

GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS AND THE STUDENT HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCE IN WASHINGTON, DC

Community Engagement Report

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Overview

The Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME), in partnership with the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) and with support from District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) and Public Charter Schools (PCS), engaged school communities to discuss revisions to DC wide Graduation Requirements. We gathered insights from students and school leaders about their high school experiences and perspectives on potential changes to current graduation requirements and the graduate profile. Student engagement focused on several key areas: students' high school experience, career preparation and pathway opportunities, graduation requirements, future readiness, and social-emotional learning supports.

The DME conducted 16 student focus group engagements across local education agencies (LEAs) from October to December 2024 with 158 students. We engaged DCPS and public charter schools.¹ Most of the students were in 11th and 12th grades, and the majority of students identified as Black, followed by Hispanic, and the majority of students lived in Ward 7, followed by Wards 8 and 4. These focus groups aimed to provide insights into the high school experience to help inform OSSE's proposed updates to the graduation requirements. Further engagements aim to include a focus on supporting specialized populations, such as conversations with special education coordinators from across sectors to gather insights on exceptional learners, representatives from the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services for youth involved in the juvenile justice system, and the Department of Human Services Office of Migrant Services to better understand the needs of newcomer and migrant populations. The insights gathered from these engagements will also help to inform other key DME priorities, such as social-emotional learning (SEL), school safety, teacher retention, and efforts to re-imagine high school more broadly. By integrating diverse student perspectives, the DME aims to create a more inclusive and supportive educational environment that addresses the various needs of all students.

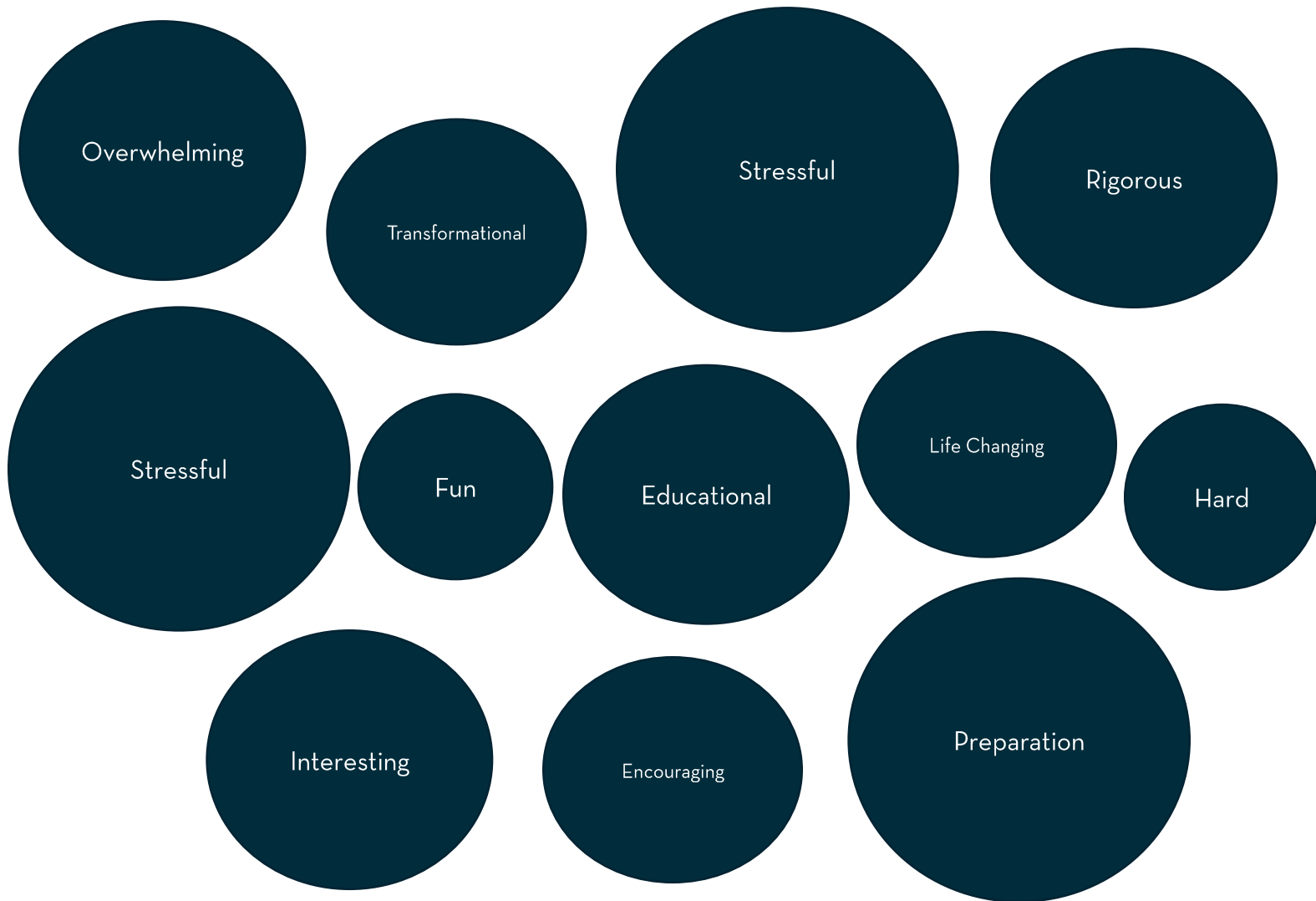
¹ DCPS school engaged included: Ballou STAY Opportunity Academy, Benjamin Banneker Academic HS, Dumber HS, HD Woodson STEM HS, Ron Brown Preparatory HS, School Without Walls HS, Theodore Roosevelt HS. PCS schools engaged included: Basis DC HS, Cesar Chavez HS, DC International HS, Digital Pioneers HS, E.L. Haynes HS, Friendship Technology HS, KIPP College Preparatory HS, Washington Latin HS, Washington Leadership Academy HS.

