ON THE PATH TO GRADUATION PATHWAYS:
Teacher Recommendations on the Implementation of Indiana's New Graduation Requirements

TEACH
+PLUS

+ |

AUTHORS

Kristin Bolek   Samantha Griffith
Susie Choi   Mark Harnew
Stephanie France   Ronni More (Senior Policy Fellow)
Tasha Getts   Jitka Nelson

TEACH PLUS STAFF

Yohan Chang   Rachel Hathaway
Indiana Policy Coordinator   Indiana Interim Executive Director

INTRODUCTION

Just as teachers learn best from one another through observation and modeling, schools and districts can benefit from learning about each other's promising practices. With this thought we, as a group of Teach Plus Indiana Teaching Policy Fellows and current classroom teachers, wanted to learn more about the effective practices of Indiana school corporations opting into the new state graduation requirements called Graduation Pathways. We sought to learn promising practices from these school corporations and share them with others across the state.

The work on Graduation Pathways began after the passage of HEA 1003 in 2017,[1] with the State Board of Education collaborating with the Department of Workforce Development and the Commission for Higher Education to develop this new set of graduation requirements, which will be formally required for the class of 2023.[2] Additionally in 2018, HEA 1426 established one standard Indiana diploma with four designations paving the way for an improved postsecondary transition for Hoosier students.[3] In recent years, the Indiana State Board of Education has made great strides in implementing Graduation Pathways as a statewide effort to provide equitable, practical, and effective educational experiences for all students.

The schools that we teach in represent a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, educational settings (public and charter) and urban, rural, and suburban areas. With the Graduation Pathways poised to open many new doors for our students, we want to ensure that all schools have equitable access to the resources and opportunities that will maximize the potential of the new requirements.

**TEACH
+PLUS**

In Indiana, students earning a high school diploma historically had to earn a certain threshold amount of credits in specific content areas and pass end-of-course assessments. Until recently, this meant earning 40 core credits and passing end-of-course assessments in Algebra I and English 10. With the passing of Graduation Pathways, students are now able to individualize their graduation requirements to align to their postsecondary goals. According to the Indiana State Board of Education, "the pathways provide schools with flexibility while expanding options for students to pursue their educational and career interests and goals ... Graduation Pathways will allow all students to select from multiple ways to graduate that align with their strengths and interests while furthering their career goals and skills."[4]

Graduation Pathways represent a shift towards more individualized and specialized preparation for life beyond high school. According to the Indiana State Board of Education, the new Graduation Pathways requirements seek to ensure "that every Hoosier student graduates from high school with 1) a broad **awareness** of and **engagement** with individual career interest and associated career options, 2) a strong foundation of **academic** and **technical skills**, and 3) **demonstrable employability skills** that lead directly to meaningful opportunities for postsecondary education, training, and gainful employment."[5] Graduation Pathways are made up of three sections:

+ Section 1: **High School Diploma** focusing on earning course credit toward a diploma.
+ Section 2: **Learn and Demonstrate Employability Skills** allowing students to choose between service-based, work-based, or project-based learning experience aligned to postsecondary goals.
+ Section 3: **Postsecondary-Ready Competencies** requiring students to pass graduation-qualifying examination.

This new initiative has been met with both praise and trepidation, and implementation has been a recurring topic of concern.[6] The consternation over Graduation Pathways implementation is wide-ranging. Educators report concerns about maintaining equity for all students given differences in access to reliable and affordable transportation.[7] In addition, some worry that the new requirements disadvantage students with learning disabilities. Some have also noted that the differences in options available at different school corporations could complicate school-to-school transfers.[8] Still, others are concerned that schools' human and financial resources could be worn thin in working to track additional student information and implement the new requirements with fidelity.[9]

Nonetheless, one clear advantage of the new requirements is the exposure to various employment opportunities to bolster students' postsecondary aspirations. For instance, schools have the ability to take advantage of the locally-created pathway (LCP) provision, offering additional specializations designed to prepare students for work in local industries. One such example is Elkhart Community Schools which offers an RV construction pathway designed to create a sturdy local pipeline to the RV industry which serves as a core of the local economy.[10] Other schools optimistically note that LCP could do the same for other rural Indiana communities with specific workforce requirements. According to the December 2018 Indiana Department of Education's memo, 504 schools in the state are reporting graduates. Of that, 22.2 percent, or 112 schools out of the 504 schools, reported that one or more of their

student graduates used Graduation Pathways.[11] While this is a requirement for the class of 2023, individual schools are already opting in. With schools on the path to implementing the new requirements, we wanted to take an in-depth look at what effective practices were used in adopting the Graduation Pathways during the 2018-19 school year.

METHODOLOGY

In the spring of 2019, we created and distributed a questionnaire in partnership with the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) to all school districts in Indiana. We asked district representatives to consider the following:

1 The successes they have found in implementing Graduation Pathways.
2 The challenges they have encountered in implementing Graduation Pathways.
3 Their wants and needs for better implementation of Graduation Pathways.

