

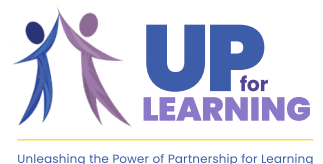
Youth Engagement & Feedback

on Vermont's Proposed Statewide Graduation Requirements



Report prepared for
the Vermont Agency of Education
by UP for Learning

May 22, 2026



About UP for Learning

UP for Learning's mission is to empower youth and adults to reimagine and transform education *together*. Through a coaching and facilitation process grounded in Youth-Adult Partnership and Youth Participatory Action Research, UP helps teams develop essential skills to address complex challenges. These skills include

using data to find common ground, practicing deep listening, amplifying unheard voices, and incorporating diverse perspectives to better understand issues.

UP for Learning fosters equitable, cross-generational relationships, where youth and adults share power, voice, and responsibility, resulting in increased equity, a sense of purpose, and lasting systemic change. UP for Learning's partnerships with school-based, district-wide, and regional teams empower youth to drive change in both their lives and communities.



UP for Learning's youth and adult staff worked with partners from the Vermont Agency of Education to plan and implement this work.

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Introduction and Context

In June 2025, the Vermont legislature passed Act 73, “an act relating to transforming Vermont’s education governance, quality, and finance systems,” which established a process for developing statewide graduation requirements. This represents a significant shift, as Vermont’s 119 school districts currently each set their own graduation requirements.

In December 2025, the Vermont Agency of Education submitted recommendations for new statewide graduation requirements to the Vermont State Board of Education, which is expected to finalize a decision by the end of 2026. The first students subject to the new statewide standards will be those in 8th grade during the 2026–2027 school year (the high school graduating class of 2031).

There are many constituencies with a stake in the proposed graduation requirements, and perhaps none more impacted than students. In Spring 2026, the Vermont Agency of Education partnered with Unleashing the Power of Partnership for Learning, Inc (UP for Learning) to gather student input, perspectives, and lived experiences related to the proposed requirements. Through collaborative facilitation with youth and organizational partners, UP for Learning designed and led meaningful data collection efforts that centered student voice in this important policy conversation.

Through this work, the youth-adult team at UP for Learning engaged more than 1,500 Vermont high school and CTE students in sharing feedback on the proposed graduation requirements, as well as their experiences working toward current graduation requirements. This report documents that effort, along with the key findings and recommendations that emerged from the process.

How to Read this Report

The students whose voices appear throughout this report are not policy experts, professional educators, administrators, or legislators. **Yet they are experts in something equally important: their own experience.** They know what it feels like to navigate graduation requirements, pursue future goals, encounter barriers, and engage—or disengage—in their learning. Their insights provide a unique and urgently needed perspective on how our educational system is experienced by those it is intended to serve: students.

This report is grounded in the belief that young people are not merely recipients of educational policy, but essential partners in shaping it. As you engage with this report, approach the student perspectives shared here with curiosity and humility. If a quote or idea challenges your thinking, consider what the student may be seeing or experiencing that is not visible from your vantage point. You may not agree with every recommendation, concern, or suggestion expressed in the following pages—and the students themselves do not speak with a single voice. Yet beneath their diverse perspectives lies a strong consensus about **the values they want reflected in the future of Vermont’s education system.** Their collective insights offer a powerful invitation to listen, reflect, and imagine what is possible when students are engaged as partners in educational transformation.

Methodology

To hear from a wide range of youth and develop a comprehensive understanding of student perspectives and experiences with graduation requirements, data was collected through two primary methods:

- High school and CTE-based student focus groups (which included both written and conversational activities, described below).
- A digital survey ([The Vermont Statewide Graduation Requirements Youth Input Survey](#)) for Vermont high school and CTE students.

A youth-adult team from UP for Learning collaborated with the project partners at the Agency of Education to brainstorm and refine the questions for the focus groups and the survey, with the goal of exploring the following research questions.

Research Questions

- What are students' perspectives on the proposed graduation requirements, as related to:
 - Relevance to post-secondary goals?
 - What do they value in the proposal?
 - What would they want to see changed?
 - What do they see as benefits and challenges for self and peers?
- What is students' awareness of and experiences with the current practices and resources in their setting, as related to topics such as current graduation requirements (attainability and supports), flexible pathways (options and access), and transferable skills?
- What people or resources do students identify as supporting them in meeting current graduation requirements? What supports do students think are needed for their setting?

By the Numbers



128 students
participated in
10 focus groups
conducted across Vermont
(5 at high schools, 4 at CTE centers,
1 virtual)



1,456
students completed
the statewide survey



35 Vermont
high schools and CTE
centers represented in
the survey

Focus Group Design and Facilitation

UP for Learning held ten focus groups with a total of 128 participants in April 2026. The dialogues were designed and facilitated in partnership by UP's Youth Interns and Youth Program Specialists. Each in-person event lasted ~90 minutes, and included several small-group structured activities to support participants in exploring the topics and expressing their thoughts. Each in-person event was facilitated by youth facilitators and at least one UP staff member was present to record notes. Staff members from the Agency of Education also attended each event, providing context and answering clarifying questions about the proposed graduation requirements.

Sites were selected based on school administrative interest, geographic diversity, and demographic representation. Five high schools and four CTE centers were chosen from across Vermont's regions to ensure broad geographic coverage. The virtual session was open to all of UP for Learning's and the Vermont Agency of Education's networks, and any high school

or CTE student was welcome to attend if they had not participated in an in-person session.

During the focus group conversations, students were asked to respond to questions about the Vermont Agency of Education's proposed credit requirements, as well as their current experiences with graduation requirements. This prompted an open discussion in which students shared their perspectives on the proposed changes, along with what is and is not working in their current school settings. Responses were recorded by UP staff, and students were informed that their input was being collected as part of a formal data-gathering process.



Along with the group discussions, students who attended the focus groups also participated in a Chalk Talk activity. Chalk Talks are a common data collection practice used by UP for Learning. This activity is a silent, interactive method for brainstorming and reflection. Chalk Talks are designed to promote equity of voices by ensuring that all participants can contribute simultaneously and that input is not dominated by the most vocal individuals.

In a Chalk Talk, large sheets of chart paper are posted around the room, each labeled with a discussion question. In this case, the questions focused on the proposed credit requirements, including their potential benefits and drawbacks, as well as the changes schools may need to implement to support them. Students rotated through the sheets, spending approximately 2–3 minutes reflecting on and responding to each question.

Focus group protocols, including the full set of questions, are included in Appendix A.

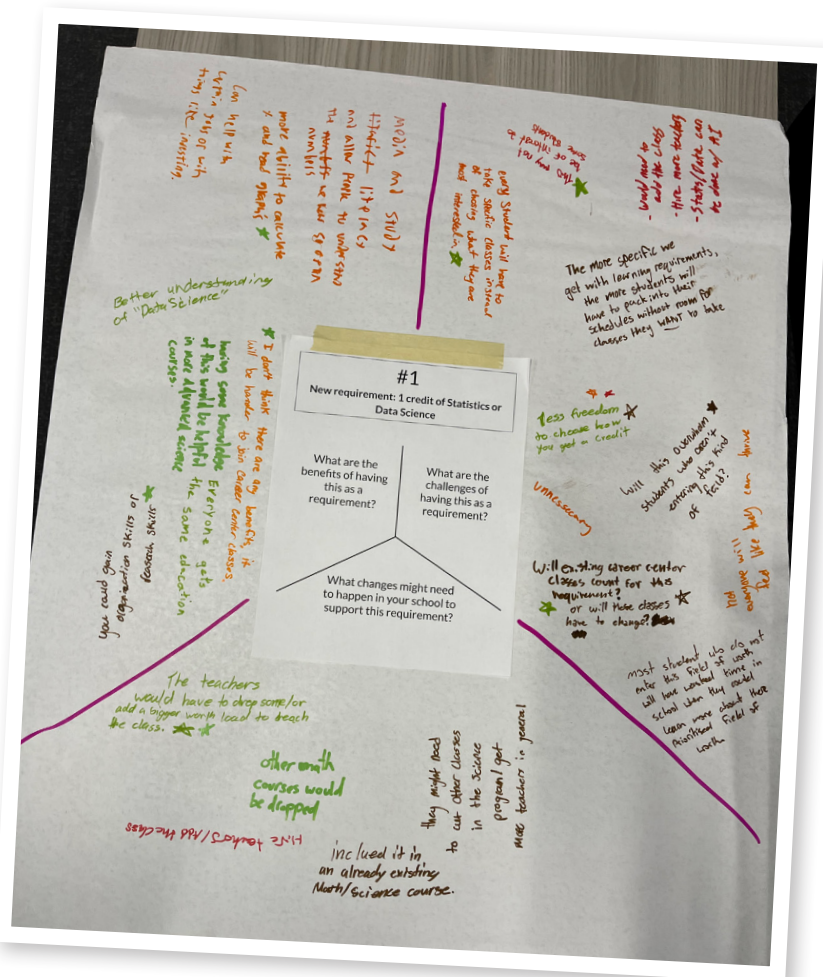
Survey Design and Distribution

The Vermont Statewide Graduation Requirements Youth Input Survey included 25 questions and was distributed to 9th–12th grade students in Vermont high schools and CTE centers. All questions for the survey, focus groups, and Chalk Talks were developed collaboratively by youth and adult staff at UP for Learning in partnership with the Vermont Agency of Education. The questions were designed to explore the proposed requirements, transferable skills, access to and experiences with flexible pathways, and personalized learning plans.

The survey was organized into three core sections aligned with the research areas. The first 12 items included scaled and open-response questions exploring students' current experiences with graduation requirements, flexible pathways, and transferable skills. The next five items asked respondents about their perspectives on specific elements of the proposed graduation requirements, including their relevance and interest, with a focus on changes that would affect many schools and districts, such as the World Language requirement, the additional Health Education requirement, Financial Literacy, and Data Science and Statistics requirements. The final seven items collected demographic information, including school, participation in a CTE program, postsecondary plans, race and ethnicity, grade level, and gender identity.

The survey questions are included in Appendix B.

A team of five youth and two adults from UP for Learning organized and analyzed the data collected through the dialogues and survey. In a series of collaborative meetings in May 2026, the team coded responses from the Chalk Talk and Circle Conversations and then grouped those codes to identify emergent themes. These themes were triangulated and supported by survey data. The team then organized the themes into four key findings presented in this report. Because student voice is central to this project, the findings are supported by direct quotes. These quotes reflect the broad range of student perspectives and experiences shared throughout the process.



Participants

Focus Group Participant Overview

A total of 128 students participated across 10 focus group sessions. Participants were asked to provide only limited demographic information, including school and grade level (see Charts 1 and 2 below). UP for Learning encouraged school staff to recruit a representative group of students for each focus group and provided resources to support the inclusion of students with diverse backgrounds and identities (Appendix C).

