

The Rhode Island High School Diploma System



*All kids
well prepared
for
high - performing,
bright futures*



Peter McWalters, Commissioner
June 2005



June 2005

Dear Fellow Rhode Islanders:

The new Rhode Island Diploma System evolved directly from the Board of Regents' High-School Regulations of 2003. The Board of Regents believes that all Rhode Island high-school graduates should be able to demonstrate that they are proficient in standards-based content as well as applied-learning skills.

We on the Board of Regents have been working closely with our counterparts on the Board of Governors for Higher Education to develop what we call the "PK-16 Initiative." The goal is to help all our high-school graduates become college ready regardless of when, or even if, they choose to go to college. The graduation requirements of all high schools in Rhode Island are being aligned with the admissions requirements for our public institutions of higher education.

Ultimately, we aim to achieve a seamless system, from preschool through college graduation, so that at each step in the education process our students are being prepared for success. The Regents' mission is to ensure that all our students achieve at the high levels needed to lead fulfilling and productive lives, to compete in academic and employment settings, and to contribute to society.

Sincerely,

James A. DiPrete
Chairman, RI Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education

Donald L. Carcieri. Governor, State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations

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THE RHODE ISLAND HIGH-SCHOOL DIPLOMA SYSTEM

The Rationale

Schools must be sure that all students successfully complete a rigorous diploma program that gives them access to college or post-secondary training, whether immediately after high school or when and if they so choose.

In recent years, employers, higher education leaders and the general public have asked that diplomas guarantee more than that a student might have attended school and managed to pass a number of classes, sometimes with low grades. Employers and colleges want graduates who are competent in oral and written communication skills, strong foundational math, the ability to work in teams, and the critical thinking skills necessary to research and solve problems creatively and effectively.

Currently some 26 states require that all students pass high-stakes, standardized tests, administered by the state, as a condition of receiving a high-school diploma. But these states are finding that their make-it-or-break-it system might spur on about 70% of the students. That approach can intimidate the remainder into dropping out of regular high school entirely.

To get more students over the testing hurdle to graduation, high-stakes states find themselves lowering the passing standard to an almost minimum competency, the very opposite of increasing academic rigor. Also, high-stakes tests give new English-language learners and certain students with disabilities no hope of proving any proficiencies and thus no hope of a regular high school diploma.

Furthermore, there is little evidence that suggests that even those who can pass the tests are necessarily able to apply their knowledge. In the real world, all students need to be able to perform a multi-step problem using critical thinking and a mastery of content. In RI, a student must be certified in both the content base as well as demonstrated abilities to apply knowledge and skills to complex problems. This two-dimensional model offers broad opportunities so that all students can achieve at high standards and apply their knowledge and skills in real-world situations.



www.ride.ri.gov/highschoolreform

Legend/button: **DIPLOMA** The online version of this brochure has active links to further information.

Required: **Proficiency in Core-Content Knowledge**

By 2008, every student must successfully complete at least 20 Carnegie units (courses), meeting requirements in six core areas.

- ✓ All students must complete four units – year-long courses – of both English language arts (ELA) and mathematics, though the fourth course in math might be math-related, such as computer programming, physics or accounting. Most high schools already require the three years of science that students will need to be successful on the state science assessment which comes online in 2008. All schools must align their existing courses in these three subject areas with the state's Grade Span Expectations which have been completed for ELA and math **DIPLOMA** and will be completed for science in 2006.

Individual high schools will set their own local requirements for social studies, the arts and technology, based on national or state standards. (For examples see: **DIPLOMA** .)

- ✓ At a minimum, all students will need to demonstrate proficiency in these six core areas. Existing course offerings must now give students frequent opportunities to practice applying their skills and knowledge, in order to prepare them for the more formal demonstrations of proficiencies necessary to earn a diploma. Naturally, high school courses will also continue to administer routine assessments such as tests, quizzes, papers, labs and so forth.

All students must participate in the state assessments for English Language Arts, mathematics and science.

- ✓ Together, a tri-state partnership of Rhode Island, Vermont, and New Hampshire created the Grade Span Expectations, from which the partnership is developing a new set of standardized tests designed to measure students' success in achieving those Expectations. Called the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP), these tests **DIPLOMA** will be administered across all three New England states. This partnership offers all three states a much larger pool from which to find examples of successful programs and strategies implemented by schools using identical tests. The ELA and math assessments will be ready as of Fall 2007. Science will follow in Spring 2008.
- ✓ Each student's results from the NECAP tests will count toward graduation, but never enough to prevent a student from graduating. Students unsuccessful on the state assessments will have ample opportunities to demonstrate proficiency in all core subjects, using evidence-based proofs of proficiency, like course grades, projects, portfolios, and performances.

All schools will support each student's creation of an Individual Learning Plan.