The following report is divided into three parts. *Part 1* provides an in-depth look at students' high school experiences, highlighting their perspectives on what should be included in graduation requirements. These initial insights reveal the aspects of students' educational journeys they value most and the areas they believe need improvement. *Part 2* captures direct feedback from students regarding the proposed graduation requirement revisions presented by OSSE and the various pathway options under consideration. This section underscores students' reactions, concerns, and suggestions for creating a more flexible and inclusive education system that reflects their diverse goals and needs. Finally, *Part 3* outlines the top considerations based on student feedback, offering actionable recommendations to guide future decisions.

Key Words and Phrases

The following words and phrases were used by high school students to describe their high school experience.

The sizes reflect the frequency and prominence of the words used.



Focus Group Summary and Insights

Part 1: Initial Insights on High School Experiences and Graduate Requirements

High School Experience

Students shared a mix of positive, elevating experiences, and reflections on their supportive school communities as well as common challenges in balancing expectations, workload, and the need for more balanced teaching styles and support.

1. **Increased Academic Rigor and Workload:** Students consistently reported an intensified academic workload compared to middle school, especially in advanced courses like International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), and specialized career pathways. Many students shared they are taking challenging classes that align with their interests but feel stressed by the volume of work and high expectations.

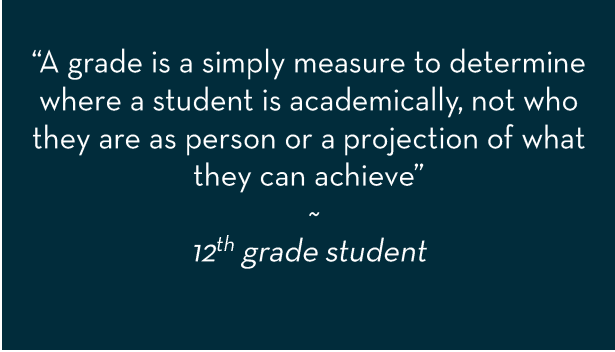
Students overwhelmingly expressed pressure to enroll in AP, IB and dual enrollment courses, along with peer pressure to perform well. This pressure creates a sense of being constantly on “autopilot” for many students with the focus to get work done. This pressure is further compounded by competitive grading systems that require additional effort to achieve high scores (e.g., on AP tests) and obtain additional credits at specialized high schools. Some students reported having a designated time in the day to rest was beneficial to students’ overall mental health.

2. **Value of Hands-On and College/Career-Oriented Learning Opportunities:** Students said they value career-specific classes and experiential learning, such as health sciences, engineering, and personal/professional skills courses. These courses provide practical skills and insights into future careers, particularly in fields like medicine, engineering, and public policy, making students feel a little more prepared for life after high school.

Many students said they feel prepared for college and career paths due to resume-building activities, reflective projects, and early exposure to professional environments through internships. These opportunities provide an early foundation for post-secondary success and self-confidence in their

abilities. Students generally wanted more exposure to courses and experiences that prepare them for life after high school (e.g., career exposure, financial literacy).

