

Youth Engagement and Feedback on Statewide Graduation Requirements

Presentation to Vermont State Board of Education
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Unleashing the Power of Partnership for Learning



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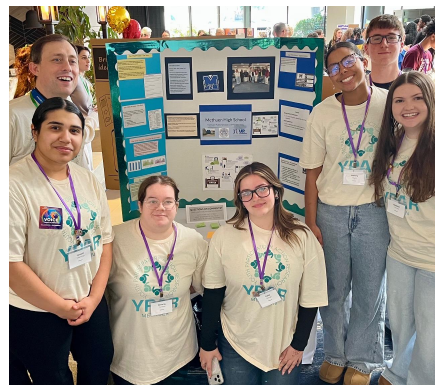
UP Executive Director



Unleashing the Power of Partnership for Learning



Mission Empowering youth
and adults to reimagine and
transform education *together*



Overview of the project:



Student Focus Groups

128 Participants in **10** sessions

4

CTE-specific
sessions

5

high school
sessions

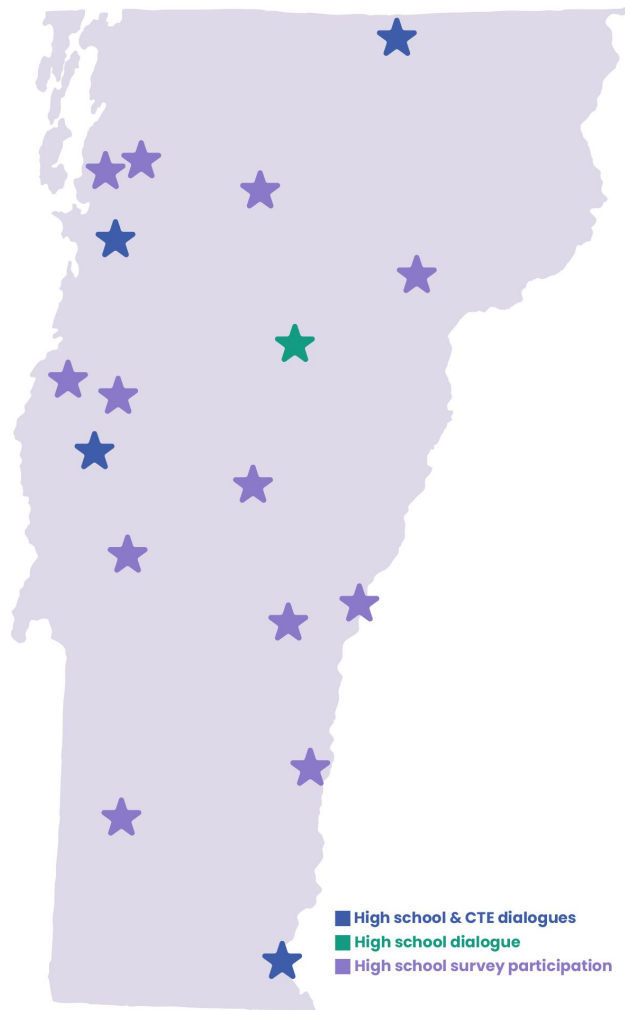
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virtual
sessions



Student Survey

1465 responses with high
participation at 14 schools



Dialogue and Survey Sites

Dialogues held at:

Patricia A. Hannaford Career Center, Middlebury Union HS, North Country Career Center, North Country Union HS, Center for Technology Essex, Essex HS, U-32, Brattleboro Union HS, Windham Regional Career Center, and online.

Strong survey participation at:

BFA Fairfax, Blue Mountain, Burr and Burton, Danville, Essex High School, Hartford, Lamoille Union, Middlebury, Milton, Montpelier, Mount Abraham, Otter Valley, Randolph, Springfield, U-32, Vergennes, and Woodstock

Project Timeline - 2026

February & March

UP for Learning youth & adult team generated questions and developed agenda, and shared communications to school and district leaders.