Chart 1

Focus Group Participants by Grade

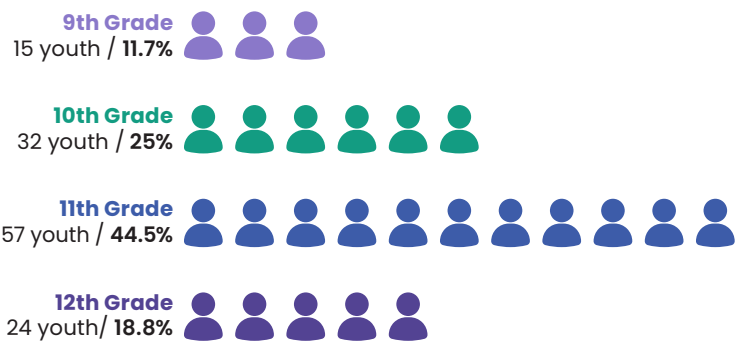
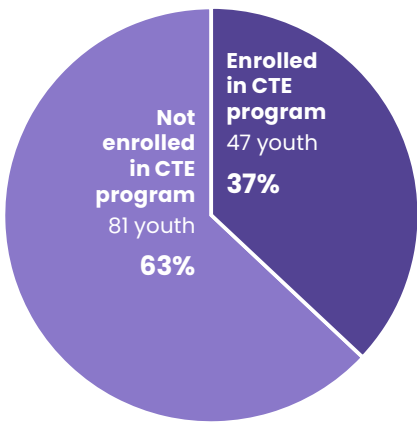


Chart 2

Focus Group Participants by CTE Enrollment



The participants in the 10 focus groups represented the following high schools: U-32, Middlebury Union, Vergennes Union, Mount Abraham Union, Brattleboro Union, North Country Union, Lake Region Union, Leland and Gray, Twin Valley, Lamoille Union, Essex High School, BFA Fairfax, Champlain Valley Union, Colchester, Mount Mansfield Union, and South Burlington.

In the 4 CTE focus groups, students attended the following CTE centers: Patricia A. Hannaford Career Center, North Country Career Center, Center for Technology Essex, and Windham Regional Career Center.

The CTE participants represented a range of programs, including: Sustainable Agriculture, Diesel, Human Services, Theater, EMS, Automotive, Natural Resource Management, Computer Programming and Graphic Design, Engineering, Building Trades, Business and Marketing, Transportation Science, Culinary, Childhood Education, Cosmetology, Architectural Design, and HVAC.

Survey Respondent Demographics

The survey was completed by 1,465 students in grades 9–12 across Vermont high schools. Students from 35 schools participated. For school-level analysis, only schools with more than 30 respondents were included (14 schools met this threshold).

Charts 3–7 present survey responses disaggregated by subgroups. With respect to grade level, race and ethnicity, and gender identity, survey participation appears to reflect a representative sample of Vermont’s student population. However, available data suggest the survey likely underrepresents students enrolled in CTE programs statewide. Additionally, it likely overrepresents students intending to pursue college after graduation. These responses have been disaggregated accordingly to support accurate and meaningful analysis.

Chart 3
Survey Responses by Grade

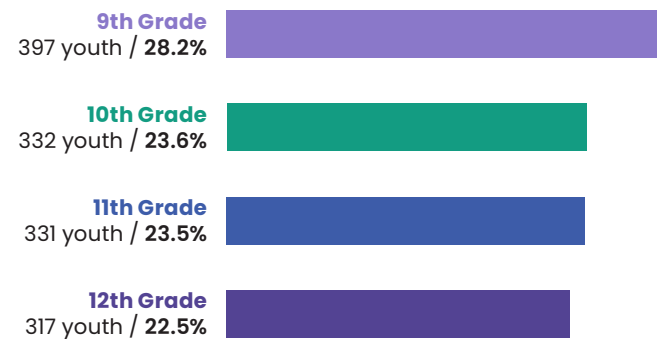


Chart 4
Survey Responses by Post-Secondary Plans

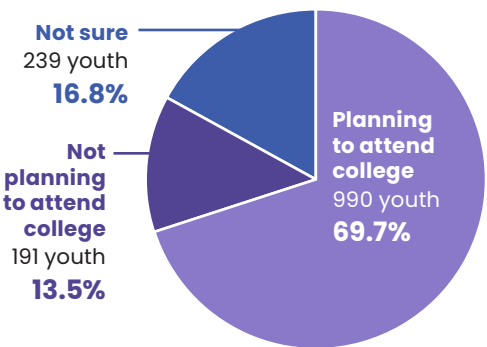
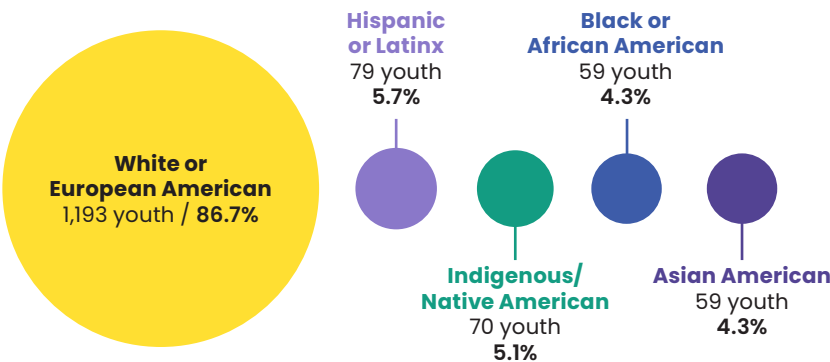


Chart 6
Survey Responses by Race & Ethnicity



Notes: Responses under 2% not listed. Percentage data adds to more than 100 because participants could select multiple options.

Chart 5
Survey Participants by CTE Enrollment

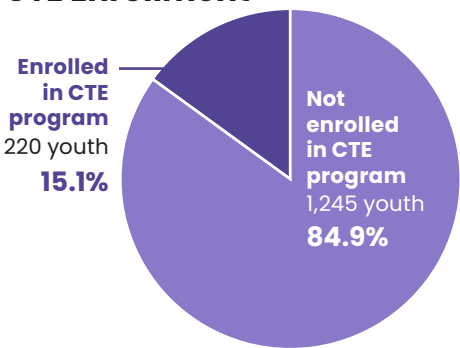
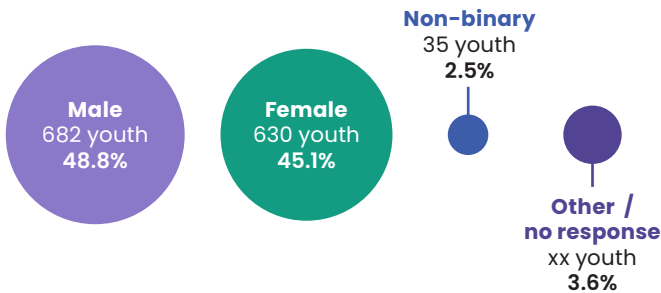
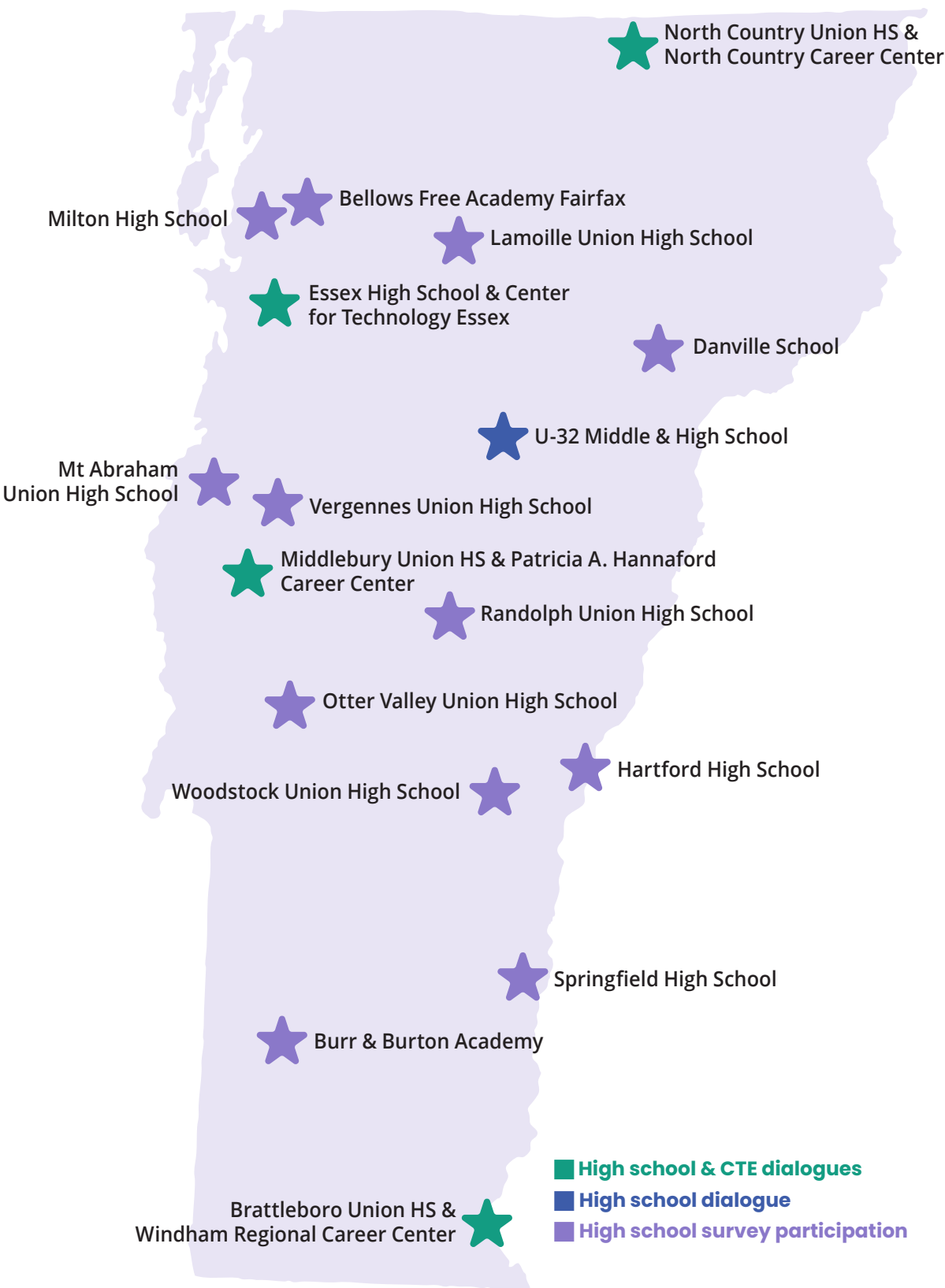


Chart 7
Survey Responses by Gender Identity



Location of Survey and Focus Group Participants



Findings

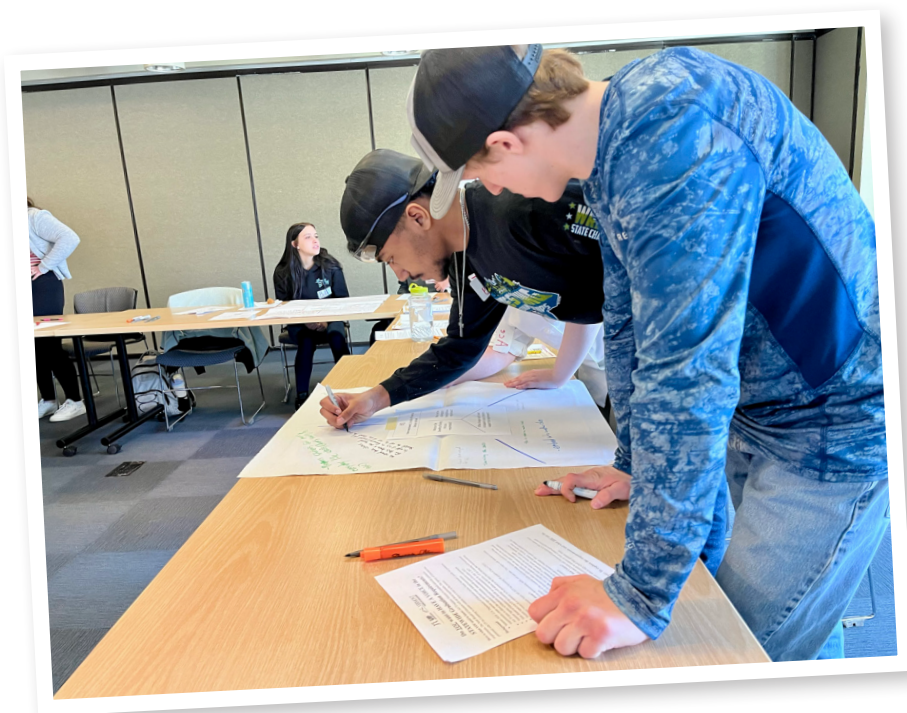
The findings below are organized around the observations and themes that emerged from the data analysis process. Because student voice is central to this project, the findings are supported by direct quotes that reflect the broad range of student perspectives and experiences shared throughout the project. Survey findings are also integrated throughout.