3. **Importance of Teacher and Staff Interactions:** Students often pointed to a specific teacher as the reason for liking a particular subject. Students emphasized the need for dedicated and caring teachers, with a recognition that teacher quality and attitudes significantly impacted their



“A grade is a simply measure to determine where a student is academically, not who they are as person or a projection of what they can achieve”

~
12th grade student

engagement and learning. Students also urged educators to adapt to different student needs, which reflects a trend toward personalized learning environments that consider diverse backgrounds and learning styles. Some students believe there is room for improvement in teacher-student communication, both in instructional

methods and daily interactions, which can affect their learning experience. Substitute teachers' lack of content knowledge was also noted as a barrier to effective learning.

4. **Importance of Advising:** Students appreciated strong support systems within their schools that help them navigate college preparation and career pathways. Students expressed a common sentiment that schools need to improve organization and communication, especially regarding program availability. Many students are unaware of certain programs until it is too late to participate. Students say improved information sharing, guidance, and a more streamlined approach to course selection could help them make informed choices about their high school pathways. Students also reported value in having mental health and adult mentorship experiences to help them navigate their work/school and life balance.

5. **Social-Emotional Support and Mental Health Awareness:** Students recognize the importance of emotional regulation, professional etiquette, and mentorship to prepare them for the workforce and post-secondary life. They feel that learning how to manage stress, communicate effectively, and build relationships are critical skills that should be emphasized in high school alongside academics to support their overall development and readiness. Students also suggested more peer mentorship

programs where older students support younger ones. This underscores the value of building relationships and community within the school environment.

Students overwhelmingly share that mental health awareness and the ability to manage emotions are essential to their academic success. Student report that having a focus on emotional and mental health built into the school day and curriculum would be beneficial because it is not a natural skill that they develop. Students expressed an interest in learning to control their responses and develop maturity in handling interpersonal conflicts.

6. **More Emphasis on Practical Life Skills and Financial Independence:** Students focused on developing practical skills such as financial literacy, effective communication, and emotional maturity through conflict resolution. Students viewed these skills as essential for personal and professional success. In addition, they shared they feel most prepared when school has quality access to technology and experiences that further their skills when incorporating core subjects with technology. Students felt this intersection of technology access makes them prepared to exceed in various fields of study and careers.

Most students felt financial literacy was a foundational skill that would enable them to make informed decisions, manage their resources effectively, and avoid financial pitfalls as they navigate college and enter adulthood. Students shared that financial literacy is best positioned for 11th or 12th graders rather than 9th and 10th, because they are closer to real-world financial independence and are more likely to engage with concepts that directly impact their near future. Financial concepts that were the most mentioned included budgeting, understanding credit, managing debt, basic investment concepts, taxes and consumer rights. Beyond theoretical knowledge, students said hands-on projects and simulations, like creating a personal budget, mock investing, or even tracking spending, can make financial literacy lessons engaging and relevant.

General Views of Graduation Requirements

When asked about graduation requirements generally (without any specific proposed changes), students expressed a strong desire for a more tailored and supportive high school experience, with an emphasis on practical skills, career alignment, and early preparation for their post-high school ambitions.

- 1. Demand for Career-Specific Courses and Pathways:** Students frequently expressed a desire for courses that align with their career aspirations. Specifically, they expressed a high interest in more specialized classes in fields like Law, Mental Health Professions (e.g., Psychology or Professional Therapist), Healthcare (e.g., CNA or Pre-med), Finance, Cosmetology, and trades like electrical work. Students said that access to such career-specific electives would help them build relevant skills early on, making high school preparation more meaningful and applicable. Many students also acknowledged that school choice can support access to career specific experiences but noted that parents also lead that decision making.
- 2. Need for Greater Access and Equity in College and Career Readiness Programs:** Students shared programs like AP/IB, dual enrollment, and career and technical education (CTE) are appreciated but often limited by availability, selection criteria and conflicts with scheduling. Many students said that these resources are inconsistently accessible and sometimes only offered to selected groups. They shared a desire for broader, more equitable access to college and career readiness courses across all schools to ensure that every student has an opportunity to prepare for their future.
- 3. Mixed Experiences with AP, IB, and Dual Enrollment Programs:** Students shared that they appreciate the academic rigor and college credit opportunities that come with AP, IB, and dual enrollment, but some find these programs overwhelming in terms of workload, misaligned with their interests, or lacking in support from teachers. Several students reported being placed in AP or IB classes without a choice, leading to disengagement. They called for more choice and flexibility within these advanced programs, allowing students to pursue subjects that are relevant to their goals. Most students shared that their experiences in AP courses were significantly influenced by the teacher's ability to teach beyond the textbook and make real-world connections. In these cases, students felt

less anxious about the workload when they perceived the teacher as knowledgeable and engaged in their course delivery.