- ✓ An Individual Learning Plan (ILP) **DIPLOMA** is primarily authored by students themselves, with guidance from their school advisors, parents, and community contacts – such as a business or arts mentor, when applicable. Schools are creating structures and occasions – such as advisories – to revisit ILPs frequently and even rewrite them as the student chooses high school courses, documents his or her outside activities, prepares to meet graduation requirements, and generally plans for the future. The ILP helps students focus on goals and how to use the time in high school to accomplish their personal objectives, in conjunction with completing graduation requirements. If a student changes schools within RI, the student and new high school has the ILP to help avoid disruption in that student's progress towards graduation. ILPs offer an excellent opportunity to engage parents in their child's learning.





Required:

Proficiency in applied learning skills

All students must demonstrate proficiency in applied learning skills in all six core content areas.

Applied learning skills are those which serve many aspects of a student's life – critical thinking, problem solving, research, communication, decision making, interpreting information, analytic reasoning and personal or social responsibility. **DIPLOMA**

- ✓ RI's Diploma System certifies mastery of content knowledge as well as the ability to apply that knowledge to real world projects and problems. For decades, employers and colleges complained that applied skills are sorely lacking in current high school graduates. Merely remembering facts is only a good first step toward a true subject mastery, which involves using facts and formulas to solve problems in widely different contexts. The mechanics of English are only valuable if a student can compose competent, effective business letters to a variety of clients, co-workers or potential employers, for example.
- ✓ Demonstrations of applied learning skills will always involve some form of evidence or proof of mastery, whether from presentations – such as speeches, projects or performances – or from products – such as essays, collections of short stories or science journals. After high school, employers and higher education evaluate their workers or students primarily from evidence of mastery – such as completed and on-time tasks, written work, plans, designs, products, records and so forth. Except for occasional entrance and credentialing exams – the LSAT, state bar, or drivers license exams, for example – tests as such will fade from students' lives, whereas demonstrations of proficiency by applying skills never will.

The new diploma system requires students to apply their learning to their own interests or passions, which motivates students to pursue their own learning.

- ✓ Whether a student is interested in rock music, sports, cooking, car mechanics, or fashion design, most passions can reasonably become a subject for a demonstration of proficiency in content and applied skills. Music alone could suggest projects in the science of acoustics, the math of tonality, the social studies of cultural tastes, the technology of instrument production and so forth. Indeed, one of the most compelling features of the new diploma system is that it harnesses students' interests in the service of their own learning. Traditional education asked students to 'park' their passions at the door, which invited alienation among those students who find course work irrelevant to their real concerns. School advisors and content-area teachers will help students design exhibition and portfolio projects that satisfy their own natural thirst for information and skills. Outside interests and those content areas beyond the six core subjects – such as foreign language and technical education – can become integrated into everyday school life, making academics more interesting and relevant.

Each district is using two of three strategies for assessing applied learning – Digital Portfolio **DIPLOMA** Exhibition **DIPLOMA** or the Certificate of Initial Mastery (CIM) **DIPLOMA**

- ✓ Using the state's guidance, local districts and schools have developed their own criteria for successful demonstrations of applied learning skills. These criteria are on each school's Website or otherwise easily accessible from the school so that students and parents know exactly what is expected. Equipped with protocols, small groups of teachers, parents, and community members will gather to view exhibitions, hear oral presentations, or examine portfolios to determine whether the student's work has met the criteria for success.

The state monitors the rigor of all schools' assessments through its Peer Support and Review process.

- ✓ Although proficiency assessments and scoring criteria are local, the state has the responsibility of ensuring that the demands to meet graduation standards are comparable no matter which school the child attends or in which community. The rigor, reliability, validity, and high standards of each local system must be consistently strong, from school to school. Local graduation systems will always need the perspective, reflections and quality review of an outside evaluator.



THE RI DIPLOMA SYSTEM

Required:

School support systems for all students

Enhanced Literacy Instruction begins in kindergarten and continues to support, ramp up or give special attention to any student not reading on grade level.

- ✓ Struggling readers are probably struggling with science, history and mathematics as well. Reading problems put any student at risk of failing courses and eventually dropping out of school. RI's literacy initiative is designed to catch reading problems early and provide help quickly. All schools assess their students' reading abilities at least once a year, and for any child reading below a certain grade level, teachers will develop a Personal Learning Plan (PLP). The plan outlines exactly what will be done to help the student become a strong reader. Schools must share these plans with the child's parents, enlisting their help and support.
- ✓ Learning to read effectively is not confined to elementary school. Middle and high school students need to be taught how to read scientific documents and historical texts. All of RI's secondary schools must implement an adolescent literacy program to accommodate their different students' needs.

Universal Design for Access assumes that all students, including those with serious disabilities, are merely different kinds of learners on the same continuum.

