

Decision Brief: One Diploma vs. Two Diplomas

Background

Currently, Virginia offers two traditional diplomas – the Standard and Advanced Studies. The *Standards of Accreditation* (SOA) identify the requirements for students to earn a diploma. The Standard Diploma requires 22 Standard Units of Credit and six (6) Verified Credits. The requirements for an Advanced Studies Diploma are 26 Standard Units of Credit and nine (9) Verified Credits.

Current data reveal several outcomes of the existing system of diploma requirements that need to be addressed. For the Advanced Studies Diploma:

- 70 percent of graduates enroll in a four year institution immediately after high school, but only 37.9 percent have completed a bachelor’s degree in four years.
- Almost 1 in 5 (18 percent) graduates are enrolled in a developmental English course

For the Standard Diploma:

- Most graduates complete mathematics requirements by the end of Grade 10 and take no additional mathematics courses during high school
- Most complete their science requirements by completing year-long courses in Earth Science and Biology. Few enroll in any Chemistry, Physics, or Computer Science courses.

The Board’s Accountability Committee has received a “strawman” Virginia Diploma which maintains rigor, provides flexibility in earning credits and course sequencing and selection, and includes verified competencies, some which may be earned by meeting local criteria approved according to Board guidelines. Verified competencies would include independent study, work sample portfolios, demonstrated performance, community service, internships, or other approved locally developed performance assessments.

Proposal for Consideration

As the Board proposes amendments to the graduation requirements, it is asked to consider one Virginia Diploma, which is a merger of the current Standard and Advanced Studies diplomas.

Explanation

The Virginia Diploma maintains the current traditional academic rigor for students planning to attend two- or four- year post-graduation programs while providing flexibility in the program of studies for students to pursue career interests. As originally presented in the Virginia Diploma, students would need to earn 25 standard credits and five verified competencies. Every student would be required to earn four standard credits each in English, math, lab sciences, and social sciences in addition to two standard credits of health and physical education.

Students who demonstrate exemplary performance, academic excellence, and/or outstanding achievement will be recognized by one or more of the following awards: Governor’s Seal, Board of Education Seal, Career and Technical Education Seal, Board of Education’s Seal of Advanced Mathematics and Technology, Board of Education’s Seal for Excellence in Civics Education, or Board of Education’s Seal of Biliteracy. If the two diplomas are merged, the Board will add a Board of Education’s Advanced Studies Seal.

Advantages of Action

The proposed recommended requirements in the Virginia Diploma address outcomes by:

- Requiring ALL students to maintain course content engagement in mathematics, science, English and history/social studies for all four years of high school
- Better aligning high school coursework with college entrance expectations for both two- and four-year institutions, as well as developing more applied options for students who will be entering the workforce by way of certification programs and credentials

- Maintaining the option of the current traditional program of studies for students seeking immediate enrollment at four- year institution of higher education
- Refining options for students seeking immediate entrance to a two- year school or workforce employment
- Adding competencies to graduation expectations to broaden the Profile and better ensure college and career readiness beyond academic expectations alone
- Providing flexibility in how standard credits in the academic content areas may be earned

Considerations

- The proposed recommended requirements in the Virginia Diploma may create concerns and challenges by requiring ALL students to earn four standard credits in each of the core areas of English, mathematics, laboratory sciences, and history & social sciences. Local division staff may “assume” that each credit requires a separate course, as is the case currently.

Legislation/SOL Innovations Committee Recommendations to Consider

Legislation approved by the 2016 General Assembly and Governor ([HB 895](#) Greason) removes existing provisions related to standard and advanced studies diplomas and standard and verified units of credit and requires the Board of Education to develop and implement a Profile of a Virginia Graduate that identifies the knowledge and skills that students should attain in order to be successful contributors to the economy (consideration of 5 Cs), emphasize the development of core skill sets in the early years of high school, and establish multiple paths toward college and career readiness.

In its Fall 2015 Report, the SOL Innovations Committee noted “*High school graduation requirements should be adjusted as needed to conform to the new expectations identified in this Profile. High schools should be redesigned so that students move from attaining core knowledge and skills in the early years to one of several alternative paths toward college and career readiness.*” Further the committee indicated “*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. Finally, these changes will also have an impact on the structure of high school and will require flexibility in order to promote innovative course development, effective professional development for high school teachers, additional support and guidance for students, and ongoing partnerships with the business community and higher education institutions.*”

Stakeholder Summary

- Several stakeholders are concerned about requiring every student to earn four credits in each core content area. Stakeholders from the Governor’s STEM Academies, High School Innovation Grants, and CTE Centers were concerned that these requirements may mean less time in the high school program of studies for students to engage in project based learning, hands on laboratory work, or internships experiences.
- Most educators expressed support for the move from two diplomas to one diploma.
- Parents generally expressed support for one diploma, although they noted some parents may oppose the elimination of the Advanced Diploma (especially parents of gifted students). Parents noted the meaning is not in the diploma name itself, but in the students’ transcripts.

Actions in other States

Nationally, forty-two states have one diploma, seven have two diplomas, and one has three diplomas. Several of the states which have one diploma offer diploma recognitions, distinctions, or pathways.

NEXT STEP

<input type="checkbox"/> Accept for Immediate Inclusion (First Review in June) <input type="checkbox"/> Approve, but Not Ready for the Initial Phase <input type="checkbox"/> Reject
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