



Miami-Dade County Public Schools

giving our students the world

INFORMATION CAPSULE

Research Services

Vol. 0701
December 2007

Christie Blazer, Supervisor
Dale Romanik, Director

DIFFERENTIATED DIPLOMA PATHWAYS

At A Glance

School districts across the nation have sought alternatives to the “one size fits all” standard high school diploma to address the individual differences presented by high school students of today. Districts are considering differentiated diploma options that recognize different levels of achievement above and below the district’s standard graduation requirements. This Information Capsule reviews the advantages and disadvantages of these alternative diplomas and also reviews M-DCPS current diploma options.

Introduction

Since the early 1980’s many have questioned whether the nation’s high schools could prepare students adequately for successful participation in a global economy. Organizations such as the American Diploma Project (ADP), an initiative sponsored by Achieve, Inc. in cooperation with the Education Trust and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, have conducted research studies of the nation’s employers, college professors, and recent high school graduates. As a result of this survey research, ADP has concluded that American high schools were not preparing students for success in college nor the world of work (February 2005).

This concern coupled with the increased graduation requirements and the establishment of high stakes testing programs as a result of the No Child Left Behind legislation, has led districts across the nation to experience low passing rates, particularly among Black and Hispanic students as well as for disabled or exceptional education students (Margolis 2003). The realization that many students would not be able to achieve what has practically become a birthright in the United States, (i.e., attaining a high school diploma), forced districts to reexamine the types of diplomas awarded to graduating seniors.

Many school districts have developed multiple diploma options to deal with the wide range of individual differences displayed by high school students. The “one size fits all” standard high school diploma no longer accounts for the heterogeneity of skill levels or interests found among high school students of today. Providing incentives to high achieving students is also a priority. Therefore, the notion of differentiated diploma pathways was initiated to address the broad skill sets of students attending high school in the twenty-first century.

Research Services

Assessment, Research, and Data Analysis

1500 Biscayne Boulevard, Suite 225, Miami, Florida 33132

(305) 995-7503 Fax (305) 995-7521

Differentiated Diploma Pathways

School districts around the country are considering differentiated diploma pathways that recognize particular levels of achievement above or below the district's standard graduation requirements. Differentiated diplomas are usually based on coursework and grade point average, but student performance on state graduation tests is increasingly being used to determine the level of diploma awarded (National Association of State Boards of Education, 2004; Conley & Venezia, 2003).

Advantages of differentiated diploma pathways include:

- Differentiated diplomas offer more accurate documentation to colleges and universities and to potential employers about a student's academic record and skills.
 - Differentiated diplomas motivate students to take more academically rigorous classes.
 - Higher-level diploma options are often based on students' performance on graduation exams, which represent a more uniform measure of students' academic abilities. Coursework and grade point average are less standardized measures of students' performance.
 - Differentiated diplomas recognize that students have different learning styles and skill levels that may not be aligned with typical graduation requirements.
 - Differentiated diplomas keep the highest and lowest achieving students motivated. Higher performing students receive recognition for attaining academic achievement above and beyond the minimum graduation requirements. Lower performing students receive an acknowledgment of their academic perseverance.
 - Differentiated diplomas insure that more students will receive a diploma than would be the case with a single set of criteria which could lead to fewer dropouts.
- Differentiated diplomas recognize that students with disabilities may be working toward achieving different standards than other students.

Challenges of differentiated diploma pathways include:

- If diplomas are differentiated based on graduation exams, it is unfair to permanently label students based on their test performance, rather than their 12 years of academic work.
- Differentiated diplomas may discourage students from staying in school if they either fail or barely pass the graduation exam or haven't taken advanced level courses because they know they will be ineligible to receive a higher-level diploma.
- If diplomas are differentiated based on graduation exams, attaching diploma endorsements to performance on these tests only increases the stakes of already high-stakes tests.
- Differentiated diplomas contradict the principle that all students be held to the same high standards.
- Employers and colleges may not recognize differentiated diplomas as being anything other than "local diplomas," with the added graduation requirements merely becoming additional hurdles for students to navigate.
- There is minimal research affirming the efficacy or value of differentiated diplomas and their affect on student achievement, employment, or participation in postsecondary education.
- It is difficult to explain the meaning and requirements of different types of diplomas to parents, students, and others.

Following are some of the points that should be considered by school districts when implementing differentiated diploma pathways:

- Policymakers must decide how many levels of differentiation should be included in the program. The more specialized diplomas become, the more confusing they are to the general public.

