

Proposal for a Revised Rhode Island Diploma System: Overview and Frequently Asked Questions

The following questions were posed by participants in the Community Conversations on the Rhode Island diploma system, which took place from March 22nd through March 28th. Answers are based on the most up to date proposals discussed with the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education; the Council has not yet approved the proposal for a revised diploma system.

Please direct any questions or comments regarding this document to secondary@ride.ri.gov.

Overview of the Proposed Diploma System

- **Diploma:** Students are eligible to earn a diploma at the completion of their high school experience if they meet the following two requirements, in addition to any local diploma criteria:
 - A minimum of **20 courses**, including **four courses in English Language Arts (ELA), four courses in math, three courses in history/ social studies, and three courses in science**. Students must successfully complete each required course, according to local criteria.
 - At least **one performance-based diploma assessment**, which may include a portfolio, exhibition, or other capstone product. Successful completion of the diploma assessment would include demonstration of proficiency in applied learning skills (e.g. communication, collaboration, critical thinking) and the applicable content standards.
- **Optional Commissioner's Seal:** As an enhancement to the diploma, students may choose from a menu of assessment options to demonstrate numeracy and literacy skills consistent with a statewide comparable standard. These options may include assessments such as the ACT, AP exams, select industry-based credentials, PARCC, select dual-enrollment courses, PSAT, or SAT.
- **Optional Pathway Endorsement:** As an enhancement to the diploma, students may choose to pursue the study of a topic of interest to them by completing a series of courses or learning experiences that relate to the topic area, including at least one advanced course or experiential learning opportunity. Students would also need to align their performance-based diploma assessment with their topic of interest to earn an endorsement. Possible Pathway Endorsements could include Business & Industry, Public Service, STEM, Arts, and Global Humanities.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Where can I find updated information on the proposed diploma system?

Updates on the proposed diploma system, the approval process, and associated documents are posted on the Rhode Island Department of Education website at this link: www.ride.ri.gov/DiplomaSystem

2. How does the proposed diploma system change what's already in place?

The proposed diploma system adds additional flexibility for how students fulfill their course requirements, reduces the number of performance-based diploma assessments to one, and removes the state requirement for achieving a particular score on a standardized test for the class of 2021 and beyond. The proposed changes also include a mechanism for students to be recognized for achieving proficiency in literacy and mathematics through a Commissioner's Seal and for completing an in-depth study of a topic of interest through a Pathway Endorsement.

3. Will students need to pass a standardized test to earn a diploma?

Page 1 - Questions and answers in this document are developed as of 4.26.16 and are subject to change.

No, students will not need to earn a specific minimum score on a standardized test to earn a diploma, unless the local school district adds such a requirement, which it is authorized to do.

4. Will students still be required to take standardized tests in high school?

Students will be expected to participate in the state testing program, as required by federal law, but they will not need to achieve a minimum score on the state test in order to earn a diploma, unless doing so is locally required. If their state test score qualifies, students could use this score to earn a Commissioner's Seal. Students may also earn a Commissioner's Seal through any of the other assessment options included in the approved assessment menu, which is yet to be determined.

5. Secondary regulations, diploma system, diploma requirements – can you explain the difference?

The secondary school regulations include a wide range of topics regarding middle schools and high schools in Rhode Island. One topic in the regulations is the diploma system, which includes the requirements needed to earn a diploma and various other recognitions that a student may earn when graduating from high school. Other topics covered in the secondary school regulations include academic supports, expectations for assessing and improving literacy and numeracy, requirements for personalized learning environments, and professional development for educators.

6. How would the proposed diploma system become a reality?

The Council on Elementary and Secondary Education will first vote to approve the revised secondary school regulations for public hearings. The public will have 60 days to offer comments and feedback to the Council, and the Council will schedule several public hearings at various locations. Following the hearings, the Council may revise the regulations based on feedback and, lastly, vote for approval.

7. What if I want to suggest a change to the proposed diploma system?

You may send your comments to secondary@ride.ri.gov or write to the Council at Angela.Teixeira@ride.ri.gov at any time. The Council will also schedule public hearings before voting on the proposed diploma system. Information about those public hearings will be posted on the RIDE website.

8. When would the new diploma system go into effect?

The proposed diploma system would go into effect for the class of 2021, at the earliest. The class of 2021 is in 7th grade in the 2015-2016 school year.

9. How will colleges and employers understand what a student has accomplished if Rhode Island shifts the diploma system to include multiple components?

Rhode Island post-secondary education and business-community stakeholders have been involved in creating this version of the diploma system throughout the revision process. Once the final regulations are adopted by the Council, RIDE will work with leaders in both the post-secondary and business communities to ensure that we are communicating effectively about the new diploma system specifically to these stakeholders.

10. Will students be able to earn a diploma if it takes them more than four years to meet all of the requirements?

The state rules and regulations allow for any student to pursue a diploma over a period of more than four years, if necessary and appropriate.

11. How does the proposed diploma system help students with disabilities, students who struggle academically, or students who are academically at risk for any reason?

The proposed diploma system is designed with flexibility and local decision-making in mind to ensure that the needs of the local student body are met, while holding schools accountable for preparing students for post-secondary education and the workplace.

