

Colorado High School Graduation Guidelines

Adopted by the State Board of Education
May 2013

Introduction

In 2007, the General Assembly adopted H.B. 07-1118 that set forth a process for developing statewide high school graduation guidelines that local boards of education must meet or exceed. Pursuant to the legislation, the Graduation Guidelines Council was formed to develop recommendations for the State Board to consider. The Council presented their initial recommendations to the State Board in 2008, focusing on the need for clearer, more rigorous standards at every grade level. In 2008, the General Assembly adopted comprehensive legislation calling for an aligned system of standards and assessments from preschool through postsecondary education. The timelines for the adoption of high school graduation guidelines were extended to May 2013 to allow time for this new system of standards and assessments to be developed.

In June 2012, a reconstituted Graduation Guidelines Council, comprised of original council members and additional members to ensure representation of desired areas outlined in law, convened to build on the recommendations of the original council. The council met monthly to develop recommendations for the State Board of Education's consideration. More than 40 meetings were held across the state with interested constituents. Data from other states and relevant research/studies informed the work of the council.

Structure of the Proposed High School Graduation Guidelines

The proposed High School Graduation Guidelines are organized into four sections:

- 1) **Purpose** – This section provides the goals of the guidelines and clarifies the statutory requirements for adoption and local implementation.
- 2) **Guiding Beliefs** – This section articulates the principles that formed the basis of the graduation guidelines.
- 3) **Local Board Responsibilities** – This section lists the responsibilities of local boards of education in developing their high school graduation policies.
- 4) **Ongoing State Board of Education Responsibilities** – This section outlines the responsibilities of the State Board of Education to support the implementation of the guidelines.

The Appendix provides the context and background information on the development of these guidelines.

Purpose of the Colorado High School Graduation Guidelines

The purpose of these high school graduation guidelines is twofold: 1) to articulate Colorado's shared beliefs about the value and meaning of a high school diploma; and 2) to outline the minimum components, expectations and responsibilities of local districts and the state to support students in attaining their high school diploma.

State statute (section 22-2-106) requires the State Board of Education to adopt by May 2013 a comprehensive set of guidelines used by each school district board of education in establishing local high school graduation requirements. Local school boards may use their own locally developed high school graduation requirements so long as they "meet or exceed" any minimum standards or core competencies/skills adopted by the State Board. The law outlines several considerations that the State Board must take into account when adopting a set of guidelines, including:

- alignment with the description of postsecondary and workforce readiness;
- alignment with the postsecondary academic admission standards for public four-year institutions;
- recognition of multiple and diverse pathways to a diploma;
- articulation through a standards-based education system;
- attainment of skills necessary to succeed in the 21st century; and
- importance of academic and career planning.

In addition, the guidelines articulate minimum competency levels in math, English, science, and social studies for entrance to workforce, armed forces, and postsecondary education.

What once was a common belief in tiered performance expectations based on post-high school interests, has become, in a modern information dependent society, a new and higher belief in the need for a "floor" of competency regardless of future work interests. Students who acquire these common competencies ought to see the benefits of higher academic achievement while in high school and be ready to apply these the day after graduation regardless of initial pathway choices.

A primary incentive for our students to want to earn a Colorado high school diploma depends a lot on its meaningfulness to the real market. When the diploma represents readiness for entrance into college or careers, its value improves. Students exert their best efforts to prove these complex skills when their self-interests are met.

Guiding Beliefs of Colorado's High School Graduation Guidelines

- To be meaningful, a high school diploma should guarantee that students are: 1) prepared to enter credit-bearing courses in postsecondary education institutions; 2) prepared academically to enter military career training; and 3) prepared to be productive entry-level employees in the workforce.
- The Colorado high school diploma should signal proof of competency of the K-12 academic standards, rather than merely completion of seat-time requirements.
- Postsecondary and workforce readiness requires content knowledge, the ability to apply content and skills in a problem solving context, and long-term planning.
- All students deserve the opportunity to engage in rigorous high school programs of study designed to prepare them for entry into postsecondary education, the military, and the workforce.
- Students and their families should know as early as elementary school the requirements for successful high school graduation. They should know how their decisions regarding coursework impact their future education opportunities and career goals.
- In preparing students for successful graduation, learning is the constant. Time is the variable. Students should be allowed to engage in and take the time needed to master rigorous content. Some students may need more time; others less.
- Expectations should remain high for all students, regardless of their post high school plans. Colorado has clearly articulated an expectation that all students graduate ready for postsecondary AND the workforce. Students not going to college face equally challenging skill and knowledge requirements for successful entry into the workforce. All students should be prepared at high levels to thrive as engaged and productive citizens in a dynamic global economy.
- Students and their families are full and equal partners in meeting these diploma expectations. Students have the responsibility to understand how rigorous coursework and experiences in which they participate prepare them for entrance to college, the armed forces and the workforce. The depth of a student's learning in elementary, middle and high school has a direct relationship to higher quality opportunities and income later.

