

Decision Brief: Require Capstone Project

Background

The Glossary of Education Reform describes a capstone project as “a multifaceted assignment that serves as culminating academic and intellectual experienced for students...” A capstone project is a process in which students pursue independent research on a question of their choice, engage in research, analytical skills, and develop a final product that reflects their understanding or conclusions about the topic.

Proposal for Consideration

As the Board develops a Profile of a Graduate, it is asked to consider requiring students to complete a Capstone Project sometime during the high school years. The project would include one opportunity for the application of the 5 C’s – creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, communication and citizenship.

Explanation

Capstone projects are designed to encourage critical thinking, problem solving, and the development of communication, research, and collaboration skills. Many times these projects require students to engage with community or society issues, encouraging them to become more involved citizens.

Advantages of Action

- Students get to choose a topic in which they have some competence, based on their academic work, experience, or exploration of future career options.
- The project provides an opportunity to apply academic concepts and contributes to personal skill development, such as self-regulation, time-management, and organization skills as students are often given the end goal and have to devise their own process and timeline for completing the project.
- This requirement would more closely mirror assignments students will receive in college and career.

Considerations

- Capstone projects must be well designed and monitored by staff to ensure quality according to standards or these projects can be viewed as a “waste of time or resources”.
- Capacity among school staff should be considered.

Legislation/SOL Innovations Committee Recommendations to Consider

In its Fall 2015 Report, the SOL Innovations Committee recommended that “*the Board of Education and Virginia Department of Education should undertake the redesign of the current high school model, so that students spend the early high school years developing core skill sets, and the later years following one of several alternative paths toward college and career readiness (e.g. internships/apprenticeships, early college, career readiness, certifications, a student portfolio that demonstrates mastery of essential skills). This will require options for relevant college and career readiness assessments that may serve in place of requirements in the current system. As mentioned in [previous] recommendation, this will also require the revision*

of graduation requirements and replacement and/or elimination of certain end-of-course assessments while still providing options for students.”

Stakeholder Summary

- Students from Wakefield High School and Dr. Patrick K. Murphy, Superintendent, Arlington County Public Schools shared their Senior Projects and positive learning experience that every student is required to complete during their senior year. The Senior Project experience is also offered to seniors at Washington-Lee and Yorktown High Schools in Arlington County.
- Currently, a consortium of nine divisions, Cumberland County, Fairfax County, Henry County, Albemarle County, Loudon County, Frederick County, Shenandoah County, Chesterfield County, and Virginia Beach City, in partnership with EdLeader 21 and VDOE have received a grant to work on Student-Led Assessments. This work will have students create a portfolio of learning that will support them in setting goals for future learning by preparing an Exhibition of Learning. Students from Oakton High School, Fairfax County, are currently doing this work which culminates in a high school capstone project.
- Stakeholders have generally been supportive of problem-based learning and experiential learning opportunities, such as a capstone project. Principals noted that capstone projects are an opportunity to integrate multiple content areas and demonstrate outcomes of learning. While the concept is supported, educators noted challenges related to this proposal such as time in students’ schedules, and capacity of staff to monitor and assess the projects.

Actions from other States

Both Georgia and North Carolina require a capstone project to be completed for graduation. Elements of the project include a research paper, portfolio, and a student presentation. Many states, like California, lack a statewide requirement, but a capstone project is required by some localities. Washington graduation requirements included a capstone project from 2008 to 2014, but that requirement was eliminated as of 2015 via state legislation.

NEXT STEP

- Accept for Immediate Inclusion (First Review in June)
- Approve, but Not Ready for the Initial Phase
- Reject