- 4. Desire for Early Exposure and Exploration of Career Interests:** Many students want exposure to career pathways earlier, ideally starting in 9th and 10th grade if not before. They felt that an introduction to a wide range of subjects early on would help them identify and refine their interests before they reach their final years in high school. Students also suggested that career fairs, job shadowing, internships, and advising could enhance their understanding of various professions and give them a clearer sense of direction. Ideally, students expressed a desire to be introduced to career interests and various pathways as early as middle school. Early exposure, they noted, would allow them to explore diverse fields, gain a clearer understanding of their strengths and interests, and make more informed decisions when selecting a high school and corresponding program. Through integrating career exploration and pathway education into the middle school curriculum, students believed they would feel less anxious about choosing a pathway prematurely in 9th grade.

- 5. Desire for More Elective Variety and Flexibility in Core Subjects:** Students would like a broader selection of electives, particularly those relevant to their interests and career goals, such as debate, pre-law, or specialized art and technical courses. Additionally, some students questioned the requirement of four years in subjects like math or English, suggesting that they would prefer to focus on electives that align with their intended career paths during the later years of high school. However, this view was not universally shared. Some students shared that the current graduation requirements are reasonable and make them more competitive with students globally. Compared to their peers in other jurisdictions, these students felt they are held to fewer requirements.

For subjects like Physical Education (PE) and Health, many students suggested that these courses could be combined or substituted with other structured activities, such as participation in a full season of sports teams or JROTC programs. They argued that this would provide flexibility while still promoting physical activity and health awareness.

6. Mixed Views on Community Service and Civic Engagement: There were mixed responses from students regarding the community service graduation requirement when asked about it in the abstract, apart from a specific proposal. Many students from schools with strict community service guidelines expressed that they would prefer to eliminate the requirement, as they either did not see its importance or felt it added unnecessary pressure to their already demanding workload and jobs. Many students stated that they would prefer to either remove the requirement entirely or reduce it to fewer than 75 hours. Notably, these views differed from the response from students when the proposed reductions were presented to them. While the consensus leaned toward reducing or removing community service hours, some students valued the requirement, seeing it as an opportunity to enhance their college applications and give back to their community. Additionally, students noted that community service exposes them to various professional fields and connects them with mentors, providing valuable insights into potential career paths and networking opportunities that can support their post-graduate goals.

Part 2: Direct Feedback on OSSE Proposed Revised Graduation Requirements and Diploma Pathways

Overall, students expressed wanting a practical education that prepares them for real-world experiences while maintaining academic rigor to remain competitive for college and careers after high school. They emphasized flexibility, relevance, and opportunities for personal growth through community service, electives, and pathways. Students consistently shared concerns about implementation, equity, and national competitiveness. Students also highlighted the importance of not widening opportunity gaps for students at traditional neighborhood schools, expressing a desire for equitable standards that ensure all students, regardless of their school, have access to high-quality education and opportunities. While students at application schools acknowledged their schools' high standards, they emphasized the importance of uplifting all schools and maintaining a high standard to prevent disparities.

Community Service Requirements

- 1. High Value of Community Service:** Students largely view community service as essential for personal growth, resume-building, college acceptances and gaining life skills. Many believe maintaining or increasing the hours (e.g., to 100 or 200 hours) is beneficial, while a minority supports reducing them

to alleviate stress. Notably, these views differed from the views of students asked about community service generally, without the specific proposal in front of them.

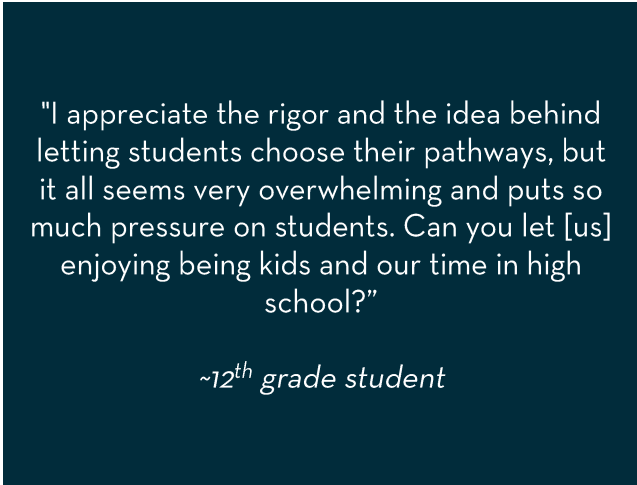
2. **Mixed Views on Manageability:** Those opposed to reductions argued that 100 hours is achievable when broken down across four years, while others feel that even 60 hours is challenging due to work or other commitments. Specifically, the students that support the decrease largely stated needing support from schools to find sites that accommodate their hectic schedules due to outside stress and having to contribute financially to their household.
3. **Firsthand Learning:** Many students expressed that community service provides unique opportunities to learn about career paths, build emotional intelligence, and contribute to the community.