Local Board of Education Responsibilities

Each local school district's board of education retains the authority to develop its own high school graduation requirements, so long as those local high school graduation requirements meet or exceed any minimum standards or basic core competencies or skills identified by the Colorado State Board of Education based on skills students will need to be successful after graduation.

The requirements for earning a Colorado high school diploma must be aligned with current entrance requirements for postsecondary education, military, and the workforce. Evidence that a student is ready for these post high school experiences includes eligibility for credit bearing college courses, proven academic workforce skills, and academic qualifications preferred for leadership careers in the armed forces. The following define local school board responsibilities in developing high school graduation policies.

1. Local district high school graduation policies must state the minimum academic competencies needed for students to demonstrate postsecondary and workforce readiness and the types of measures that the district is using to determine such attainment. For the entering 9th graders in 2014 districts may use the state's Minimum College and Career Ready Determinations as guideposts in setting those competencies (see chart below). For the entering sixth graders of 2014, districts must meet or exceed the state's Minimum College and Career Ready Determinations. These options and their respective thresholds will be refined as new state assessments, industry certifications, and district capstone experiences are clarified.

Minimum Colorado College and Career Ready Determinations Established by the Colorado State Board of Education

The state's minimum College and Career Ready Determinations for English, math, science and social studies are set to match proficiency levels on the state assessment, higher education's cut scores for placement in credit bearing classes, industry certificates, and the military's cut scores for academic consideration for preferred career training. They are designed to be of approximate comparable rigor and will be refined, improved, and added to over time.

Students must demonstrate competency in each content area using any one of the items in the competency demonstration menu for that content area. Students wishing to attend four-year postsecondary institutions will also need to meet the entrance requirements for their institutions of interest.

Competency Demonstration:	English	Math	Science	Social Studies
TCAP (2013-14 only)	663	627		
State Test (2013-14 onward)			TBD	TBD
PARCC (2014-15 onward)	4 or higher	4 or higher		
ACT¹	18	19	TBD	
SAT¹	430	460		

International Baccalaureate	3 or higher	3 or higher	3 or higher	3 or higher
Advanced Placement	3 or higher	3 or higher	3 or higher	3 or higher
Verified District Capstone² (Start 2015-16)	TBD	TBD	TBD	TBD
Concurrent Enrollment College Course	C- or higher	C- or higher	C- or higher	C- or higher
ASVAB (military) preferred AFQT score for career level jobs	50	50		
Select, Earned Industry Certificate	Awarded (Depending on the certificate, may qualify as interdisciplinary proofs; list of eligible certificates will be developed in 2013-14)			
Additional State Board Approved Demonstrations of Student Competency	Additions will be made as advances in competency demonstrations become more standardized			

¹ Recognized for entrance into postsecondary institutions.

² The Council is recommending this option with conditional criteria. As with the other measures or methods on the menu, these capstone projects must be proven as: valid, comparable in rigor to the other choices, standardized in their administration, free from outside assistance, credibly judged by a third party and aligned to the standards. Specific rubrics for district use in each subject area will be created and verified among and between high school educators and pertinent, subject-specific industry and college advisors.

- The local district has the authority to add measures of competency in other subject areas (such as world language, music, art, etc.) to serve as minimum criteria for graduation.
- In 2013-14, the state will administer new science and social studies assessments. Readiness determinations for science and social studies will then be set in collaboration with the Colorado Department of Higher Education.
- In 2014-15, the state will administer the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessments in English language arts and mathematics. These will replace the TCAP exams.
- Note that the ACT, SAT, AP, IB, and college credit determinations are set at the spring 2013 thresholds for “no need for remediation” as outlined in the Colorado Commission on Higher Education’s Admission Remediation Policy. These thresholds are under review. Updated thresholds are expected in the fall of 2013.
- While no single competency demonstration in the above menu fully measures the new academic K-12 standards, the determinations begin the transition to a competency-based system. While not identical instruments, the menu of competency determinations shares thresholds of approximately comparable levels of rigor.
- Local districts have the authority to adapt the determinations of competencies to accommodate students with exceptionalities (i.e., students with disabilities and students who are gifted and talented).