Students held varied opinions on the specific aspects of the proposed graduation requirements. However, across focus groups and survey responses, a consistent set of underlying values became clear. Those values provide an important context to understand the findings that follow, and help explain how students evaluated both the proposed requirements and their current educational experience.

The first section, titled “What Students Want Their Education to Be: The Values Behind the Findings,” highlights those values of relevance, choice and flexibility, inclusivity and accessibility, support and guidance, and preserving what makes schools unique. The remaining findings can largely be understood as students evaluating the proposed graduation requirements through these values.

Findings Overview:

- **What Students Want Their Education to Be: The Values Behind the Findings**
- **Finding #1:** Student Perspectives on Specific Elements of the Proposed Requirements
- **Finding #2:** Varying Student Experience with Graduation Requirements and Application to Personal Goals
- **Finding #3:** Student-identified System-level Barriers and Inequities in Graduation Requirements
- **Finding #4:** Students Desire Choice and Flexibility in Graduation Requirements to Suit their Learning Preferences



What Students Want Their Education to Be: The Values Behind the Findings

Students expressed a wide range of perspectives on the proposed graduation requirements. Some viewed the changes favorably, others raised concerns, and many noted that the proposed requirements are only marginally different from their current experiences, both in the number of credits required and the content areas emphasized. While opinions varied, students' feedback was grounded in a shared set of values that point to a common vision for what they want their educational experience to be, *regardless of the specific requirements*. Students care about graduation requirements, but even more importantly, they care about the conditions that make learning meaningful, manageable, engaging, and enjoyable.

The values that emerged through the focus groups and the survey responses are: relevance, choice and flexibility, inclusivity and accessibility, support and guidance, and preserving what makes schools unique.

Look for these icons to explore how each value emerged throughout the findings.



Relevance



Choice



Inclusivity



Support



Uniqueness



Students value learning that feels relevant to their future lives.

Students repeatedly emphasized the importance of connecting school to life after graduation, whether that path leads to college, a career, or another pursuit. This desire for future relevance was reflected in their calls for learning experiences that help them build practical life skills, achieve financial independence, maintain their health and well-being, and explore interests and passions beyond the classroom. Students want an education that not only prepares them for graduation, but also equips them to thrive in adulthood. As one student put it, *"I want to learn things that are going to boost me up in life after high school."*

The value of relevance emerged clearly throughout the findings:

- In students' reflections on the purpose of graduation requirements (Finding 2), many emphasized that requirements should prepare them for life beyond school, not simply fulfill academic expectations.
- In discussions of the Financial Literacy requirement (Finding 1e), students consistently expressed strong support because they viewed it as valuable and applicable regardless of their postsecondary pathway.
- In discussions of the Data Science and Statistics requirement (Finding 1f), students were more supportive when they could see clear real-world applications and more skeptical when they perceived the content as abstract or primarily focused on college preparation.
- In questions about the extent to which the proposed requirements are oriented toward college readiness (Finding 2b), students highlighted the need for pathways and learning experiences that are relevant to a broader range of futures.



Students value choice and flexibility in what they learn and how they learn it.

Choice and flexibility emerged as two of the strongest priorities expressed by students throughout the data collection process. While students generally understand and accept the need for graduation requirements, they do not want those requirements to limit opportunities to pursue their interests, strengths, and goals. Students consistently linked choice and flexibility to greater engagement, motivation, and enjoyment of school. This value was reflected in their desire for meaningful elective offerings, robust and accessible flexible pathways, and multiple ways to meet graduation requirements through learning experiences that align with their interests and aspirations. As one student explained, *"It would be really nice to have base requirements...but also more room and options for people to focus on what you are interested in."*

The values of choice and flexibility emerged clearly across multiple findings:

- In students' support for integrated, interdisciplinary, and innovative approaches to meeting graduation requirements that allow for greater personalization and relevance (Finding 4c).
- In students' cross-cutting concerns that graduation requirements can reduce opportunities to take electives and pursue areas of personal interest (Finding 1b).
- In the experiences shared by CTE students, who frequently described scheduling conflicts and limited flexibility in balancing the graduation requirements of their sending schools with the demands of their career and technical education programs (Finding 2a).
- In discussions of flexible pathways, where students consistently reported higher levels of engagement and motivation when they had greater ownership over what, how, and where they learned (Finding 4b).



Students value requirements and opportunities that are inclusive and designed to work for everyone.

Students frequently referenced differences in learning styles, abilities, identities, and responsibilities outside of school when discussing the proposed graduation requirements. Their perspectives on specific requirements were often shaped by concerns about how both current and proposed requirements may unintentionally create barriers for certain groups of students. At the same time, students recognized the potential for graduation requirements to advance equity and inclusion by ensuring that all students have access to meaningful learning opportunities and the support needed to succeed. One focus group participant noted, *"The purpose of statewide education standards is to minimize the already present achievement gap in our education system...They're meant to make you ready and able to enter the world, just as anybody of any other financial stature."*

The values of inclusivity and accessibility emerged clearly across multiple findings:

- In the recognition that a statewide approach to graduation requirements supports educational equity and opportunities (Finding 1a).
- In students' concerns about how graduation requirements affect students with IEPs, diverse learning needs, and varying levels of academic preparedness (Finding 3b).
- In concerns about staffing capacity and schools' ability to provide sufficient support under the proposed requirements, particularly in smaller and more rural communities across Vermont (Finding 3a).

- In feedback on Health Education, where students emphasized the importance of learning about neurodiversity, disability, sexual orientation, and gender identity as part of fostering more inclusive, informed, and welcoming school communities (Finding 1c).

Together, these findings highlight students' desire for an education system that recognizes and responds to the diverse experiences, identities, and needs of all learners.



Students value strong support systems and clear guidance to help them navigate school successfully.

Students value clear expectations, transparent communication about changes to graduation requirements, accessible systems for tracking their progress, and trusted adults who can guide and support them along the way. They consistently emphasized the critical role that school counselors play in helping students navigate requirements and plan for their futures, while also acknowledging that counselors are often stretched thin and difficult to access when support is needed. Students also noted that effective support extends beyond individual relationships with adults; it includes having access to clear, timely, and easy-to-understand information that helps them make informed decisions about their educational pathways. One student said of graduation requirements: *"As long as students know where they need to be and what they need to be taking when, then it is decently easy to meet them."*

The value of support and guidance emerged clearly in Finding 3d:

- In students' repeated references to school counselors as essential partners in helping them understand, navigate, and complete graduation requirements.
- In students' desire for accessible tools, such as digital gradebooks and student information systems, that allow them to monitor their progress toward graduation and make informed decisions about their coursework.
- In requests for greater clarity, consistency, and transparency regarding graduation requirements, including the various pathways available to meet them.

Together, these findings underscore students' desire for systems and relationships that help them successfully navigate their educational journeys and plan for their futures.



Students recognize the importance of statewide graduation requirements while valuing what makes their schools special.

Students recognized the value of statewide graduation requirements and the importance of greater consistency across Vermont's schools. At the same time, they expressed pride in the programs, course offerings, and unique characteristics that make each school distinct. Students also raised concerns that new requirements could unintentionally reduce access to electives, flexible pathways, and arts and music programs—experiences they see as central to a meaningful and engaging school experience.

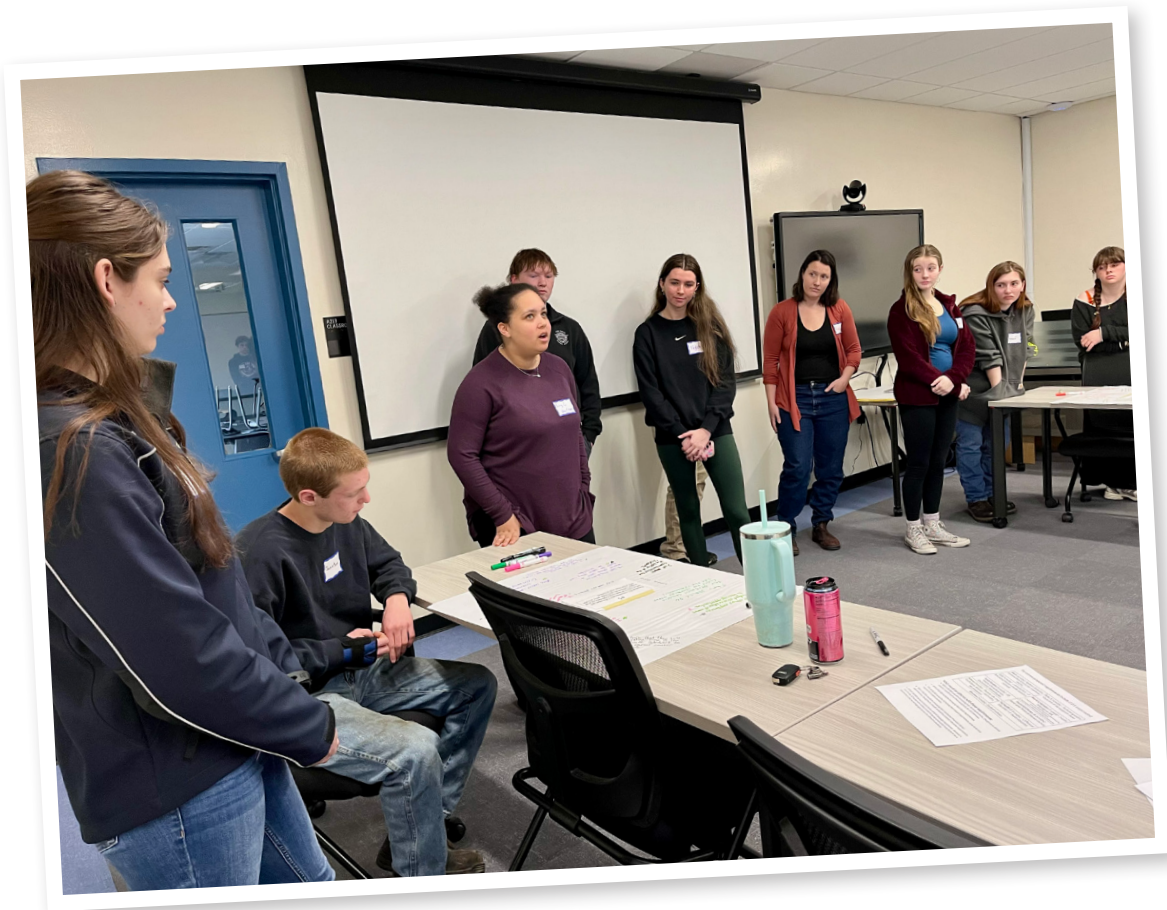
Students' recognition of the importance of a statewide approach to graduation requirements is explored in Finding 1a.