Schools and districts would be able to set the proficiency level students will be expected to demonstrate through their coursework, determine which courses can be used to fulfill state coursework requirements, and help students set their high school course of study according to student needs and interests. To ensure local discretion in the awarding of diplomas, the proposal does not include a requirement that students demonstrate a state-defined minimum academic proficiency level on a standardized test. Students, including those who are pursuing a course of study based on modified standards, may earn a diploma based on locally established criteria.

Further, the secondary regulations would require that all students be followed closely by their schools to ensure that they are on a path to fulfill graduation requirements and to ensure that schools provide all students with the necessary supports to help them meet their academic and post-secondary goals. The optional Pathway Endorsement may help students who struggle with engagement to stay in school longer.

12. How will students who study world languages be recognized under the proposed diploma system?

Demonstrating literacy in two or more languages, which is the criteria for earning a “seal of bi-literacy,” is an accomplishment that would be recognized under the Pathway Endorsement structure.

13. How can we ensure that all students learn important 21st century or applied learning skills such as collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving?

The proposed diploma system continues and adds clarity to the requirement for all students to demonstrate proficiency in applied learning skills through their performance-based diploma assessment.

14. Is there enough flexibility for students to take all the required courses and still pursue a pathway?

The regulations allow for a number of flexibilities that local schools and districts will manage. The definition of a course is such that many different types of learning experiences can be used to fulfill the minimum 20-course requirement. Additionally, many courses that are specialized to address a pathway topic could also be used to fulfill the minimum core-content course requirements in ELA, math, history/social studies and science. The proposed diploma system does not require specific courses that must be used to fulfill the diploma requirements. Furthermore, the proposed regulations may allow some students to substitute two of their course requirements (other than ELA and not more than one substitution per content area) for a course that is more closely aligned with their pathway, as long as they adhere to formal approval process prescribed by the LEA.

15. Would students be able to earn credit for high-quality experiential learning programs outside of the school?

Whether a non-traditional learning experience can be used to earn credit toward course requirements will be a local decision based on a number of criteria. The proposed regulations set conditions for schools and districts to identify courses that include experiences outside of the traditional classroom setting for students to apply toward the required 20-course minimum, including the 14 core-content course requirements, or to earn an optional Pathway Endorsement. Earning credit for learning experiences is contingent upon the local determination that the content is of a scope and rigor appropriate for credit.

16. How are Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs included in the proposed diploma system?

There are several ways that the proposed diploma system celebrates and recognizes the accomplishments of students who complete high-quality CTE programming. The proposed diploma system includes an enhancement to the diploma called a Pathway Endorsement that would recognize CTE students' accomplishments in their program area. For example, students in a criminal justice CTE program might earn a "Public Service Endorsement" or a student in a manufacturing CTE program might earn a "Business and Industry Endorsement." Students may also apply state-approved CTE program courses toward the course requirements for a diploma.

17. Does the Pathway Endorsement require a student to choose a career early on in high school? Will students still be able to pursue a broad "liberal arts" high school course of study?

Some students enter high school with a strong interest in a specific subject area, while others discover this later on in high school or not until well after they have graduated. The Pathway Endorsement could be earned in all of these scenarios. Students would be able to start working toward a Pathway Endorsement at any time, or may choose not to pursue a pathway at all. We envision that the pathway work would serve as a complement to the general education curriculum and allow students to go as deeply as they wish in a particular subject matter by pursuing a number of related learning experiences. Students would be able to choose one or more pathways within career fields, academic subjects, or broad topics of inquiry.

18. What are the requirements to earn a Commissioner's Seal?

Under the proposed diploma system, students would need to demonstrate their math and literacy skills on one of a menu of assessments and earn a state-designated minimum score to earn the optional Commissioner's Seal. Assessment options could include standardized achievement tests such as PARCC, SAT, AP exams, or ACT. The menu may also include particular industry-recognized credentials or a particular minimum grade in a dual-enrollment course, provided that those experiences are aligned to a specified state standard for math and literacy. Students could also demonstrate their literacy and numeracy skills independently on two different assessment types (e.g., an AP English exam and the SAT math portion).

19. Is there a cap on how many students can earn a Commissioner’s Seal?

No, there is no proposal for a cap on the number of students who can earn a seal. Our state goal would be to encourage as many students as possible to earn this recognition, including school-based incentives through the accountability system. We are moving from a student-based testing requirement to a school-based accountability system. Among a variety of other metrics, we anticipate that schools will be held accountable for the percentage of their students who earn the Commissioner’s seal, which can be increased over time. We have not established details of the accountability system at this time.

20. Are students eligible for a Pathway Endorsement even if they are not seeking or eligible for the Commissioner’s Seal?

Under the current proposal, students could earn one or more Pathway Endorsements, with or without a Commissioner’s Seal. The Pathway Endorsement and Commissioner’s Seal are not conjunctive requirements and both are entirely optional. Either can be earned alone or in combination with the other.

21. How is a Pathway Endorsement or Commissioner’s Seal valuable prior to a student receiving a diploma at graduation?

These recognitions would be part of a student’s transcript as soon as the student has met the requirements. Similar to a diploma, they could also be represented as an expected recognition on a resume or application before they are earned. In this way, these recognitions would signal to colleges and employers that a student has achieved accomplishments beyond the diploma requirements.

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