We collected 27 responses from a variety of school personnel ranging from district leaders such as superintendents and school principals to school staff such as guidance counselors, and from Central, Northern, and Southern Indiana as well as from rural, urban, and suburban communities. Using a qualitative research method, we aggregated and analyzed the responses and looked for common trends and insightful ideas.

FINDINGS

FINDING 1. SCHOOL AND DISTRICT-LEVEL STAFF RECOGNIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF IDENTIFYING OPPORTUNITIES WHILE ASSESSING THEIR ONGOING NEEDS TO SUCCESSFULLY IMPLEMENT GRADUATION PATHWAYS.

Indiana's schools and districts are in varied stages of implementing Graduation Pathways. School and district-level staff that responded to our questionnaire highlighted that they have been diagnosing opportunities while also assessing their needs to successfully implement the new requirements. Specifically, in our questions about Section 2 implementation, respondents commented that they are still developing opportunities and seeking partnerships. One respondent explained: *"We are working to secure more community partnerships that would enable our students to take advantage of service-based learning and work-based learning experiences."*[12] Similarly, respondents stressed the importance of building additional options for students with varying needs as well as identifying test preparation opportunities. One respondent shared: *"We will continue to build and develop more opportunities for students. We need support in tracking the pathway completion steps in general."*[13] Since each school or district may face challenges unique to the landscape of their community during the implementation of Graduation Pathways, it is important to carefully assess the needs and identify solutions to successfully navigate them.

FINDING 2. ACCESS TO COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS TO SUCCESSFULLY IMPLEMENT SECTION 2 OF THE GRADUATION PATHWAYS IS THE MOST COMMON CHALLENGE.

In our questions about the progress of schools' implementation of the Graduation Pathways, most of the respondents either strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that they are effectively implementing Section 2 of the Graduation Pathways.[14] At the same time, a number of respondents indicated that they are also struggling to create partnerships with local organizations and businesses which are important to making this section a reality.[15] They cited challenges with building access to opportunities such as internships and volunteering or simply allocating resources like transportation or designated staff to expand capacity. Noted one superintendent: *"Understand rural communities have little opportunity for internships and business partnerships. We have 100 graduates and not enough opportunities for them."*[16] Another superintendent echoed the same concern: *"The folks we have in the area are willing, we just do not have many opportunities."*[17] Among other concerns were tracking the completion progress and adding career technical education (CTE)-type classes.

FINDING 3. SCHOOLS THAT HAD VARIED LEARNING PROGRAMS IN PLACE PRIOR TO 2018 ARE MORE CONFIDENT IN THEIR ABILITY TO EFFECTIVELY IMPLEMENT GRADUATION PATHWAYS.

In our questionnaire responses, we noticed that school and district-level staff reported more confidence in implementing Graduation Pathways if they had already established learning experiences similar to project-based, work-based, or service-based learning prior to the new requirements. One superintendent explained that *"students [in our district] have been exposed to project / problem-based learning for 10 years. A community service component has been a requirement for our Leading EDGE Diploma for almost that amount of time along with a strong internship program through our Career Development Center."*[18]

Respondents to the questionnaire recognized the need for strong career awareness for students, and many reflected that their districts had already expanded opportunities for greater exposure and understanding of various employment opportunities. Noted one respondent: *"We have built a strong internship program over the past few years that involves many business partnerships. We have internship coordinators who focus solely on building these relationships and placing students in the experiences."*[19] Another commented: *"We already had a service learning program in place so we have just made small changes to that to meet the Pathways requirements."*[20]

While some respondents noted they will have an easier time implementing Graduation Pathways in their school or district because of these previously-established programs, others noted they are only now beginning to identify opportunities and partnerships needed to implement Graduation Pathways effectively. One guidance counselor commented: *"We are in the process of evaluating other options."*[21] Another noted regarding Section 3: *"We [still] need to find or create a locally-created pathway that will work for our students with special needs."*[22]

RECOMMENDATION 1. CREATE A RUBRIC TO MEASURE PROGRESS TOWARDS EACH SECTION OF THE GRADUATION PATHWAYS.

In order to further study districts and schools that have been implementing the new requirements effectively, IDOE should create a rubric to measure their progress using specific criteria matching each section of the Graduation Pathways. This rubric can help to better study schools that have already opted into the new requirements to showcase their successes in implementing Graduation Pathways as well as highlight the challenges they have encountered. We also recommend that IDOE consider a close study of schools that have implemented locally-created pathways so that schools in communities with limited local businesses or schools in rural communities can follow their example.

RECOMMENDATION 2. LEVERAGE BEST PRACTICES OF EARLY ADOPTER SCHOOLS THAT ARE SUCCESSFULLY IMPLEMENTING GRADUATION PATHWAYS AND IDENTIFY STRATEGIES TO BETTER CONNECT THEM WITH OTHER DISTRICTS AND SCHOOLS IN INDIANA.

