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**Connecticut Task Force on High School Graduation Requirements**  
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Chairman Cirusuolo, Commissioner Wentzell, members of the committee, thank you for the invitation to speak with you this afternoon.

Achieve is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit education reform organization dedicated to working with states to raise academic standards and graduation requirements, improve assessments, and strengthen accountability. Created in 1996 by a bipartisan group of governors and business leaders, Achieve is leading the effort to make college and career readiness a priority across the country so that students graduating from high school are academically prepared for postsecondary success.

I am here to suggest ways Connecticut can establish graduation requirements that reflect the full range of your state's college- and career-ready standards without relying on credit hours or seat time.

High school graduation requirements play a pivotal role in aligning the K-12 education system with the expectations of college and career, signaling the expectation that *all* students, not just some, need exposure to the full range of college- and career-ready standards to graduate prepared.

State policies that require or encourage credits to be competency- or mastery-based are designed to address persistent inequities caused by students progressing through a course of study without first demonstrating mastery of critical knowledge and skills. Such policies invite innovation by encouraging learning outside the classroom, lifting the ceiling for students who want to progress at a faster pace through early college, dual enrollment, and apprenticeship programs, and providing more targeted support for students who are struggling.

States considering competency-based graduation requirements are starting with very different policy structures. They have a range of options — from encouraging to incentivizing or requiring these policies. States can start small and pilot the policy with a select group of districts or launch the policy statewide. Regardless of the approach, all states need to begin by aligning the graduation requirements to the state's standards — *which are college- and career-ready*. Without taking that step, far too many graduates will continue to be unprepared for their next step.

We also encourage states to establish clear learning expectations. Standards are not self-executing. To lead to an increase in student preparation, states, districts, and schools — *collectively* — can create multiple learning experiences and pathways that reflect the full range of standards. And in doing so, help students have more agency — “voice and choice” — about how they demonstrate proficiency.

Taking the vision further, formative assessment can become a meaningful part of the cycle of learning, enabling students to continue to learn until they reach proficiency. Students can no longer receive a D and move on to the next unit of study. Instead, they understand that they are “not yet proficient” and must continue working until they are able to demonstrate they are proficient. This means schools will need to provide students and their families clear information about where they are and what they need to do next. When data about student progress is made transparent to students and their families, accountability becomes an ongoing, embedded part of the system. Practically speaking, this means redesigning student- and school-level report cards.

Although more than 30 states have policies that *allow* local use of competency-based approaches to graduation requirements or credit determinations<sup>i</sup>, this flexibility has not yet led to widespread use. States may need to do more than just allow districts and schools to use competency-based approaches. Broadening the scale will also require states to provide districts and schools more guidance and support.

Implementing competency-based policies and practices requires significant professional learning and capacity building. States will need to identify guard rails for consistency, quality, and equity. Additionally, the effort, on any scale, will need to be bolstered by communications and change management support for principals, teachers, guidance counselors, parents, — and most importantly — to students themselves. In most states, however, this ground is not well tread.

I will outline several principles for you to consider:

- ***Expect All Students, All Standards***
- ***Clearly Define the Knowledge, Skills, and Practices***
- ***Build Capacity of Educators and Instructional Leaders***
- ***Establish the Level of Performance Expected — and Calibrate***
- ***Commit to Transparency and Continuous Improvement***

### ***Expect All Students, All Standards***

Expose all students to the full range Connecticut’s standards through courses and learning experiences. This is one of the most important ways you can help ensure that Connecticut’s graduates will be academically prepared for their next steps after high school.

All high school graduates need a rigorous and broad curriculum that is grounded in the core academic disciplines but also consists of other subjects that are part of a well-rounded education. College- and career-ready expectations — *as defined in Connecticut’s English language arts and math standards* — include the ability of students to communicate effectively in a variety of ways, work collaboratively, think critically, solve routine and non-routine problems, and analyze information and data. The knowledge and skills needed to excel in academics, technical settings, and life overlap significantly, largely because these skills cannot be gained absent content — and content is not very useful without the skills necessary to transfer and use that knowledge in a range of settings.

## ***Clearly Define the Knowledge, Skills and Practices***

I am going to outline three broad approaches. All of these approaches tie graduation to competency on the full range of Connecticut's standards but use different mechanisms to define the requirements. These approaches are not mutually exclusive or exhaustive; Connecticut could also create a hybrid or new option.