The value of preserving what makes schools unique emerges most clearly in discussions of flexible pathways, where students repeatedly emphasized the importance of sustaining popular and engaging opportunities that support both personalization and student engagement (Finding 4).

Summary of the Values Behind the Findings

In considering the move to statewide graduation requirements, students prioritize an education that is relevant to their futures, offers flexibility and choice, is accessible and inclusive, is well-supported and clearly guided, and preserves the qualities they value most about their current schools.

The findings that follow can be understood as students' evaluation of the proposed graduation requirements through this shared set of values.



Finding #1: Student Perspectives on the Proposed Requirements

Students were asked to share their perspectives on specific elements of the proposed requirements through the survey and both focus group activities, including written Chalk Talks and Circle Conversations. In designing the data collection process and seeking feedback, the research team focused in particular on four elements of the proposed requirements:

- The 4-credit math requirements and the inclusion of a Data Science and Statistics credit requirement;
- The 1-credit Health Education requirement;
- The 0.5-credit Financial Literacy requirement;
- The 1-credit World Languages requirement.

The team selected these four elements because they represent areas in which the proposed requirements would create changes for most school districts. According to the Vermont Agency of Education’s report on the proposed requirements, these elements would be an increase in the credit requirements for those subjects for between 70% and 86% of supervisory unions and school districts. Through the data collection process, students shared their perspectives on the perceived relevance of these different components and identified both potential benefits and concerns related to the proposed changes.

Sub-Finding 1a. Student support for a statewide approach to requirements

Students generally recognized the value of statewide graduation requirements. While they had critiques of specific aspects of the proposed requirements (explored throughout Finding 1) and raised overarching concerns about the implementation of new requirements (explored in Finding 3), many students identified the benefits of a statewide approach. This recognition connects with several of the students’ values, including inclusivity and having clear requirements and strong supports to meet them. This general support for the idea of statewide graduation requirements is illustrated by the following quotes from focus group participants:

<i>“It will be helpful if all requirements are statewide, and everything is the same for each school.”</i>	<i>“It is important for everyone to be held to the same standard, so that everyone knows that they learned and can do the same things. It is helpful for employers and colleges to know that everyone can do the same thing.”</i>	<i>“It is positive that everyone is learning the same things, and that everyone in the state is held to the same standard.”</i>
<i>“The purpose of statewide education standards is to minimize the already present achievement gap in our education system. People who come from wealthier families already have a better chance of receiving better education.”</i>	<i>“Everyone has the same standards, so it gives everyone equal opportunities for what they want to do.”</i>	<i>“It gives most people an equal base for where they want to go.”</i>
		<i>“Other tech schools have more embedded credits than we do. If we want to put the state of VT on one set of grad requirements, we should put all CTEs on the same embedded credit requirements.”</i>

Sub-Finding 1b. Cross-cutting concerns on requirements

Although students expressed different opinions about the proposed Health Education, World Language, Financial Literacy, and Data Science and Statistics requirements, there were common concerns that were shared in discussions of all four of those subjects.

This cross-cutting feedback, which is closely related to the values explored in the section above, includes:

- **Concerns about staff capacity and school resources:** Students frequently questioned whether schools have the staffing, funding, and course offerings needed to implement the proposed requirements successfully, particularly in smaller schools and rural communities. Participants also emphasized that teachers need adequate time and support to teach new materials.
- **Concerns about preserving choice and flexibility:** Students often weighed the benefits of additional requirements against their potential impact on electives, flexible pathways, and opportunities to pursue personal interests and goals.
- **Questions about rigor and meaningful learning:** Students distinguished between requiring a subject and ensuring meaningful learning takes place within it, expressing concern that additional requirements could prioritize credits over depth and relevance.
- **Differences in perceived relevance among student groups:** Survey findings revealed notable differences between college-bound and non-college-bound students, as well as between CTE and non-CTE students, regarding the relevance and interest in different elements of the proposed requirements (see Charts 8 & 9).

Chart 8

Elements of the proposed requirements that are relevant to students’ future goals

Percent of survey respondents who identified elements of the proposed requirements as “Somewhat” or “Very” relevant to their future goals

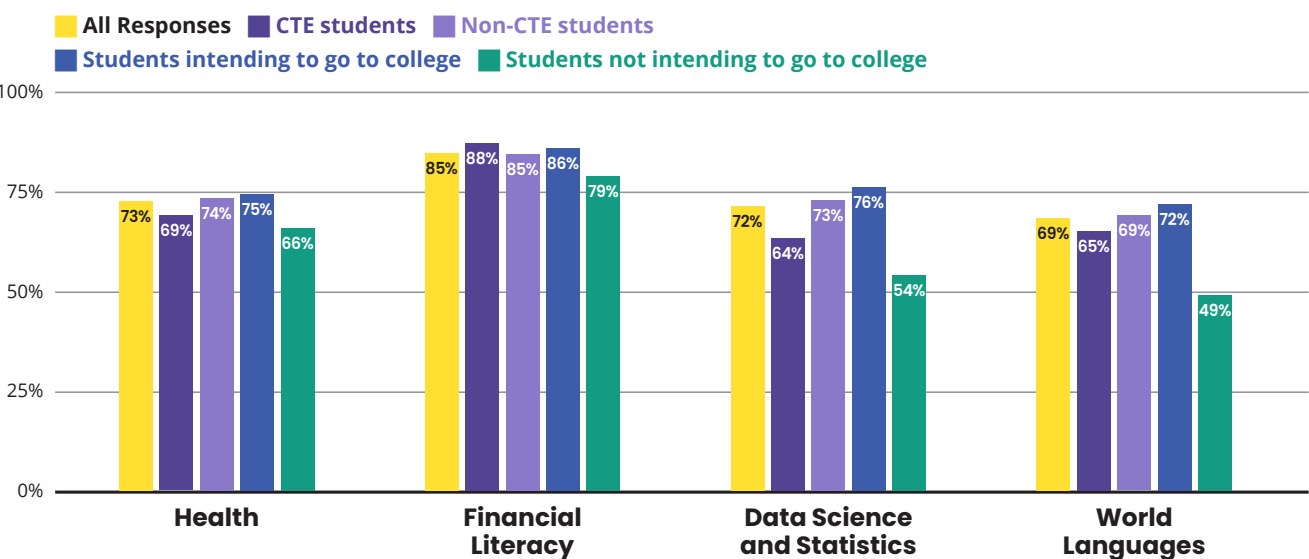
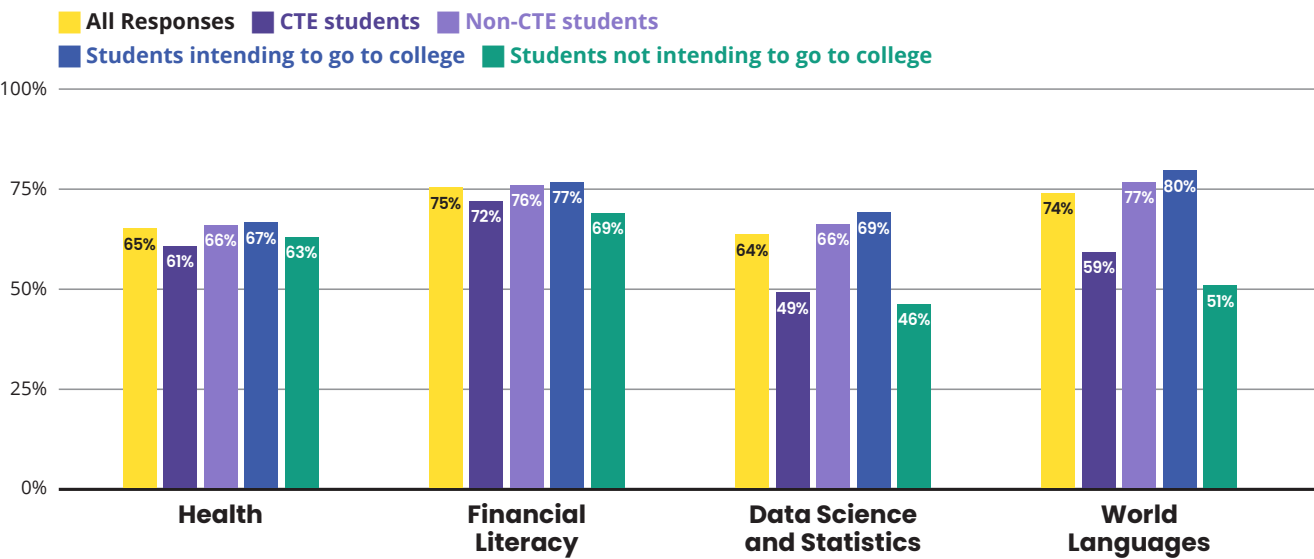


Chart 9

Elements of the proposed requirements that are currently interesting to students

Percent of survey respondents who identified elements of the proposed requirements as “Somewhat” or “Very” interesting to them now.



Sub-Finding 1c. Specific feedback on Health Education requirement

Participants expressed positive views about the potential benefits of expanded Health Education requirements. Students identified value in more comprehensive and inclusive learning opportunities, addressing topics such as mental health, gender identity, sexual orientation, neurodivergence, disability, and sex education. Participants noted that this learning could be especially important for students who may not have opportunities to discuss or learn about these topics at home, and that schoolwide learning in these areas could positively influence school climate and culture.

Among the comments shared during the focus groups, the following are representative of the positive aspects students identified:

*“Having a full year of health could be so so good. It is such a struggle to add more about neurodivergence, queer folks, and invisible disabilities into the curriculum. There is so much to learn about this, and there is so much new research about these topics. **It would be a good change in our school climate if everyone was a little more educated about those things.**”*

*“Talking about certain things in health class makes certain people uncomfortable, but **people need to get out of their shell.** It is so important to learn that your discomfort now, when you are still growing, is important to grasp certain concepts.”*

Concerns related to the expanded Health Education requirement reflected the cross-cutting feedback above. In particular, students emphasized the need for strong professional learning and support for educators, noting that teachers can sometimes appear reluctant or unprepared to engage students in deeper learning around sensitive topics. Several participants also suggested that additional health

course offerings could focus on specific subject areas and emphasized that health education should be developmentally and age-appropriate, recognizing that meaningful learning experiences may look different for a 9th-grade student than for a 12th-grade student.

Sub-Finding 1d. Specific feedback on World Language or ASL requirement

The proposed requirement of one credit in World Languages or ASL was one of the more divisive components discussed. When asked to identify potential benefits, students pointed to opportunities for cultural connection, communication, and travel. Some also noted the value of learning a second language for specific career pathways, and there was clear enthusiasm for ASL being included as an option to meet the requirement. Participants further emphasized the importance of world languages for college readiness and college applications; a perspective that aligns with the survey findings noted above.

Among the comments shared during the focus groups, the following are representative of the positive aspects students identified:

*"It **opens you up to other cultures** around you. It connects you to other people who speak the same language."*

*"The world language requirement feels important – If you are working with people, we should be building skills **to be able to communicate with people.**"*

*"A lot of people would benefit from world languages: **It is a valuable skill**, and a skill that can get you more money."*

*"**ASL would be a really good class** to offer at every school. I'm taking French, but I would have loved to have taken ASL if that was offered."*

Concerns related to the world language requirement reflected the cross-cutting feedback described above. Students specifically noted issues of relevance and personal interest, the limited number of language options available in their schools, and the impact of shifting what is currently an elective into a required credit. Several participants also expressed concern that one year of world language study may be insufficient to develop practical proficiency in a language.