2. Local district high school graduation requirements must include student demonstrations of 21st Century skills in addition to the attainment of the minimum academic competencies. The skills include critical thinking and reasoning, information literacy, collaboration, self-direction, and

invention. These skills are embedded in the Colorado Academic Standards. As a result, students' successful completion of coursework and/or other learning experiences aligned to the Colorado Academic Standards may provide one method for students to demonstrate 21st Century skills. Student engagement in and completion of extracurricular activities, service learning experiences, capstone projects, and other student demonstrations may also serve as demonstrations of 21st Century skills.

3. Local district high school graduation requirements must include successful completion of the Individual Career and Academic Plan, known as the ICAP. Required by state statute for every ninth through twelfth grade student (or in the years required for a student to graduate), the ICAP is designed to assist a student and his or her parent or legal guardian in exploring the postsecondary career and educational opportunities available to the student, aligning course work and curriculum, applying to postsecondary education institutions, securing financial aid, and ultimately entering the workforce. ICAP attributes can be found at [http://www.cde.state.co.us/secondaryinitiatives/downloads/ICAP/ICAPitemsmatrix2011\(final\).pdf](http://www.cde.state.co.us/secondaryinitiatives/downloads/ICAP/ICAPitemsmatrix2011(final).pdf).
4. Local district high school graduation policies must allow students multiple, equally rigorous and valued ways to demonstrate competency of the knowledge and skills necessary for postsecondary education and meaningful careers. Districts are encouraged to benchmark their programs of study off of the Colorado Commission on Higher Education's Higher Education Admissions Requirements.
5. Local districts may permit students longer or shorter time to earn their diploma.
6. Local school district high school graduation requirements must align with the postsecondary and workforce readiness definition and description adopted by the State Board of Education and the Colorado Commission on Higher Education in 2009. This description is at <http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdegen/downloads/PWRdescription.pdf>.
7. Local school district high school graduation requirements must align with the Colorado Academic Standards, Colorado English Language Proficiency Standards, and the Colorado Career and Technical education standards. The standards can found at <http://www.cde.state.co.us/StandardsAndInstruction/ColoradoStandards.asp>, <http://www.cde.state.co.us/CoEngLangProf/StateStandards.asp>, and at <http://www.cde.state.co.us/contentareas/CareerandTechnicalEd.asp>.
8. Local district graduation policies should recognize and acknowledge the importance of education in world languages, comprehensive health, physical education, music, dance, performing arts, visual arts, and career and technical education in strengthening student learning in other subjects and in supporting students' ability to succeed in the 21st Century.
9. Beginning no later than the sixth grade, districts must provide information to students and their families about the requirements for high school graduation and successful entry into college and careers. It is recommended that districts also share with each student their academic readiness for graduation beginning in elementary school. Such information might take the form of current grade level proficiency in math and reading, attendance rate and forms of a student's active participation in their own learning.

Colorado State Board of Education Ongoing Responsibilities

The Colorado State Board of Education is responsible for establishing, maintaining, and updating Colorado's High School Graduation Guidelines and for providing information to districts and the public on students' college and career readiness. Specific ongoing duties of the State Board are outlined below.

1. The Colorado State Board of Education will refine and update the Colorado College and Career Ready Determinations over time. At a minimum, the determinations should articulate the academic competency levels for high school graduates in English language arts (reading, writing, and communicating), mathematics, social studies, and science. The State Board will adjust the current competency levels and add or remove standardized measures on the menu as proof methods improve and as the post high school sectors refine their expectations.
2. The Colorado State Board of Education and Colorado Department of Education will annually provide indicators of college and career readiness in order to help parents, schools, districts and local board members prepare students for life after high school. The data will also help school boards and district/school leaders refine and enhance their graduation requirements and policies to better assure and support students' college and career readiness. Such locally-specific and disaggregated data should include, but not be limited to:
 - Number of students reaching Colorado College and Career Ready Determination levels
 - Student proficiency rates on elementary, middle and high school state summative assessments
 - ACT scores trends
 - Trends for college readiness assessments
 - Concurrent enrollment
 - Advanced placement enrollment rate
 - Graduation rates and dropout rates
 - College remediation rates
 - Later Colorado college-going degree completion rates
 - Number of students scoring above 50 on ASVAB assessments (officer training eligibility)
 - Applicable workforce data, as available
3. The State Board of Education will examine ways to augment the state's accountability system to include more measures that signal that students are graduating postsecondary and workforce ready. Bonus accountability points to schools and districts reaching specified readiness thresholds might include:
 - Increases in the number of students earning a 3 or higher on the Advanced Placement and/or International Baccalaureate exams
 - Increases in the number of students successfully participating in concurrent enrollment courses and college credit courses
 - Increases in the number of student earning career and technical education certificates
 - Increases in the number of students earning endorsed diplomas
 - Decreases in the number of students requiring remediation in college
 - Increases in the number of students scoring above 50 on ASVAB assessments (officer training eligibility)
 - Decreases in the number of students requiring retraining in the workforce (as available)