- Policymakers will also have to include an additional level of differentiation: a “certificate of attendance” for students who have passed the requisite number of courses but have not met the other graduation requirements (such as grade point average or passing score on the graduation examination). Proponents of the certificate of attendance maintain that it offers an incentive for lower-performing students to stay in school because they receive some recognition for their efforts. Critics of certificates of attendance contend that they have no educational value and only add to the confusion over differentiated diplomas.
- Policymakers must decide what criteria on which to base the different levels of diplomas. Specifically, they must decide if coursework, grade point average, and/or graduation tests will be used to determine the level of diploma awarded. The current national trend is to award standard diplomas based on both coursework and grade point averages, with performance on state graduation tests being used to award diplomas with honors.
- New re-test policies will be needed for students who originally pass the graduation exam but opt to retake it so they can receive a higher-level diploma.
- School districts that have alternative graduation standards for students with disabilities will have to determine how special education requirements align with the differentiated diploma pathways.
- Procedures should be implemented to evaluate the technical adequacy of the various types of diplomas and to track their effectiveness and consequences for students.
- Policymakers should involve employers and postsecondary institutions in discussions and development of various diploma options.
- Self-fulfilling prophecies, such that identifying or categorizing students at an early age and placing them into programs that may lower academic expectations based on their perceived achievement levels, should be avoided.

- Determine at the outset how to deal with students changing diploma options midstream.
- Each type of diploma should be operationally defined and communicated clearly to stakeholders.

According to the Education Commission of the States (2007), a number of states award advanced high school diplomas to students who complete additional coursework, take certain tests, achieve high test scores, and/or graduate with a minimum grade point average. This achievement is recognized by a higher level diploma or an endorsement, seal, or stamp on the student’s diploma or transcript. As of February 2007, 21 states offered or planned to offer an honors or college preparatory diploma or endorsement. This number does not include the District of Columbia, two additional states that allow local districts the option of offering a more advanced diploma (Oklahoma and West Virginia), or two states that offer a college preparatory course of studies that is the default alternative to a technical prep diploma (North Carolina and Tennessee).

Walcott and Makkonen (2005) reported that alternative options can include Diploma Endorsements and Career-Technical Diplomas. Diploma Endorsements recognize the mastery of a particular skill or participation in specific school activities. Career-Technical Diplomas inform prospective employers that students have completed a series of career-related life skill and academic courses. These diplomas are preferred to certificates of attendance since they are tied to successful course completion. Such diplomas would need to be based on clear and specific industry standards.

On A Local Note

Diploma options currently available to students graduating from Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS) high schools include:

- Standard High School Diploma. This diploma is awarded to students who have met all the requirements to graduate, based on a 24-credit graduation option.
- Differentiated Diploma. These diplomas include the Superintendent’s Diploma of Distinction, International Baccalaureate, and Advanced

International Certificate of Education. These diplomas are awarded, in addition to the standard diploma, to students who have exceeded the prescribed minimum requirements.

- Certificate of Completion. Students who have completed the minimum number of credits and district-specified courses but who are unable to satisfy the other requirements for a standard high school diploma (including passing the Grade 10 FCAT or earning a 2.0 grade point average) are awarded a certificate of completion. Students who meet all of the requirements for a standard high school diploma except earning passing scores on the Grade 10 FCAT are eligible to receive the Common Placement Test (CPT) - Eligible Certificate of Completion.

- Special Diploma. This diploma is awarded to students who have been identified with special needs and whose Individual Educational Plan indicates this diploma option.

The Florida Legislature has mandated a new diploma option beginning in the 2007-08 school year. School districts will be required to issue a standard diploma that includes a notation of distinguished honors if a student demonstrates superior academic achievement on the Grade 10 FCAT, as determined by the Commissioner of Education.

In addition to the above types of existing diplomas, M-DCPS is currently exploring differentiated diploma pathways.

All reports distributed by Research Services can be accessed at <http://drs.dadeschools.net> by selecting "Research Briefs" or "Information Capsules" under the "Current Publications" menu.

References

- American Diploma Project. (2005). *Rising to the Challenge: Are High School Graduates Prepared for College and Work?* Achieve, Inc., February 2005.
- Conley, D.T., & Venezia, A. (2003). *High School Transitions: State of the Art and View of the Future*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL.
- Education Commission of the States. (2007). *State Notes: Honors/College Prep Diploma or Endorsement*. Retrieved from <http://mb2.ecs.org/reports/Report.aspx?id=736>.
- Margolis, L. S. (2003). *High-Stakes Testing, Diploma Options, and Students with Disabilities: Negotiating the Quagmire of Politics, Policy, Rhetoric, Law, and Emotion*. National Association of Protection and Advocacy Systems, December 2003.
- National Association of State Boards of Education. (2004). Tiered Diplomas. *Policy Update*, 12(15). Retrieved from http://www.nasbe.org/new_resources_section/policy_updates/PU_Tiered_Diplomas_12.04.pdf.
- Walcott, C. & Makkonen, R. (2005). *High School Reform*. WestEd, San Francisco, California, June 2005.