The following quotes and data are representative of these concerns:

*"A lot of people take a language and don't like it. When you require it, you might just have **people who don't even try any more.**"*

*"World Languages could be really beneficial, but it will also be **very hard for a lot of students.**"*

*"We have only two languages right now. Last year I was forced to do Spanish online and **it was awful.**"*



Participants emphasized the importance of high-quality flexible pathway options for meeting this requirement (including independent study, dual enrollment, and online courses). They also expressed

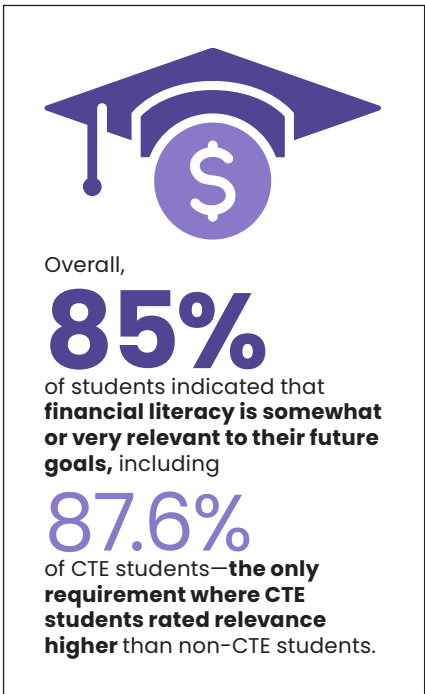
interest in the ability to fulfill the requirement in middle school and shared ideas for broadening the requirement to include more culture-focused or exploratory world language offerings.



Sub-Finding 1e. Specific feedback on Financial Literacy requirement

The 0.5 credit Financial Literacy requirement was the most positively viewed of the four elements included in the survey and focus group discussions. Overall, 85.0% of students indicated that financial literacy is somewhat or very relevant to their future goals, including 87.6% of CTE students—the only requirement where CTE students rated relevance higher than non-CTE students. Focus group participants emphasized that financial literacy is useful *“no matter what [they] do post-grad.”* It was seen as a potential equalizer and an opportunity to help all students build foundational knowledge related to managing money, building wealth, and investing. Students also expressed enthusiasm for learning skills related to entrepreneurship and college readiness, such as understanding tuition, grants, and loans. One participant shared, *“More classes like financial lit are going to be so helpful. I want to learn things that are going to boost me up in life after high school.”*

Participants raised questions about how the requirement would be implemented, particularly its potential integration into other courses. There was interest in embedding financial literacy within math courses or even substituting it for part of the math requirement. One student noted that integrating financial literacy into other learning experiences could also support more authentic, community-based projects.



Sub-Finding 1f. Specific feedback on Data Science and Statistics requirement

Participants’ positive views of the Data Science and Statistics component of the math requirements included its real-world applications (such as interpreting information related to finance, media literacy, health, and politics), its relevance to a range of career and postsecondary pathways, and its potential to strengthen critical thinking skills. These benefits were reflected in the perspective of one focus group participant: *“I can see how this is important. Knowing how data and statistics are presented can be very beneficial for yourself, and there can be a lot of potential to mislead with facts. While everyone does not need to go on a long math career, it is something that could be one of the most important classes we can take. It includes relevant skills that you need throughout life.”*

At the same time, many participants expressed concerns that contrasted with these positive views, particularly around the perceived relevance of the requirement. As noted in the cross-cutting feedback, Data Science and Statistics showed significant gaps in perceived relevance and interest between CTE and non-CTE students, as well as between college-bound and non-college-bound students. In addition, many students expressed anxiety about math and concern about the prospect of needing to complete additional math credits for graduation.

The following quotes are representative of these concerns:

*"I don't think that we need more science and math. I actually get a feeling of dread thinking about another year of math class. I struggle so much with math. **The higher the level, the less uses there are in the real world.**"*

*"It might be hard with stuff like **data science, if people are not interested in it.** It might be hard for them to go to class and be interested in it."*

Students offered several ideas for reducing the impact of these concerns, including allowing students to begin meeting math requirements in middle school; expanding course offerings to ensure multiple pathways for meeting the Data Science and Statistics requirement; integrating content into real-world and community-based learning opportunities; and enabling students to fulfill math requirements through CTE program coursework.

Finding #2: Varying Student Experience with Graduation Requirements and Application to Personal Goals

Students’ experiences with graduation requirements are not uniform. Future aspirations often shape how students perceive both their current and proposed graduation requirements. This is closely related to the value of future relevance. Students also reflected on their school experiences in the focus groups: For many students, the proposed graduation requirements were perceived as more difficult to complete than their current requirements, and CTE students in particular noted that existing barriers—such as scheduling constraints—could become even more significant challenges. One student asked, “If some courses are required, and you can’t get into them because of your CTE schedule, how are you supposed to do that? I’ve been trying to get into one class, a required class, for three years.”

Despite these challenges, students generally recognized that graduation requirements serve an important purpose. However, they differed in what they believed those requirements should prepare students for. Requirements were described as a foundation for college and career readiness, an opportunity to explore interests, and “a ‘sampler’ of possible postsecondary paths for undecided students.” These different views of the purpose of graduation requirements and the underlying value of future relevance, that many students carried, help explain the differing views on some elements of the proposal explored in Finding #1.



Sub-Finding 2a. CTE student experiences with graduation requirements

CTE students experience unique structural and personal challenges in meeting graduation requirements, leading some to evaluate the proposed requirements differently than their non-CTE peers. These challenges include scheduling constraints; commute times, the existing demands of technical programs, and the need to stay connected with their sending school counselor and their CTE center’s staff. The following quotes and data points illustrate these various challenges:

“Graduation requirements are really made to support you in your future, but in some ways these requirements feel like a hindrance. If you take a career center class, that is **a lot of scheduling conflict**. Especially if you want to access courses that are of interest to you.”

“That one credit **could stop you from doing the tech program** that you wanted.”

[These requirements seem] **“focused on students that attend 1 school.”**

[It is] “challenging for tech students who travel to balance **taking classes and the time required to commute...**”

“I think if these requirements were implemented, **we would need more time as tech students for other classes...** but we don’t have that. In the morning, you can only fit two classes, and you only have 3-4 extra classes that you can

take here. And that is having a really packed schedule.”

“[The requirements] would have a place if we incorporate them into the CTE — and **if schools can prepare for that.**”

“If we had 4 math credits, it would mean **doubling up in math to get into my building trades program**. It would be so hard for us.”

When asked if they were familiar with their school’s current graduation requirements, **non-CTE students had a more favorable response**, with 76.4% agreeing or strongly agreeing that they were familiar, compared to 73.4% of CTE students.

Sub-Finding 2b. Perception that proposal focuses on college-readiness

Students in both high school and CTE programs perceived an emphasis on college readiness from the proposal. Some expressed concern that this focus may overlook the diverse goals students hold for their futures, including pathways that do not involve a traditional college degree.

<i>"This is a very college-driven proposal, right now college is at an all time low, what we should be learning in HS should be a stepping stone for what is next after HS."</i> <i>"More and more people going into tech ... [this proposal] is meant for the college pathway — these are not reflecting the changing times."</i>	<i>"Some systems are college based (currently)... should not push a college based curriculum."</i> <i>"The requirements are setting the students up for a college career, and not other types of careers after high school."</i> <i>"Financing for college is hard to attain so why do we push people to college?"</i>	<i>"Finding that balance between like 'Hey, you should know statistics,' and 'You're going to be living on your own in a few years and might want to make a lasagna.'</i> <i>It is important to find a balance between those things especially as we move into a world where you can make good money without going to college."</i>
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As noted in Finding #1, across all elements of the proposal highlighted in the survey (World Languages, Financial Literacy, Data Science and Statistics, and Health Education), a higher percentage of college-bound students reported finding them relevant and interesting compared to non-college-bound students.

Taken together, these findings suggest that students' educational pathways, future goals, and definitions of relevance significantly influence how they experience and evaluate graduation requirements.

Finding #3: Student-identified System-level Barriers and Inequities in Graduation Requirements

While many students expressed support for certain of the proposed graduation requirements, they also identified structural barriers and inequities in their current systems, raising concerns that implementing new graduation requirements could further exacerbate these challenges.

These concerns particularly reflected students’ values of accessibility and inclusivity, strong school supports, and preserving the qualities they value most about their current schools. Specific concerns include staffing and budget constraints, uneven access to opportunities, practical barriers to implementation, and inconsistent systems for tracking student progress. As one student explained, *“We need more teachers. This is a very good idea overall, with more real-world skills, but I think the staffing issues would be the most challenging part.”*

Overall, the dataset includes a wide range of observations highlighting the implementation challenges these requirements may pose.



Sub-Finding 3a. Concerns about budget and staffing

High school students identified staffing and budget constraints as key barriers to implementing the proposed graduation requirements, particularly in focus groups with smaller schools (e.g., North Country, Lake Region, U-32). Students expressed concern that, in order to accommodate these constraints, schools may need to reduce elective course offerings and extracurricular opportunities.

*“Our school is pretty small, so **we really don’t have enough teachers or space now.**”*

*“School is in a financially desperate spot right now, we’re losing teachers and classes extremely fast. With these new [requirements], I have a fear that **we’re going to lose even more of our arts and extra-curriculars.**”*

*“Our teachers right now don’t even have planning periods, we’re **adding more to the teacher’s workloads without any way to hire more** or to support them well.”*

*“This would impact our teachers. We have great teachers, but **we don’t have a lot of teachers.**”*



Sub-Finding 3b. Concerns about equitable access

Students expressed concerns about equitable access to the graduation requirements across different student populations within their schools. Specifically, they raised questions about how proficiency would be defined and applied universally, how different learning speeds and styles would be accommodated, what implementation would look like for students receiving special education services, and the extent to which the requirements might place additional strain on already demanding student schedules.

"Proficiencies are there to make sure everyone gets to where they need to be before graduating with skills and knowledge. But **when they are too intense, they do not work for everyone.**"

"How do these requirements fit **people with IEPs?**"

"Sometimes people might **learn at a different speed** and might not understand certain content. I don't know how we would fit that in."

"Too many academic requirements will **overload and discourage students.**"

"A lot of people would have a lot more to do outside of school with these added classes, which could **pose a struggle for people who have to care for siblings or work.** This would be a lot of extra homework. For people that have a lot to do outside of school that could cause extra struggles."



Sub-Finding 3c. Student scheduling concerns

One common practical concern for students was how a change in requirements would impact their course scheduling. Many questioned how the requirements would fit within existing scheduling structures and expressed concern that this could limit their ability to take elective courses. This concern is closely related to the shared value of flexibility and choice.

"Challenge in **scheduling without gaps** for all of these half credits and a block schedule."

"Since we moved to a 7 period schedule, this would be detrimental overall. **It's pretty rigid and there's no room for electives.**"

"There's **only 5 slots for electives.** If you take band all 4 years, that leaves you with 2.5 elective slots, which is only enough to take Computer Science and something that takes a year."

[There's] "not enough room to take all the classes that I'm interested in already in middle school—[I'm] **worried about having multiple interests in high school with no time.**"

"Half credit classes often leave **gaps in schedules** since there are a limited number of them."



Sub-Finding 3d. Counselors and gradebooks are key supports for students

Experiences with graduation requirements are not consistent across schools or students. Students identified school counselors and gradebooks as key supports in helping them navigate these requirements. This concern is closely related to the value of strong supports for students in navigating the requirements.