4. The State Board of Education will work with the Colorado Commission of Higher Education, the Department of Defense and the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment to monitor entrance competencies, inform the revision of college remediation policy, quantify workforce benchmarks, and contribute to the college and career readiness cut point thresholds on future multi-state tests for students across the country.
5. The State Board of Education may make available examples of possible demonstrations of 21st Century skills that local school boards may use as reference when determining required demonstrations.
6. The State Board of Education will make available examples of ICAP attributes that local school boards may use as reference when determining ICAP completion. ICAP attributes can be found at [http://www.cde.state.co.us/secondaryinitiatives/downloads/ICAP/ICAPitemsmatrix2011\(final\).pdf](http://www.cde.state.co.us/secondaryinitiatives/downloads/ICAP/ICAPitemsmatrix2011(final).pdf)
7. The State Board will consider a way to establish with the Colorado Commission of Higher Education a model high school transcript which effectively captures high school competency and not merely seat time or course credit evidence.

Appendix

Context for this Policy

Colorado's Department of Education, with the Colorado Graduation Guidelines Advisory Council, has carefully considered Colorado's current and future high school graduation results and their long term implications for our students' college and career success. This includes analyzing state, district and individual Colorado high school student results over time and tracking Colorado college performance of these individuals after graduation.

Research about other state high school graduation policies and participation in cross-state discussions on competency-based approaches informed our observations. More than 40 meetings with interested Colorado educators and constituents also occurred to solicit feedback and shape the development of a coherent recommendation about successful high school graduation.

Observations That Inform Us

1. What we have learned in working with partners in higher education, defense, and labor is **that minimum requirements for college, military, and career completion success are higher than what many of our high school students are meeting**. Expectations for our high school students are rising, thus more rigorous graduation guidelines are necessary for our students to be competitive in college and careers.

When pressed to describe this, each sector shares three common needs of a basic high school graduate: information knowledgeable, problem solving oriented and able to assess the "big picture" with others in order to get the job done.

In fact, basic academic entrance requirements, once tiered depending on job complexity, are now almost indistinguishable among sectors in a modern time which requires overall more math, literacy and critical thinking expertise. Technical work, agriculture, and small businesses require people to know more and to solve complex problems. The armed forces, now a sophisticated tactical technology enterprise, have raised minimum academic cut scores for enlisted personnel on track for preferred career jobs to thresholds of effort which are approximately correlated to a 17 on the ACT. They cannot afford the costs of significant retraining.

Current admission requirements for students to enter a Colorado college ready to take credit bearing classes (i.e., not needing remediation) are an ACT score no lower than an 18 English, 19 Mathematics, 470 on the SAT, C minus on a college credit bearing course or the earning of an industry certificate. **Currently, more than a third of our 11th graders cannot meet minimum academic entrance requirements for career level military, or for "remediation free" college.** <http://www.cde.state.co.us/SecondaryInitiatives/GraduationGuidelines.htm>

The Colorado Workforce Development Council is beginning this year to benchmark its 14 key industry sectors by what is academically required for employment consideration.

2. Nearly all states have high school graduation policies, and yet, national high school graduation rates average about 75%. Colorado's on-time graduation rate has been rising and is 75.4%. <http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdereval/gradcurrent.htm>
3. 75.4% of our high school seniors graduate with a diploma in four years. The rate rises to 78.5% when students are given two more high school years. 48% of these Colorado high school graduates will enroll in two or four year Colorado colleges and, of these who enroll, 40% will need remediation. <http://highered.colorado.gov/i3/Statewide.aspx>
4. Recent Colorado Department of Education and Department of Higher Education research shows Colorado high school graduates who persisted in obtaining a two year Colorado college diploma had actually averaged no less than a **22** on their high school ACT test and when in a four year degree program, no less than a **24** ACT. The 22 and 24 scores are higher than what the average Colorado junior scores each year which is now a **21**. Students who entered Colorado two year colleges but did not persist had an actual **18** average on the ACT; four year college dropouts had an actual **22** average ACT score. See more at <http://www.cde.state.co.us/SecondaryInitiatives/GraduationGuidelines.htm>.
5. Only 33% of all Colorado high school graduates who attend two or four year Colorado colleges (which is typically about half of the Colorado graduating class and regardless of their need for remediation) will complete Colorado college in four years. <http://www.cde.state.co.us/SecondaryInitiatives/GraduationGuidelines.htm>

Why Is This Happening?