Core Academic Requirements (Math and Science)

1. **Mixed Opinions on Proposed Reductions:** The majority of students, particularly upperclassmen, opposed reducing math and science credits, emphasizing the importance of these subjects for college readiness, competitive applications, and STEM-related careers. They shared experiences of applying to college programs, feeling largely prepared for the academic demands. Conversely, a smaller group—primarily underclassmen in grades 9 and 10—supported the reductions, citing the perceived irrelevance of certain courses such as Algebra 2 and Geometry to their future plans and the stress associated with meeting the current requirements.
2. **Real-World Relevance:** Students consistently advocated for curriculum adjustments to make math and science more practical, applicable to real-world skills, and aligned with SAT and college expectations. Rather than reducing credits, they would prefer an expansion of course offerings tailored to their post-secondary goals, ensuring the curriculum remains both rigorous and relevant. Most of the upperclassmen suggested alternative senior-level English courses like journalism or argumentative writing over traditional English 4 options. Students also prioritized courses that develop independence, emotional intelligence, and communication skills.

Pathways and Individualization

1. **Support for Pathways:** Many students saw the potential benefits of pathways, such as Career and Technical Education (CTE), Advanced Coursework, and Individualized Pathways, especially when they align with their specific career interests. They appreciated the opportunity to focus on areas that match their goals, such as technical skills, certifications, or advanced academic preparation.
2. **Concerns About Pathway Implementation:** Students expressed several concerns about how pathways would be implemented. Students strongly preferred delaying pathway selection until 10th or 11th grade, allowing students time to explore general education courses and develop a clearer understanding of their interests. Choosing a pathway as early as 9th grade felt overwhelming and premature for students as they shared how much they have grown during their time in high school. Students frequently asked about flexibility and whether they would have the ability to switch pathways if their interests or goals change. Students also raised questions about how transfer students would integrate into pathways and whether they would face barriers in accessing the courses or credits needed to complete their chosen track.



"I appreciate the rigor and the idea behind letting students choose their pathways, but it all seems very overwhelming and puts so much pressure on students. Can you let [us] enjoy being kids and our time in high school?"

~12th grade student

3. **Equity and Access:** Many students shared concerns about equitable implementation of graduation requirements, particularly for students attending schools with fewer resources or course options. They shared their belief that ensuring all students have access to robust pathways is critical to avoiding widening opportunity gaps. Students shared their fear and hesitation that differing diploma tracks could lead to a perception of hierarchy or limit opportunities for those on less rigorous tracks. To address this, students suggested maintaining high, unified standards while incorporating pathways to enhance (not replace) the foundation of a standard diploma.

Part 3: Top Considerations for Improving the High School Experience and Graduation Requirements.

The following are recommendations for the graduation requirements revision and overall high school experience based on student focus group feedback.

- 1. Enhanced Access to Career-Oriented, Hands-On Learning:** Based on student feedback, we recommend expanding career-specific electives, internships, job shadowing, and career fairs across high schools (and middle schools if possible) to give students meaningful exposure to a wide range of fields. Career-focused classes should be based on high-demand fields in DC and student interest, with these options available starting in 9th grade if not before to help students identify interests and refine their goals early on.
- 2. Preparation for Multiple Pathways and Life after High School:** Based on student feedback, instituting incentives and credit for completion of pathways (e.g., through endorsements or seals) can support student engagement and preparation for pathways after high school. However, we recommend considering one pathway umbrella (e.g., three or four courses of CTE, AP/IB, specialized courses like arts and language), and/or dual enrollment) to avoid siloing students and/or creating a de facto tracking system. To prepare students for life after high school, we support adding life skills courses (e.g., financial literacy) to the curriculum, ensuring robust access to college and career advising services, and implementing robust training for advisers to support students in navigating life during and after high school. We may want to explore the establishment of a pathways program database to facilitate ease of access for students, families, and counselors.
- 3. Maintain Current Credit Requirements but Increase Elective Variety and Core Subject Flexibility:** Based on student feedback, we recommend offering greater elective choice, especially for juniors and seniors, who may benefit from more specialized, advanced, and career-aligned classes rather than a fixed requirement in every core subject. Students interested in specific career pathways or technical skills should have access to electives (e.g., pre-law, pre-med, specialized art and technical courses, skilled trade courses) to make their education more relevant to their future goals. At the same time, we recommend maintaining the current credit count (24 credits) and core academic requirements