- Familiarity with current graduation requirements varied significantly by school, ranging from 56.2% to 84.4% of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed that they were familiar with current requirements, with an overall average of 76.0%.
- Similarly, students' understanding of their school's grading system also varied, with rates of agreement or strong agreement ranging from a high of 90.0% at one school to a low of 66.7% at another.

"How will requirements be tracked?"

"The guidance counselors have access to every student's portal to see where they are at. How come students don't have access to that? **How come we can't just see our transcript?**"

"We **already have a system in place for tracking our graduation requirements (PLPs)** – I think that works well, although some students don't do it. It can be a little bit boring, but it can be really effective in making sure you're on track."

"It is awful to track your graduation requirements. There is a little progress bar, but it doesn't track your college courses or your career center courses, or your flexible pathways. Guidance counselors are very helpful,

but they are very busy. **I'd love to have a very clear guide to show me if I've met a graduation requirement or not**, like a visual with a check-mark or something."

"Guidance counselors need to reach out to students if they are not meeting the requirements. **Currently, our system is not wonderful.** As long as students know where they need to be and what they need to be taking when, then it is decently easy to meet them."

"Our school **does not do a good job of checking in with us** about what courses we have to take and what options are available to us."

"I think **counselors have a role to play** in this to help students get through the graduation requirements."

"We have to go to our counselors, but **our counselors are always busy.**"

"If I want to see what we have done, **I need to go to [the registrar] to see what requirements I've met.** We have google classrooms, powerschool, and schoology, my grades are on all of those, and I can't see [my progress towards graduation] online."

"It is **very hard to see what I've done.** I can't see it on my computer. I need to go to a person to see what I've done."

"**I have to pull strings to figure out what kind of credits I have.** I have to email my counselor, it is a pain."

"We need **support with our systems** like Powerschool to help show us these."

Finding #4: Flexible and Personalized Approaches are Key



Choice and flexibility emerged as two of the strongest values expressed by students in both CTE and high school focus group sessions. Support for the proposed requirements varied, often shaped by the perception that they could limit this flexibility. As one student put it, *“We try and tailor our schedules to what we want to do, but the requirements get in the way of us doing what we want to do.”* Students also linked reduced choice to decreased engagement and motivation, with one noting, *“If you add a bunch of stuff that are requirements for graduation, students will struggle – they won’t be focused on trying to learn, they will be focused on trying to graduate.”*

Students identified a number of existing structures and approaches that promote choice, such as clearly defined flexible pathways, personalized learning opportunities, and innovative approaches to meeting credit requirements.

Sub-Finding 4a. The power of relevance and personalization

Students emphasized that course relevance and curriculum personalization are key drivers of engagement. They expressed concern that requiring specific classes may reduce student buy-in and weaken overall classroom experience. Students described how the ability to choose courses aligned with their interests increases motivation to attend school, stay engaged in class, and achieve strong academic outcomes. In contrast, they noted that required courses that do not align with student interests can diminish motivation and reduce engagement.

“Flexibility should be a larger aspect. I want to take more math but that is not for everybody.”

“As someone who has doubled up on math, because I want to take more, I actually feel like **those courses are less important to be able to have more of.** We already have a lot of that, and now asking to have more of them feels not that impactful. It just cuts down on opportunities for students to pursue things they’re interested in.”

“It would be really nice to have base requirements...but also **more room and options for people to focus on what you are interested in.**”

“Requiring **more electives will make students happier,** look forward to coming to school more.”

[World] “languages might be hard to force people to go to them, **makes students less engaged** and will make it worse for other students.”

“Dropped out of French even though I like the content, but the pacing was too slow. There has to be **some choice and customization** in the options.”

“It is important to have these things required, but people also need to have the opportunities for choice. **They might not put as much effort into things that aren’t important to them.**”



Sub-Finding 4b. The importance of flexible pathways

Students identified numerous benefits to the flexible pathways offered at their schools; They are seen as a way to meet graduation requirements, while honoring different learning styles, interests, and postsecondary schools. It was clear that students valued flexible pathways as a way to successfully create relevance, flexibility, and access – as well as the importance of what makes each school special – while allowing consistent graduation requirements. However, many students expressed concern that these pathways may be constrained by the proposed new graduation requirements.

*"I feel, especially it being my 2nd year in automotive and my 3rd year in aviation, flexible pathways have definitely made a difference. **I'm taking something I struggled with sitting down in class and applied it to something I'm actually passionate about.** And that flexible pathway makes it click."*

*"You can teach me about osmosis and make me read 15 articles on it, and I won't still understand it, but **as soon as I'm working with hydraulic lines or in health anatomy, I have an opportunity to understand it.**"*

*"Flexible pathways are more relevant for many students. **It meets them where they are.**"*

*"When you talk about rigor, people talk about course load or complexity but **flexible pathways make it so there is rigor in communication and things they have to do in everyday life.**"*

*"**Flexible pathways are good for people who think a little differently.** It helps us stay engaged. If you want to know if these are successful, just look at how engaged the students are."*

*"As someone with a lot of health issues, I really appreciate being in a flexible program without homework that allows me to rest when I am at home. **PILOT made me like coming to school for the first time in a long time.**"*

*"**The system is not doing its job UNLESS there are flexible pathways,** because there's no way they can fathomably teach all that."*

*"I am personally planning on doing dual enrollment next year. I figured out the pathway I want to take, and my ability to do dual enrollment and make some headway towards what I want to do really makes me more confident in what I want to do. The graduation requirements are important, but **I'm more excited that I am able to get an early jump on my life goals** through dual enrollment."*

*"I think that they are good opportunities because **it really does put you in real world situations,** really hands on."*

As noted in prior findings, survey data also show variation in students' access to flexible pathways across schools, with the percentage of students reporting that they are familiar with their flexible pathway options ranging from 38.7% at one school to 76.8% at another (59.7% overall agreeing or strongly agreeing).

Sub-Finding 4c. Innovative and integrated curriculum is key

Students see integrated and interdisciplinary curriculum, as well as other innovative approaches to course structure, as a way to meet requirements while increasing choice, relevance, and access.

"Having the option to take some courses in tech centers without being in a program."	"Need more student choice. For instance, if there's only one kind of financial literacy class, that doesn't feel like a choice at all and it'll be harder to go through it. It's generally unfair."	"Statistics and Data Science is relevant and should be integrated into other classes rather than making it into its own required course."
"I would like to learn about business in a statistics class and how you can apply that to the real world."	"When I think of statistics, I think of economics and finances. Integrating those courses could be a good way to help students meet their requirements."	"Would it be possible to meet multiple credits in one class? Putting multiple credits into different classes could reframe how the classes work so they could meet the requirements and be more interesting."

Recommendations from Students on Implementing the Proposed Graduation Requirements

The following recommendations are rooted in the core values that emerged through the data analysis. Students value relevance, choice and flexibility, inclusivity and accessibility, support and guidance, and preserving what makes schools unique. The recommendations that follow are intended to help policymakers, educators, and school leaders translate those values into practice as Vermont moves toward statewide graduation requirements.

Recommendations for the State Board of Education

Students emphasized the importance of flexibility and choice in their learning. To that end, there were specific areas where students saw the proposed requirements as particularly limiting.

- **Reconsider requiring four credits in any subject area**, including math, as this may limit opportunities to take electives and strain school resources (both for students who need additional support and for students who are interested in higher-level coursework). This aligns with the values of choice, flexibility, and access.
- **Broaden the World Language requirement to include a cultural learning component** for students who are not interested in learning a second language or who struggle with acquiring a second language. This aligns with the values of choice and access.
- **Explore integrating requirements as a way to increase relevance and create flexibility.** Students were generally supportive of integration of requirements, such as incorporating financial literacy into math requirements.

Recommendations for the Agency of Education

The Agency of Education should be prepared to support smaller schools with fewer resources; expand student services across learning programs to align with the requirements; consider making credit requirements more accessible to students who find them less engaging or relevant; and provide comprehensive education about the graduation requirements once they are finalized.

- **Emphasize student supports in implementation.** Connected with the value of equity and access, students called for strengthened special education services, more varied course-level options, and greater opportunities for customization and alternative pathways to earn credits.
- **Support school counselors in implementation.** Students noted the critical role that school counselors play in supporting students on their path to graduation and recognized the stress and workload of the position. This directly connects with the value of strong support systems.
- **Provide high-quality supporting materials to schools and districts to explain the changes.** Students recommended that clear and thorough education and communication about the new graduation requirements be provided to students, teachers, and administrators. This directly connects with the value of clear guidance.
- **Create consistency in CTE program credits.** CTE students shared the wide range of credits awarded through their different programs. In some cases, credits were able to be applied to specific graduation requirements, while in other programs students earned only elective credits. Students should be able to meet their graduation requirements through their CTE program without having to take online or summer courses.
- **Identify best practices around credit tracking and reporting.** In line with the value of clear guidance and support, the AOE should provide best practices for electronic gradebooks or Student Information Systems so that all students can track and understand their path to graduation.

Recommendations for School and District Leaders

Schools and district leaders should aim to provide varied class-level options for each requirement; increase student support for required courses; integrate requirements with one another or within existing courses; offer an accessible Driver's Education course; continue to expand and improve access to flexible pathways; invest in systems (such as software, counselors, and staff training) that allow students to easily track their progress toward graduation requirements; and ensure thorough education about the requirements for students, educators, and school leadership as they are rolled-out.

- **Create and advertise flexible pathways options.** Flexible pathways provide opportunities for students to meet graduation requirements while addressing their values of relevance, flexibility, and choice. Schools should provide clear and repeated guidance to students about how they can access different flexible pathways options.
- **Provide varied class options and interest-based courses to meet requirements.** Students want varied class-level options, opportunities for customization, and alternative approaches for earning credit, along with courses that feel meaningful and connected to their interests.
- **Focus student support systems on required courses.** In line with the student value of equity and access, students expressed concern for the challenges meeting requirements may pose to themselves or their peers. To the extent possible, focus student supports on courses required for graduation.
- **Integrate graduation requirements into existing or new courses.** For example, embedding data science, statistics, or financial literacy content into practical courses like Family and Consumer Science, or applied math classes to make requirements more cohesive and relevant.
- **Offer Driver's Education as a standard, accessible course in public schools** to reduce inequities related to cost and access.
- **Support student-friendly gradebook practices.** Students highlighted the need for a consistent and user-friendly system for tracking progress toward graduation requirements, such as SIS or gradebook tools that allow students to clearly monitor completion in real time.
- **Plan for comprehensive education and communication about the new graduation requirements for students, teachers, and administrators.** Students particularly noted the importance of early education about the graduation requirements in supporting students who may choose to enter a CTE program in their junior or senior year.
- **Ensure all students have multiple opportunities to visit CTE centers and learn about the opportunities there.**

Recommendations to Support Student Voice, Agency, and Leadership

The practice of listening to young people about these topics should not end with this report. Students should be engaged as ongoing partners in the implementation, evaluation, and refinement of the requirements to ensure that they remain relevant, accessible, and responsive to the needs of all learners. To that end, we offer this guidance as a way to establish ongoing structures for youth-adult partnership in the implementation, evaluation, and refinement of graduation requirements:

- Engage in **clear communication with students** about changes to the graduation requirements.
- Examine course offerings with an **equity lens** focused on interest, content, and accessibility.
- Support students in collaborating with adults to develop **systems and structures to communicate the requirements**.
- **Co-create course offerings with students!**
- Co-design accessible guidance to support students in exploring **flexible pathways options**.
- Co-develop **Personalized Learning Plan systems** with students as an avenue to support planning for how they will meet graduation requirements.
- Use and adapt the **focus group protocol and survey** in your school, and engage in ongoing conversations about what you hear as a school community.