IDOE has identified early adopter schools that have been successfully implementing one or more sections of Graduation Pathways.[23] In partnership with these schools, IDOE has made resources such as infographics, toolkit, and promising practices available on their website.[24] IDOE should continue to leverage these schools' experiences and best practices and share them with those schools and districts that are just now beginning to develop their own strategies and approach to implementation. As one respondent stated, state policymakers and administrators should "*serve as a connector so that schools can share best practices, challenges, etc.*"[25] IDOE should also consider creative ways to make these connections by utilizing multimedia, monthly newsletters, and other tools.

CONCLUSION

With the adoption of Graduation Pathways, Indiana has the opportunity to provide meaningful secondary education for Hoosier students as they prepare for life beyond high school. We must ensure all schools have equitable access to these opportunities. Therefore, we urge IDOE to create a rubric to measure the implementation progress of early adopter schools and to better connect these schools with other districts and schools in Indiana in order to best leverage their success. IDOE should take advantage of the opportunity to *"serve as a connector so that schools can share best practices [and] challenges. We learn best from each other."*[26]

++++++++++++++++ ENDNOTES ++++++++++++++++

1 http://iga.in.gov/legislative/2017/bills/house/1003

2 Indiana State Board of Education. (July 11, 2018). Graduation Pathways Policy Guidance. p. 5. Retrieved from https://www.doe.in.gov/sites/default/files/graduation-pathways/guidance-document.pdf

3 LeClaire, R. Indiana Department of Education, Director of Office of School Improvement. (May 25, 2018). Memorandum to School Superintendents and Principals. Retrieved from https://www.doe.in.gov/sites/default/files/legaffairs/hea-1426-various-education-matters-guidance-2-4.pdf

4 Indiana State Board of Education. Graduation Pathways Frequently Asked Questions. p. 1. Retrieved from https://www.in.gov/sboe/files/Graduation%20Pathways%20Frequently%20Asked%20Questions.final.docx

5 Indiana State Board of Education. (November 16, 2018). Graduation Pathways Panel. Retrieved from https://www.doe.in.gov/sites/default/files/graduation-pathways/graduation-requirements.pdf

6 Carden, D. (December 6, 2017). Earning an Indiana high school diploma just became a lot more complicated. NWI Times. Retrieved from https://www.nwitimes.com/news/education/earning-an-indiana-high-school-diploma-just-became-a-lot/article_4ee7c57d-4cf1-52ad-a493-cb6e108666be.html

7 Lindsay, J. (December 19, 2017). New Graduation Pathways Cause Concern For Small, Rural Schools. Indiana Public Media. Retrieved from https://indianapublicmedia.org/stateimpact/2017/12/19/graduation-pathways-concern-small-rural-schools/

8 See endnote 6.

9 See endnote 7.

10 Herron, A. (September 21, 2018). Why RV makers in Elkhart are actively recruiting fifth-graders to work for them one day. IndyStar. Retrieved from https://www.indystar.com/story/news/education/2018/09/21/rv-industry-partnering-elkhart-high-school-train-students/1305869002/

11 Indiana Department of Education. (December 21, 2018). Analysis of Graduation Pathways Usage for 2018 Graduates. Retrieved from https://www.in.gov/sboe/files/Report%20on%20Graduation%20Pathways%207.0.pdf

12 Question: "What additional work will your school(s) do and what support does your school(s) need to effectively implement Section 2 of the Graduation Pathways?" Open response question

13 See endnote 12.

14 Question: "We would like to know more about your experience in implementing Section 2 (Learn and Demonstrate Employability Skills) of the Graduation Pathways. Please indicate how strongly you agree with the following statement: My school or district is implementing Section 2 of the Graduation Pathways effectively." Responses (n=27): "Strongly Agree" (37.04 percent), "Somewhat Agree" (59.26 percent), "Somewhat Disagree" (3.70 percent).

TEACH +PLUS

[15] Question: "In order for students to meet Section 2 requirements, students must demonstrate Employability Skills through one of three different learning experiences, i.e. project-based, work-based, or service-based. Has your school or district successfully created partnerships with local agencies and/or businesses to successfully implement Section 2 of the Graduation Pathways?" Response (n = 27): "Yes" (77.78 percent), "No" (22.22 percent)

[16] Question: "What feedback do you have for state policymakers and administrators as they consider the implementation of Graduation Pathways?" Open response question

[17] Question: "If so, what strategies were used to create these partnerships? If not, how do you anticipate building these partnerships?" Open response question

[18] Question: "In your implementation of Section 2, what has been working well?" Open response question

[19] See endnote 17.

[20] See endnote 18.

[21] See endnote 12.

[22] Question: 'What additional work will your school(s) do and what support does your school(s) need to effectively implement Section 3 of the Graduation Pathways?" Open response question

[23] Indiana Department of Education. Reporting and Tracking. Promising Practices. Tracking. Retrieved from https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/1eVCrJL1G1KLEv2mpm0mniwK2SDuM4Poy

[24] Indiana Department of Education. (2018). Graduation Pathways Website. Retrieved from https://www.doe.in.gov/graduation-pathways

[25] See endnote 16.

[26] See endnote 16.