such as math, so students do not lose their competitive edge for higher education or jobs. To accomplish the goals of increased academic flexibility and rigor, we recommend issuing clear guidance and policies around course substitutions, facilitating the awarding of multiple subject credits for one course as long as standards are met, expanding the competency-based waiver process, and considering adding financial literacy to the math requirement.

- 4. Deepen Focus on Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and Mental Health:** Based on student feedback, we recommend embedding SEL and mental health resources within the curriculum and school day as much as possible. Schools could implement regular mentorship sessions, mindfulness activities, or advisory periods, where students receive guidance on managing stress, emotional regulation, and building healthy interpersonal relationships, perhaps as part of a life skills course. Ensuring that students can earn community service credit for mentoring could also support this goal.

Appendix

1A. Timeline and Objectives

September 2024 – October 2024

Objective: *Initiate Focus Group Engagements and Lay Foundation for Diverse Insights*

1. Kick-off Meetings and Planning

- Conducted planning sessions with OSSE to finalize logistics, outreach strategies, and participant recruitment for focus groups.
- Developed materials and guidelines for focus group facilitation to ensure consistency across sessions.

2. Student Focus Group Series – Part 1

- Engagements: Began the first wave of student focus groups across LEAs, focusing on gathering insights related to high school experiences, future preparation, and graduation requirement considerations generally.
- Outcomes: Collected qualitative data on students' high school experiences and perspectives on existing graduation requirements.

November 2024 – December 2024

Objective: *Expand Focus Group Engagements and Begin Analysis of Emerging Themes*

1. Student Focus Group Series – Part 2

- Engagements: Continued student focus groups, shifting focus to OSSE's draft graduation proposals.
- Outcomes: Gathered additional insights on students' high school experiences, the social-emotional challenges students face, and what course offerings they feel will make them globally competitive.

2. Preliminary Data Analysis

- Began analyzing themes from initial focus groups, identifying key issues, gaps in current graduation requirements, and potential areas for revision.
- Summarized findings for presentation to OSSE and school stakeholders, highlighting emerging recommendations and focus areas.

1B. Demographic Data

Grade Level	Strong participation from 11 th and 12 th grade students.
Race/Ethnicity	Racially, Black students make up the largest group, followed by Hispanic/Latino students.
Ward	Ward 7 geographically represents most of the students, followed by Ward 8 and Ward 4
Total Number of Students	158

The demographic profile shows a diverse student population engaged across various wards, age ranges, and identity groups. To date, the DME has conducted 16 focus groups with both DCPS and PCS High schools, engaging approximately 158 students. The majority of the students were with in 11th and 12th grades. Ward 7 geographically represents most of the students, followed by Ward 8 and Ward 4. Racially, Black students made up the largest group, followed by Hispanic/Latino students and smaller representations from White, Asian, and other racial backgrounds. Gender identities varied, with most students identifying as male. Academically, we engaged comprehensive high school students as well as alternative education programs and citywide application schools. This demographic data provides insight into the diverse backgrounds and identities that shape students' high school experiences and needs across different wards and educational settings.

1C. Schools Engaged

DCPS

Ballou STAY Opportunity Academy HS (Ward 8)	Benjamin Banneker HS (Ward 2)	Dunbar HS (Ward 5)	HD Woodson STEM HS (Ward 7)	Ron Brown Preparatory HS (Ward 7)	School Without Walls HS (Ward 3)	Theodore Roosevelt HS (Ward 4)
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PCS

Basis DC HS (Ward 2)	Cesar Chavez HS (Ward 7)	DC International HS (Ward 4)	Digital Pioneers HS (Ward 6)	E.L Haynes HS (Ward 4)	Friendship Tech HS (Ward 8)	KIPP DC College Preparatory HS (Ward 5)
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Washington Latin HS (Ward 4)	Washington Leadership HS (Ward 5)
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