These next steps emphasize the importance of consistent communication, equitable access, and meaningful collaboration with students in shaping graduation requirements and the systems that support them. Centering student voice throughout implementation will strengthen both relevance and agency, ensuring that policies translate into experiences that support all learners.



Appendices

Appendix A: Youth Facilitation Guide for AOE / UP for Learning State-Wide Graduation Requirement Sessions

When	What	Materials / Who
	Prep: • Nametag station with name tags, stickers, fidgets, markers • Sign in sheet - first name, grade, school • Hand out sheet with circle questions • Chart paper - prep with questions • Name tags • Stickers • Fidgets • Markers • Pens/Pencils	Print: • State-W... • Half-pag... • Propose... Chalk Talk Printouts Agendas Notesheet
10 mins	Welcome! Facilitator introductions, explanation of the project, and norms Explanation of the Project from AOE: The Agency of Education is engaging partners across Vermont to provide feedback on proposed statewide graduation requirements, and student input must be a central element in shaping this vision. This project seeks to ensure youth voice is meaningfully included in the conversation about how best to prepare students for life beyond K-12 education. The Agency of Education has partnered with UP For Learning (that's us!) to host a series of youth focus groups to support students in providing feedback on proposed statewide graduation requirements. Youth and adult staff from UP for Learning are leading these focus groups in high schools and CTE centers across the state. The agenda for this session, and the questions that we're asking you today, were designed by youth and adults together. Review Norms: • Be fully present • If you wonder, ask (ask the hard questions) • Listen for understanding (while withholding judgment) • Support each other's learning • Speak your truth equitably (knowing it is only part of the truth) • Make it safe to take risks • Invite and give gentle reminders (if any of us stray from our agreements) • Step up/step back • Take care of your own needs (opt out at any point in the day if needed)	

15 mins	Chalk Talk activity Groups will rotate through each station and then, if time allows, they will find themes in the original stations to share out (on sticky notes - top 3-4 themes). Instructions for group: - You will divide into 5 groups. I will be the time keeper, and give you a signal to move to the next station after about 3 minutes - Each station has a different aspect of the changes in the grad requirements, and 3 questions for you to think about and share your thoughts and ideas. You will have writing implements at each station. - Like a dialogue, feel free to read what others are writing and respond to them - just draw an arrow so that it is clear that it is connected. Each “Chalk Talk” sheet will be divided into three columns, one with the question “What are the benefits of having this as a requirement?”, “What are the drawbacks to having this as a requirement?”, “What changes in your school would help you feel supported in meeting this requirement?” Posters will focus on the following aspects of the graduation requirements: 1 Statistics or Data Science credit 1 World Language or American Sign Language (ASL) credit - Minimum half credit of Financial Literacy content 1 Health Education credit - Beyond the requirements themselves, what types of learning experiences and opportunities do students hope their schools will prioritize and provide?	Prepare 2 sets (if more than 40) Chart paper Chalk Talk Printouts Tape Markers Sticky notes
30 mins	Circle Conversations (with notetakers) - small groups of approx. 6-8 Setting the Stage: - Review norms - EMPHASIZE no judgment with passing - Using talking piece Rounds: Opening round: Name, grade, and what do you see as the purpose of graduation requirements in preparing students for life after graduation? - Looking at the proposed graduation requirements, how well do you think these requirements prepare you for what you want to do after graduation —whether that’s college, a career, or something else? - What feels helpful? - What feels less relevant?	Talking piece Facilitator notesheet / doc for taking notes on computer

	3. Looking at the proposed graduation requirements, how do you think these changes would affect students at your school? ■ What benefits do you see for students in your school to having these requirements? ■ What challenges do you see for students in your school to meet these? 4. HS QUESTION: Part of the proposed requirements include increasing engagement in “flexible pathways,” like internships, dual enrollment, career programs, or independent projects. ■ What makes a flexible pathway learning opportunity meaningful and relevant? ■ How do you know if a flexible pathway learning opportunity is equally or more rigorous than a traditional class? CTE QUESTION: Have there been challenges in meeting graduation requirements when attending CTE (getting in all the required credits)? – What has the process been like for you to get CTE program coursework recognized on your transcript? 5. The proposed math requirements include a credit in statistics or data science, which can relate to topics like analyzing data, understanding information in the news, or how AI systems use data. ■ What topics or skills would you be most interested in learning about in a statistics or data science course? What topics would be most relevant to your future goals? ■ What skills would you want students to gain in school to use AI effectively and responsibly? 6. What kind of help do students need to meet these graduation requirements? ■ how do you / would you like to track your own progress toward them? 7. How do you hope that your school engages students in designing meaningful ways for students to satisfy the graduation requirements?	
5 mins	Closing ● Thank participants. ● Share a word about how you’re feeling right now. ● Complete survey (one-pager)	

Appendix B: Survey Questions

VERMONT GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS – STUDENT SURVEY

Thank you for taking the time to respond to this statewide survey, designed by youth and adults, on the proposed implementation of Vermont graduation requirements. This survey is part of an effort to ensure that students' voices, experiences, and perspectives are meaningfully included in the conversation about how best to prepare students for life beyond K–12 education.

The Vermont Graduation Requirements Student Survey covers topics including the proposed requirements, transferable skills, access and experiences with flexible pathways, and personalized learning plans.

An analysis of the data from the survey and the focus groups will be included in a report shared with the Vermont State Board of Education as part of their decision-making process in determining the new statewide graduation requirements. The findings from this survey will not be used to evaluate individual schools/districts, and individual schools' results will not be shared publicly.

- Taking this survey is optional. You can choose to stop taking the survey at any time.
 - All the questions are optional. You can choose to skip questions that you do not want to answer.
 - The survey is anonymous. Your name and email are not recorded as part of the survey data.
-

YOUR CURRENT EXPERIENCES

The following questions explore your current experiences with graduation requirements, flexible pathways, and transferable skills. These are all aspects that may be impacted by the new statewide graduation requirements in Act 73. Knowing how students currently experience these will help inform policy-makers as they move forward.

1. I am familiar with my school's current graduation requirements.

- ☐ 1 Strongly disagree
- ☐ 2 Disagree
- ☐ 3 Neutral
- ☐ 4 Agree
- ☐ 5 Strongly agree

2. I am confident that I will graduate on time with my school's current graduation requirements.

- ☐ 1 Strongly disagree
- ☐ 2 Disagree
- ☐ 3 Neutral
- ☐ 4 Agree
- ☐ 5 Strongly agree

3. What people or resources have helped you in meeting your school's graduation requirements? (Check all that apply.)

- ☐ School counselors
- ☐ Teachers
- ☐ School administrators

- ☐ School social workers
- ☐ Career and Technical Education (CTE)
- ☐ Summer programs (including summer school)
- ☐ Work-based learning
- ☐ Dual-enrollment
- ☐ Personalized Learning Plans
- ☐ Mentoring programs (including GEAR UP)
- ☐ Family
- ☐ Peers
- ☐ Other: _____

4. How have people or resources been helpful to you in meeting your school's graduation requirements?

5. I understand my school's current grading system.

- ☐ 1 Strongly disagree
- ☐ 2 Disagree
- ☐ 3 Neutral
- ☐ 4 Agree
- ☐ 5 Strongly agree

6. It is easy for me to access courses that are interesting and relevant to me at my school.

- ☐ 1 Strongly disagree
- ☐ 2 Disagree
- ☐ 3 Neutral
- ☐ 4 Agree
- ☐ 5 Strongly agree

7. I am familiar with "flexible pathways" opportunities like internships, work-based learning, and dual-enrollment at my school.

- ☐ 1 Strongly disagree
- ☐ 2 Disagree
- ☐ 3 Neutral
- ☐ 4 Agree
- ☐ 5 Strongly agree

8. It is easy for me to access "flexible pathways" opportunities like internships, work-based learning, and dual-enrollment at my school.

- ☐ 1 Strongly disagree
- ☐ 2 Disagree
- ☐ 3 Neutral
- ☐ 4 Agree
- ☐ 5 Strongly agree

9. Transferable skills (like communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, responsible citizenship, and self-direction) are emphasized in my school.

- ☐ 1 Strongly disagree
- ☐ 2 Disagree
- ☐ 3 Neutral
- ☐ 4 Agree
- ☐ 5 Strongly agree

10. In what ways are transferable skills (like communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, responsible citizenship, and self-direction) currently assessed in your school? (Check all that apply.)

- ☐ They are assessed in all my classes
- ☐ They are assessed in some of my classes
- ☐ They are included on my report card
- ☐ They are required for graduation
- ☐ I am not aware of transferable skills
- ☐ Other: _____

11. What is working well at your school (programs, courses, or opportunities) that you want to see available to all students in Vermont?

12. Please use this space to share some of your thinking behind your responses above.

YOUR PERSPECTIVES ON THE PROPOSED REQUIREMENTS

In current legislation (Act 73), new statewide graduation requirements may go into effect for incoming 9th graders in Fall 2027 for the graduating class of 2031. These graduation requirements would not apply to current high school students. However, decision-makers are interested in your perspectives and experiences related to the Agency of Education's proposed requirements.

13. What additional supports would be helpful for all students in meeting the proposed graduation requirements?

14. How relevant do you feel the following aspects of the proposed graduation requirements are to your future goals? The following covers 5 aspects of the proposal that would result in changes in most schools in Vermont based on the current local requirements.

For each item, select:

- ☐ This is not relevant to my future goals.
- ☐ This is somewhat relevant to my future goals.
- ☐ This is very relevant to my future goals.

a. 1 required credit of Statistics or Data science

b. 1 required credit of World Languages or American Sign Language

c. .5 required credit of Financial Literacy content

d. 1 required Health Education credit

e. Engagement in “Flexible pathways,” like internships, dual enrollment, career programs, CTE, or independent projects.

15. How interested would you be in taking courses to meet the following requirements? The following covers 5 aspects of the proposal that would result in changes in most schools in Vermont based on the current local requirements.

For each item, select:

- ☐ This is not interesting to me.
- ☐ This is somewhat interesting to me.
- ☐ This is very interesting to me.

a. 1 required credit of Statistics or Data science

b. 1 required credit of World Languages or American Sign Language

c. .5 required credit of Financial Literacy content

d. 1 required Health Education credit

e. Engagement in “Flexible pathways,” like internships, dual enrollment, career programs, CTE, or independent projects.

16. Please use this space to share some of your thinking behind your responses above.

17. In the proposal, the graduation requirements include a math credit in data science or statistics. What would you find most interesting to learn about in these courses? Check all that are relevant/interesting to you.

- ☐ Analyzing statistics used in the news and media
 - ☐ Using a computer to analyze data
 - ☐ Understanding how data is used by AI systems
 - ☐ The ability to understand and use data in your personal decision-making
 - ☐ Other: _____
-

ABOUT YOU

The following questions are about your identity and background. The following questions will help to understand how these shifts in graduation requirements might impact different students in different ways.

- You can skip any questions you don't want to answer.
- The survey is anonymous. Your name and your email are not collected.