- ✓ For some students, intensive literacy will be only one part of an even more comprehensive support plan. A diploma system for all students must have the flexibility to promote achievable success for all students, including those just learning English or children with disabilities. Using state guidance to assure rigor and true academic achievements, schools will create learning experiences and assessments that maximize the diverse learner's ability to progress. 'Universal' does not imply one solution, but means high standards for all students, each of whose education is addressed with different and creative solutions.

Personalized education ensures that every student is known well by at least one adult in the school, who can offer guidance, help and on occasion, referrals.

- ✓ The 2002 RI High School Regulations, where much of RI's diploma system was first put in place, require that all schools eliminate anonymity and impersonal social climates by having the adults get to know the students better. Most commonly, schools begin 'personalizing' their educations with advisory systems, whereby every professional guides a small group of 12 to 15 students during the four years of their tenure. These advisors are essential to helping all students remove obstacles, handle adversity, stay focused, access outside help and in short, prepare for proficiency-based graduation. Other more specialized supports and professionals – social workers, psychologists, special educators – are available when students' issues are beyond the expertise of a typical teacher. Mostly the adults get to know advisees and their families in order to monitor, guide, and cheer them on during high school. No longer can schools be sink-or-swim experiences, with a portion of acceptable casualties. Personalization is key to the success of every student and every school.
- ✓ Nationally, Comprehensive School Counseling has been working to change the job and nature of the school guidance counselor to one who oversees and aids the school's overall climate and its social-emotional issues – along with the more traditional work of supporting student academic and college success. Moving from the model of one-on-one counseling, the Comprehensive Guidance Counselor helps schools re-organize so students are more connected to the adults, to the resources they need, and to other students in positive ways. Guidance is a critical player in helping school professionals understand and carry out their new roles – as advisors, for example – to create a social and academic fabric without cracks through which students can fall. Comprehensive guidance makes sure that systems are in place such that all students are well prepared to leave school ready for a career, whether they immediately go on to college, further training, the military or directly into the workforce.





A Brief History

RI has been evaluating its students – and the schools themselves – by examining information gathered from standardized tests, everyday classroom assessments, and projects that demonstrate applied learning.

What children must know has been the subject of curricula and testing systems since time immemorial. But in the early 1990's as the standards movement started to take hold, RI developed its Comprehensive Education Strategy (CES) with a keen interest in what children should be able to do as well as know. The CES asked schools and the public to rethink both what education was supposed to accomplish and how those accomplishments could be tested. The very technology that makes standardized tests convenient greatly limits what skills they can assess. Multiple-choice, machine-scored tests cannot evaluate the full range of critical thinking skills, such as the quality of a well-crafted, well-delivered speech.

To broaden the range of curricula to include critical thinking, RI entered into a multi-state partnership that resulted in the New Standards Reference Exams – tests that ask for open-ended and constructed responses. To be successful on those exams, students need regular instruction in problem-solving and experience with hands-on applications of their facts and skills. Scoring the open-ended sections of the tests require highly-trained specialists. The New Standards tests have been administered annually since 1998.

Similarly, using only test and other quantitative data to evaluate schools themselves sometimes misses the true quality of a school. Rather than rely too heavily on purely statistical data, RI balanced its school-assessment system with School Accountability for Teaching and Learning (SALT) visits, whereby teams of educators and community members go to a school for a week, observe the school's practices with their own eyes, and evaluate according to standardized SALT criteria. This system yields key information that schools can use to improve, to shift strategies, or to confirm effectiveness.

In response to widespread concerns about student performance, RI held two High School Summits. At these summits, the greater education community committed to significantly raising graduation standards and simultaneously intensifying support to the students themselves. All students must have at least one adult advisor in the school and must receive additional reading assistance when necessary. In 2003, the Regents' high school regulations established the foundation for the current diploma system, including important support structures.

For students, the new Diploma System divides the labor of gathering evaluation information between new standardized tests and local assessments which evaluate a broader range of content. The new standardized tests, developed by the New England Common Assessment Program, will be administered starting in 2007. Each high school is designing its own local assessment system which must be piloted, refined, and fully in place for the graduating class of 2008.

To hold schools accountable, the System similarly divides its evaluation information between the data from tests and relevant statistics, and assessment evidence of the Peer Support and Review process.

Just as many parents, teachers, community members, and even politicians have participated on a SALT-visit team, all stakeholders will have multiple opportunities to be involved with the implementation of the Diploma System. Rhode Island schools will be reaching out to local partners to serve as mentors and advisors, offer sites for work-based learning experiences, provide resources for specialized tasks, and help evaluate graduation-related projects, performances, and portfolios. Together, we will help students meet the proficiency requirements.

The Rhode Island High School Diploma System



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www.ride.ri.gov/highschoolreform

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