One option is to tie graduation to ***proficiency on the full set of Connecticut's standards***. This option replaces traditional course or credit requirements. Rather, students would have to demonstrate proficiency on the full range of standards to graduate. If you pursue this approach, I encourage you to provide extensive guidance and support for districts in how to ensure that all students receive exposure to and demonstrate proficiency on all standards. At a minimum, it will be important to curate and elevate exemplary instructional materials and assessment tasks and align public reporting and accountability to a new set of indicators to reflect this approach. The state will also need to craft additional guidance for how local districts determine that the intent of this policy has been met. For example, you may still require that students be engaged in mathematics and English language arts/literacy experiences throughout each year of their secondary school enrollment. Or, you may stipulate that students can demonstrate mastery through an approved set of choices (including traditional academic and career and technical education (CTE) courses, out-of-school experiences, or independent projects), but that they need to use a variety of these choices over time or they need to provide multiple forms of evidence. The statewide summative assessments can also be used to validate that graduates have received exposure to the full set of standards.

A second option is to tie graduation to ***competency on a set of statewide college- and career-ready competencies that encompass the full set of the state's college- and career-ready standards***. This approach could be in addition to course or credit requirements that would not be based on seat time. For example, states may identify a set of learning experiences or develop a series of performance tasks around the competencies that students must complete to graduate.

The third option is to tie graduation to meeting ***a threshold level of performance on an assessment or set of assessments that encompass the full set of the college- and career-ready standards***. The intent is not to offer this as a traditional exit exam policy. Connecticut could pursue this option using one set of assessments or perhaps over time a menu of assessment options (e.g., a series of performance-based assessments or other demonstrations of learning across the year). The state would need to tackle a wide array of decisions to make to ensure that all assessments in the menu encompass the full range of the standards, including providing substantial guidance and resources to ensure alignment and quality for locally-developed assessments and demonstrations of learning. In this approach, you may continue to have traditional, course, and/or credit-based graduation requirements yet encourage, support, incentivize, or require them to be met through demonstrating competency on an assessment or series of assessments rather than seat time.

### ***Build Capacity of Educators and Instructional Leaders***

States and districts share the responsibility of deepening understanding of the knowledge, skills, and practices expected of all students. Connecticut could evaluate processes — at the state and local level — for identifying, selecting, adapting, or purchasing instructional resources. Likewise, Connecticut could create the space for educators to examine student work — in the context of the materials and tasks to strengthen their capacity. The same level of analysis and support would need to happen with regard to developing local assessments to elicit evidence that students have mastered the knowledge, skills, and practices embedded within the standards. Connecticut could facilitate groups of teachers working together to build curriculum-embedded performance assessment tasks that would capture the full set of the standards, and share them as exemplars for other educators to use in building assessments to validate mastery for awarding credit.

Building capacity with fidelity to Connecticut’s standards will hinge on a clear, shared set of criteria and a common process for selecting, curating, and developing instructional materials and assessment. Ultimately, educators in Avon, Bridgeport, the Connecticut Technical High School System, and Deep River should all be using high-quality and aligned materials and assessments to prepare all students for postsecondary education, the military, and careers.

### ***Establish the Level of Performance Expected — and Calibrate***

An important — but challenging — step for states is to build a shared understanding of the level of performance that is needed in evaluating student work — and ultimately for students to receive credit for courses or learning experiences. In the traditional educational environment, students can receive credit for courses by minimal grades that reflect students’ average performance throughout the course. In a competency-based environment, however, students need to have achieved a solid level of performance on each set of standards to move ahead in their course of study. For equity and consistency, Connecticut would need to play a role to establish and help build a shared understanding of this level of performance. Connecticut will need a strategy for building educator capacity and calibration in scoring student work (e.g., projects, performance tasks, oral presentations, portfolios, research papers, work-based learning experiences, etc.). Connecticut could begin by facilitating conversations about the level of performance needed for graduates to be prepared to enter into postsecondary education and training without need for remediation. The Connecticut state college and universities — the two-year, four-year, and technical systems — along with business and industry associations and representatives and the Connecticut Military Department should all be invited to the table. Although graduating students at a college- and career-ready level of performance is the goal, you will need to determine how to build toward this level of performance.

### ***Commit to Transparency and Continuous Improvement***

States, districts, and schools — collectively — need to ensure that the system is transparent and responsive enough to give students clear signals about their progress. This also means

identifying the need for additional support when students are struggling and the opportunity to accelerate when students are soaring.

It is also important to analyze student performance and implementation data to flag areas of common challenge or bright spots to elevate. Building on its commitment to publicly reporting disaggregated information, Connecticut should report school-level information about graduates' attainment of credit.

Finally, throughout the design and implementation of a competency- or mastery-based diploma, I strongly encourage Connecticut to engage postsecondary education faculty, system leaders, and employers in ongoing conversations about ways to align and adjust policy and practice to ensure student success.

I appreciate the opportunity to share my thoughts with you today. I would be happy to answer any questions.

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<sup>1</sup> Achieve, 2014. *The Imperative for State Leadership*. <http://www.achieve.org/files/AchieveCBPTheImperativeforStateLeadership.pdf>