High School

High school credit on a student transcript is awarded based on a "credit hour" system. The hypothesis has been that by attending class, "enough" academic content will be obtained. A diploma is granted in Colorado by a local district and is traditionally given for the number of credits accrued. Each district (all 178) sets its own graduation requirements. College and military entrance, athletic eligibility, school funding, school and district accreditation and common employment terms reinforce this model. Has this proposition produced high school graduates which employers need and college and technical schools require?

Unfortunately, the data suggests that the credit-based systems work for some but not enough of our students. Far too many students are leaving high school having taken classes but are not functionally knowing and applying the information and skills at levels needed to be ready for success in postsecondary education or the workforce.

Also, despite quality counseling and teacher messages, students are not necessarily taking the most rigorous classes or realizing the connection between the choices they make today and future opportunities.

Before High School

Local educators and state policy leaders tell us what Colorado Department of Education (CDE) and Colorado Department of Higher Education (DHE) research also indicates: successful high school

completion requires proficiency at each of the early and middle grades. Making sense of the new high school academic standards in class without the benefit of foundational proficiency in prior years was never intended and attempts to “catch up” students are difficult and not typically successful.

CDE/DHE longitudinal data show 75% of Colorado 6th grade students who are **below** proficient on CSAP/TCAP will later need remediation in their first year of college. (On average, half of the students needing college remediation do not complete a college degree.) Read more at <http://www.cde.state.co.us/Communications/download/FactSheets/LatestFindingsfromColoradoStudentData.pdf>.

If proficient or above on CSAP/TCAP, **86%** of sixth graders will not need remediation in their first year of college and for these students more than **73%** will complete a Colorado college degree. Districts have these long term data down to the individual student regarding historical 6th grade CSAP/TCAP scores, past and current ACT scores and, now, remediation rates to determine success of their high school graduates once in Colorado colleges.

The lesson emerging about high school graduation success is grounded here: most students who can get to grade level in elementary and middle school stay “on track” and are often “no remediation needed” eligible for college, military careers or the workforce.

A comprehensive high school graduation policy must recognize that preparation for successful exit from the system begins in elementary school.

The Endorsed Diploma

Recently, all 11 public Colorado institutions of higher education governing boards approved the criteria for an Endorsed Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness High School Diploma. The criteria outline the minimum academic qualifications for admission to and eligibility for (subject to additional institutional review of other admission and placement qualifications) placement into credit-bearing courses at all open, modified open, or moderately selective public institutions of higher education in Colorado, as well as priority consideration for admission into Colorado’s selective and highly selective institutions. To view the adopted criteria document go to http://www.cde.state.co.us/SecondaryInitiatives/PWR_Endorsed.htm.

The criteria are based on four readiness indicators:

1. Student is college ready in math and English language arts.
 - As evidenced by satisfying Higher Education’s Admissions Requirements and demonstrating no need for remediation on college placement or comparable exams
2. Student completes the Individual Career and Academic Plan (ICAP).
 - As evidenced by the creation and maintenance of an ICAP
3. Student demonstrates 21st Century skills.
 - As evidenced by completion of coursework and extracurricular experiences that demonstrate competency in: information literacy, invention, collaboration, critical thinking, and self-direction
4. Student demonstrates mastery of academic content in three content areas.
 - As evidenced by completion of coursework and maintenance of specified grade point average and other mastery demonstrations in three of the following areas: 1) reading, writing, and communicating; 2) mathematics; 3) social and behavioral sciences; 4)

natural and physical sciences; 5) world languages; 6) arts and humanities; and 7) career and technical education.

The specific criteria have been reviewed by business and community leaders and frequent feedback has been that considering the modern expectations within any sector these might well serve as terms for a general education diploma. While these thresholds may not work for all students, the message was clear that these components and the expectations of accomplishment are becoming necessary in both college and career settings.

The endorsed diploma is both a college and a career ready signal for accelerated advancement. The endorsed diploma was created not to honor and identify academically elite student, but to offer a very realistic stretch expectation with benefit to the majority of our students.