Questions and agenda co-developed in partnership with with AOE.



April

Youth and adults from UP held 10 HS and CTE-based dialogues.

Survey window open.

UP team developed analysis approach for data.



May & June

UP team completed data analysis and drafted report on findings.

Team refined report and recommendations in partnership with the AOE.

Sharing about the findings and recommendations with you, the AOE leadership!



What questions did we ask in the focus groups?

1. What do you see as the purpose of graduation requirements in preparing students for life after graduation?
2. 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?
3. Looking at the proposed graduation requirements, how do you think these changes would affect students at your school?
4. **HS QUESTION:** Part of the proposed requirements include increasing engagement in “flexible pathways,” like internships, dual enrollment, career programs, or independent projects.
5. **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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. How do you hope that your school engages students in designing meaningful ways for students to satisfy the graduation requirements?

How were the focus groups structured?

Dialogues lasted ~90 minutes

Agenda:

- Welcome, introductions and statement from the AOE partners
- Chalk-talk (silent writing / drawing activity)
- Circle conversations (structured rounds of questions facilitated by youth with adult notetakers)

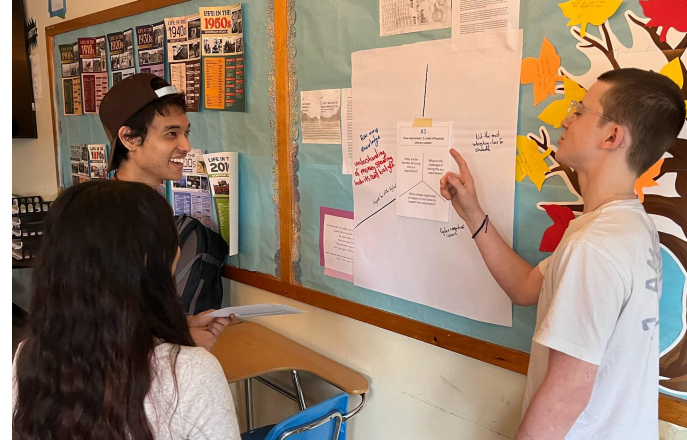


Student Survey

- 24 question survey for Vermont high school students
- Developed in partnership between youth and adults at UP for Learning and the Agency of Education
- Topics including youth perceptions of and experiences with:
 - Current graduation requirements and the proposed requirements
 - Transferable skills
 - Access and experiences with flexible pathways
 - Personalized learning plans.
- 1465 participants with high participation at 14 schools.
- Included some demographic data for cross-tab analysis



Reflections on What We Heard



What Students Want Their Education to Be:

- **Relevant to their future lives** – Students repeatedly emphasized that they want school to connect to life after graduation, whether that means college, a career, entrepreneurship, or another pathway.
- **Flexible, with choice and voice** – Students generally understand and accept the need for graduation requirements, but do not want requirements to crowd out opportunities to pursue personal interests, electives, Flexible Pathways, and CTE programs.
- **Inclusive and accessible** – Students want graduation requirements that work for all learners and do not unintentionally create barriers for students with different learning needs, identities, responsibilities, or life circumstances.
- **Supported by clear guidance and caring adults** - Students identified the importance of caring adults, clear communication, school counselors, and accessible systems for helping them understand and meet graduation requirements.
- **Reflective what makes their schools special** – Students generally recognize the value of statewide consistency while also expressing pride in the programs, opportunities, and experiences that make their schools unique.

General support, specific concerns

Students generally support a statewide approach to graduation requirements, but have critiques of specific elements and concerns about the impacts of implementation.

“It is positive that everyone is learning the same things, and that everyone in the state is held to the same standard.”

Cross-cutting Feedback

We asked students about 4 specific 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.