18. What high school do you attend?

19. If you are enrolled in a CTE program, what CTE center do you attend?

20. What grade are you in?

- ☐ 9th
- ☐ 10th
- ☐ 11th
- ☐ 12th
- ☐ Other

21. Do you plan on attending college after high school?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure

22. Select any of the following Race and Ethnicity categories with which you identify. (Check all that apply.)

- ☐ Indigenous/Native American
- ☐ Asian American
- ☐ Black or African American
- ☐ Hispanic or Latino/x American
- ☐ Middle Eastern or North African American
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- ☐ White or European American
- ☐ Other: _____

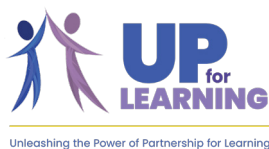
23. With what gender do you most identify?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Non-Binary
- ☐ Other: _____

24. Do you identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I'm not sure

Appendix C: Support for recruiting representative groups of youth



Strategies for Recruiting Representative Youth Focus Groups

UP for Learning supports and encourages inclusion of a diverse spectrum of youth participants. We believe that all youth and adults have valuable insights and experiences to share. For your focus group conversation, we suggest intentional recruiting of youth from all backgrounds and experiences to ensure that all voices are included. This may require flexibility and creativity to remove barriers and provide added support for some students.

We ask that when you are inviting youth to participate in this focus group, you consider:

- 1) Are there Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) youth represented?
- 2) Are there youth with different abilities (social-emotional, physical, academic, etc.) represented?
- 3) Are there youth who have not had a chance to share their wisdom with the community?
- 4) Are there a variety of perspectives and experiences represented in the group?
- 5) Have we ensured that there are no barriers to participation for any interested participants?

Creating truly representative youth focus group requires that schools and employ a **thoughtful combination of recruitment strategies**, some of which are shared below:

Broad Outreach Advertise opportunities through various channels to reach different students.

1-on-1 or small group invitations One-on-one invitations often go a long way to make a student feel empowered to join an opportunity. Sometimes youth will respond very well to a one-on-one conversation, other times it can be helpful to bring in small groups of youth who feel comfortable with one another.

Teacher Recommendations Encourage teachers to recommend students who might bring unique insights to the group, ensuring diverse representation.

Encourage Peer Advocacy If possible, empower current students to advocate for and encourage their peers to join. Peer recommendations can be influential.

Appendix D: AOE Statement for introduction of Focus Groups

Grad Reqs Focus Groups Opening Statement

Hi, I'm (name), (role) at the Vermont Agency of Education, and I'm excited to talk to you today about graduation requirements.

Ever wonder why a student in Brattleboro might have different graduation rules than someone in Burlington? Right now, Vermont's 119 different districts each get to make their own graduation requirements, and this means that what it takes to earn a diploma in one town might look very different from the requirements in the next town over.

Based on feedback from the U.S. Department of Education and our own analysis at the Agency of Education (AOE), we believe a statewide standard for graduation is a matter of fairness. We want to ensure that no matter where you go to school, your Vermont diploma represents the same high level of preparation for your future. This isn't about making things harder; it's about making sure a Vermont diploma means the same thing—and carries the same weight—no matter where you graduate from in the state.

The Agency of Education submitted recommendations for the new statewide requirements to the Vermont State Board of Education in December of this past year, and they will finalize the decision about the graduation requirements by the end of 2026. Today's 7th graders will be the first students held to the new statewide standards, as the class of 2031.

The proposed new requirements are designed to work seamlessly whether you attend your home high school, attend a career technical center, or engage in a flexible pathway, so that everyone will earn the same recognized Vermont diploma. For example, if you are learning at a career tech center, those experiences will count appropriately toward these new statewide requirements. It is a way of saying that all high-quality learning is equally valued.

These are still *proposed* requirements. The State Board and the AOE need to hear from the people this affects most: students. We've partnered with UP For Learning to create spaces to hear directly from students and then turn this input into a report to share with the State Board and help them make their final decisions. We thank you for your participation in these student focus groups and student survey. Your feedback is essential to making sure these requirements will truly serve all Vermont students.

Appendix E: Handout for Focus Group Participants

Do YOU want to HAVE A VOICE in the STATEWIDE Graduation Requirements?

Here is what YOU need to know: Act 73 requires Vermont to establish statewide graduation requirements. The State Board of Education will set those requirements. The Agency of Education has partnered with UP for Learning to ensure students have a voice in the process.

Background:

- Summer 2024: U.S. Department of Education review found Vermont's locally set graduation requirements create uneven rigor and don't meet federal expectations
- Act 73 aims to direct the creation of consistent, statewide graduation requirements
- Vermont Agency of Education finalized recommendations in December 2025
- State Board of Education must decide on recommendations by July 1, 2027
- Student input (via UP for Learning) will inform the decision. UP for Learning will incorporate students' voices in a summary to be presented to the State Board during their decision-making process.
- New requirements begin fall 2027 for incoming 9th graders (Class of 2031)

What does 'credit' mean?:

Credits should be based on demonstrating skills, not seat time. This aligns with Vermont's existing Education Quality Standards.

- **1 credit = mastery** of the essential skills and knowledge typically covered in a year-long course. A student who demonstrates those skills quickly earns the same credit as one who needs more time. **For example**, two Algebra I students, one who masters equations and inequalities in half the year, and one who needs the full year, both earn the same 1 credit.
- **Why "credits" over "proficiencies"?** Schools across Vermont define "proficiencies" differently, making it challenging to establish a statewide standard. "Credits" tied to clear learning standards create a consistent common language. This would mean minimal change for schools already aligned to standards.

How will this affect Career Tech Centers?

The AOE wants to make sure Career and Technical Education or CTE credits count toward core graduation requirements so students at Tech Centers get consistent credit recognition no matter which high school they graduate from.

Flip over: To explore the requirements and what YOU can do.

The current proposed requirements include (22.5 total credits):

Math (4 credits) - Algebra I, Geometry, Statistics/Data Science, plus 1 pathway elective	Arts (1.5 credits) - Performing and/or visual arts of the student's choice
ELA (4 credits) - 1 Introductory + 3 Specialized Mastery credits based on pathway	World Languages (1 credit) - 1 world language or ASL
Social Studies (3 credits) - US History, Civics/American Government, World Studies	Financial Literacy (0.5 credits) - Stand-alone financial literacy courses
Science (3 credits) - Physical, Life, and Earth/Space Science — each with a lab component	PE/Health (2.5 credits) - 1.5 Physical Education + 1 Health Education
Electives (3 credits) - Student's choice	

How you can get involved – Complete the Statewide Youth Survey!



- Explore the AOE and State Board of Ed websites
- Get involved with UP for Learning and the Educational Justice Coalition!
- Review the [AOE Recommendations for](#) Statewide Graduation Requirements

Appendix F: FAQ for Focus Group Participants

Statewide Graduation Requirements – Frequently Asked Questions

1. What students will this impact?

The new requirements would begin in fall 2027 for incoming 9th graders (Class of 2031). This will not affect any current students.

2. What does “credit” mean?

Credits should be based on demonstrating skills, not seat time. This aligns with Vermont's existing Education Quality Standards.

1 credit = mastery of the essential skills and knowledge typically covered in a year-long course. A student who demonstrates those skills quickly earns the same credit as one who needs more time. **For example**, two Algebra I students, one who masters equations and inequalities in half the year, and one who needs the full year, both earn the same 1 credit.

3. Why "credits" over "proficiencies"?

Schools across Vermont define "proficiencies" differently, making it challenging to establish a statewide standard. "Credits" tied to clear learning standards create a consistent common language. This would mean minimal change for schools already aligned to standards.

4. How will this affect Career Tech Centers?

The AOE wants to make sure Career and Technical Education or CTE credits count toward core graduation requirements so students' learning at Tech Centers get consistent credit recognition no matter which high school they graduate from.

5. Question about fractional credit? Interdisciplinary course offerings and credit - what would this look like and how does the AOE support schools in making this happen?

Once the graduation requirements are approved, the AOE will be working with schools to map out which standards would need to be taught to what depth of knowledge for each credit. This will allow schools to deliver the content in interdisciplinary ways, as well as through flexible pathways, while still ensuring the appropriate consistency of rigor across the state when students earn a Vermont diploma.

6. What will the content be in these courses?

The content will be based on the State Board-approved student standards for grades 9-12 (e.g. Common Core Math and ELA standards, Next Generation Science Standards, etc)

7. My school has only 7 blocks per day. How will that impact my requirements?

No, because the graduation requirements are not based on seat-time in classes.

8. What is not decided/defined yet?

The AOE's statewide graduation requirements proposal has been submitted, and now the State Board will decide which of those recommendations, if any, to move forward with. They have committed to deciding by December 2026, which is ahead of the deadline set by Act 73.

9. How will this impact special education?

The AOE has launched a working group focused on accessibility of the new graduation requirements. We are working with stakeholders across the state, partnering with other states to learn from their approaches, and preparing to support educators in making decisions about how to ensure students with disabilities are able to satisfy the requirements. Similar to how some students with more significant support needs take different state assessments, there may be instances where the graduation requirements would need to be adjusted. However, these kinds of decisions would need to follow a statewide process and be documented in the student's individualized education plan (IEP).

10. What happens next?

The AOE will submit the report that UP For Learning prepares to the State Board of Education during their decision-making process. They will finalize their decision with a board vote in December of 2026. All State Board Meetings meetings begin and end with time for public comments, which students are welcome to participate in as well.

Appendix G: Mayla's Experience with Engagement at U-32

I collaborated with Chief Academic Officer Erin Davis, U-32 Principal Becca Tatischeff, and U-32 Community Schools Coordinator Bec Dezan to expand on the work done with UP at U-32. Our goal was to use the work gathering student feedback on the statewide graduation requirements as an example to develop a broader system of student feedback gathering process that can be used across the state to gather student feedback on a variety of issues in the future.

In addition to working with UP and facilitating a Focus Group at U-32, I met weekly with Becca and Bec, and had several meetings with Erin Davis. We started by brainstorming different methods of collecting feedback, including student interviews, feedback sessions with student leadership clubs, a survey, posters in the hallways, and more. We considered how to engage and uplift the voices of students who may not normally go out of their way to participate in this data-gathering.

Outreach was a struggle throughout this beta process at U-32. While planning this feedback-gathering process with Becca and Bec, we discussed the importance of students being informed on the subject before sharing their opinion. I hosted an info session during our school's callback time the week before the focus group to go over the proposed graduation requirements, including directly comparing them to U-32's current graduation requirements so that students could understand the differences. Unfortunately, only two students showed up. We struggled with outreach leading up to the U-32 focus group as well. While a great group of students showed up to participate the day of, I recognized most of the faces in the room as student leaders from various clubs or other activities. While their opinions and voices were extremely valuable, I recognized that our outreach and the format of the focus group hadn't quite succeeded in including some of the perspectives that aren't always heard in a school building.

To expand on this project in future data-collecting for the State of Vermont, I recommend utilizing additional methods of gathering feedback that may be more accessible to students who don't usually engage. For example, putting posters in the school hallways with tally mark voting / sticky notes to share thoughts, and engagement in classrooms rather than just the opt-in focus group. These efforts would require additional time and commitment, which is why I recommend a model of fostering youth-adult partnerships to facilitate these information sessions and subsequent feedback-gathering at individual schools. If the Agency of Education provided a protocol for students to partner with their school leadership and facilitate data-gathering processes similar to what I did at U-32, we would be able to involve more students who don't typically get involved, and collect broader, more representative data across the state (not limited to the schools engaged in Focus Groups or using the survey).

This project has been beneficial to U-32 as well. We plan to use the data collected to inform decisions made by teachers and the Curriculum Director of Instruction in the process of re-designing graduation requirements at our school to align with the statewide requirements.