendment by Fowler in the full board debate, also sought extension of the alternatives to the class of 2019, sparking more discussion.  
  
Dodd said educators in her district tell her the same problems facing the class of 2018 are likely to reappear for the class of 2019. But Rep. Andrew Brenner (R-Powell), who chairs the House Education Committee, said anything addressing classes beyond 2018 is unlikely to get traction in the General Assembly. Johnson also urged the resolution address only 2018, saying the board needs to see how the system works before making changes for other classes. On a motion from Flory, the board amended Fowler's proposal to remove references to the class of 2019.