Students had these common concerns across all four elements:

- Concerns about staff capacity and school resources
- Concerns about preserving choice and flexibility
- Questions about rigor and meaningful learning
- Questions about perceived relevance

Health Education

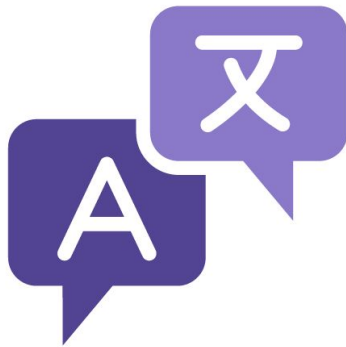
- Students valued learning that prepares them for real-life health decisions.
- Some supported expanded content related to mental health, relationships, disability, neurodiversity, gender identity, and sexual orientation.
- Students emphasized the importance of educator preparedness when discussing sensitive topics.

“Having a full year of health could be so so good... It would be a good change in our school climate if everyone was a little more educated about those things.”

World Languages

Most divisive element of the proposed requirements:

- Some students viewed world languages as valuable for communication, careers, and cultural understanding.
- Others questioned whether world language study is relevant to all students' future goals.



World Language saw the **largest gap in perceived relevance and interest** between students who planned to go to college and those who did not plan to go to college:

72%

of **students who planned to go to college** said it was relevant, compared to

49%

of **students who did not plan to go to college.**

Financial Literacy

Financial Literacy received some of the strongest support of any proposed requirement.

“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.”



Overall,

85%

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.

Data Science and Statistics

- Students supported the requirement when they could see clear real-world applications.
- Seen as relevant to wide range of future plans.
- Students emphasized the importance of making mathematics meaningful and applicable.

“It includes relevant skills that you need throughout life.”

“I struggle so much with math. The higher the level, the less uses there are in the real world.”

Different students – Different perceptions

- Future goals influence perceptions.
- College-bound students generally found the proposal more relevant.
- CTE students had clear concerns about scheduling and logistical challenges

“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.”

Barriers to Implementation

Students identified barriers to implementation including:

- Current struggles with budgeting and staffing
- Ability of school schedules to accommodate the requirements
- Student support services
- Access to school counselors
- SIS or gradebook software to track their progress.

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

“With these new [requirements], I have a fear that we’re going to lose even more of our arts and extra-curriculars.”

“How do these requirements fit people with IEPs?”

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

“We have to go to our counselors, but our counselors are always busy.”

flexibility and choice to meet requirements

- Strong support for Flexible Pathways.
- Students described greater engagement when learning connected to their interests and goals.
- Many supported integrated and interdisciplinary approaches to meeting requirements.
- Students emphasized preserving opportunities that make schools unique.

“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.”

Recommendations for State Board

1. Reconsider requiring four credits in any subject area - *limits opportunities for electives & strains school resources.*
2. Broaden the World Language requirement to include a cultural learning component - *to accommodate student interest and abilities.*
3. Explore integrating requirements as a way to increase relevance and create flexibility - *students are supportive of finding ways to creatively combine credits as needed, such as incorporating financial literacy into math requirements.*

Recommendations for School & District Leaders

1. Create and advertise flexible pathways options.
2. Provide varied class options and interest-based courses to meet requirements.
3. Focus student support systems on required courses.
4. Integrate graduation requirements into existing or new courses.
5. Offer Driver's Education as a standard, accessible course in public schools.
6. Support student-friendly gradebook practices.
7. Plan for comprehensive education and communication about the new graduation requirements for students, teachers, and administrators.
8. Ensure all students have multiple opportunities to visit CTE centers and learn about the opportunities there.

Recommendations for Agency of Education

1. **Emphasize student supports in implementation** - *Including opportunities for customization and alternative pathways to earn credits.*
2. **Provide high-quality supporting materials to schools and districts to explain the changes.**
3. **Support school counselors in implementation** - *Counselors play a critical role in supporting students through graduation.*
4. **Create consistency in CTE program credits** - *Students should be able to meet their graduation requirements through their CTE program without having to take online or summer courses.*
5. **Identify best practices around student-centered credit tracking and reporting** - *So that all students can track and understand their path to graduation.*

Thank you!

