

Michigan Youth in Government
Student Task Force Response

To the Michigan Legislature's Education Committee's Challenge
Regarding Michigan's New High School Graduation Requirements
Adopted December 13, 2005

In the spring of 2008 the Michigan Legislature's Education Committees issued a challenge to the Michigan Youth in Government participants. The challenge was to develop improvements, or an alternative, to the newly required Michigan Graduation Requirements. Approximately 1,600 students from across the state of Michigan discussed the topic. This white paper was researched, debated, and compiled by a special task force of 22 student representatives. The ideas presented in this paper were generated entirely by students, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Michigan Youth in Government staff who in no way contributed to the ideas expressed within.

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*The authors compiled information given to them
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Introduction:

A Chinese proverb reads: “Teachers open the door, but you must enter by yourself.” Our government has designed the Michigan public school system to prepare the next generation of Michiganders for the workplace and ultimately for success later in life. This objective relies on the motivation of students to hold a stake in their own education and better themselves through the framework of the public schools.

Delegates to the 2008 Michigan Youth in Government conferences, about 1,700 students and teachers in all, overwhelmingly agreed that the new graduation requirements are likely to *decrease* graduation rates in Michigan. Unlike students described by the proverb, our state has now “closed the door” on a huge number of our most at-risk Michigan citizens by increasing the difficulty of skills required of our high school graduates *without* a major systematic or budgetary change that would support the learning needs of those who are not already taking and passing classes like Algebra 2 or a foreign language.

Additionally, our Youth in Government delegates agreed that these requirements are likely to disadvantage youths seeking a technical, trade-skills oriented, or fine arts education in preparation for post-secondary education or for entry into the workplace. The addition of foreign languages, increased math requirements, and overall rigidity of requirements makes it a struggle simply to enroll in any of our state’s myriad “career centers” or “Education for Employment” programs, and anecdotally those programs are already seeing diminishing budgets and enrollment.

Therefore, as representatives of Michigan’s youth, we would like to present our concerns for Michigan’s new “toughest in the nation” graduation requirements, along with a series of both creative and well-tested recommendations that we feel would partly ameliorate some of the damage done by the new Michigan high school diploma.

Michigan Youth-in-Government Student White Paper:
To be Presented to the Michigan House and Senate Education Committees

Concerns with the new graduation requirements:

The new requirements simply ignore our differences. Instead, different students should have different routes to a diploma. The recently revised graduation requirements decrease the overall quality of secondary education by not allowing students the freedom to take classes that would best prepare them for their post graduation plans. Although some students benefit from the new requirements, others do not. The statewide requirements should be appropriate for everyone, not just the college bound.

Michigan relies on a wide variety of careers, and our high schools should prepare students for all of them. The current requirements force students to prepare for higher education or drop out. That is wrong. With the assistance of high school counselors and parents, students should be able to choose what type of education is best for them.

An aspiring artist might be a star student in a high school art class, but a failing student in a high school math class. An aspiring mechanic might similarly be a standout in a shop class, but a failure in an English class. Students entering the workforce after graduation should not have to complete the same coursework that students entering another school after graduation do. Our education system used to accommodate students who will enter the workforce after graduation. The new requirements, though, are making matters worse for those students.

Career centers offer programs for students who want a hands-on alternative learning experience. All types of students use the centers, but they are losing funds as school districts struggle to adapt to the new requirements. Budgets have not grown, but the demands from the state have. It is vital that we reinvigorate career centers.

Public schools should meet the needs of all students. The recently revised graduation requirements strip schools of the ability to meet this very basic responsibility. If almost every student in one school goes to college after graduation, while almost every student in another school gets a job after graduation, these schools should offer different classes. Due to the recently revised graduation requirements, they cannot.

Electives are essential to a well-rounded education. The new requirements demand so much time in a student's schedule that little room is left for elective classes. Now schools are offering fewer options in the visual and performing arts due to the lack of flexibility. While these classes might not prepare every student directly for a job or for college, studies suggest that they can play a critical role in mental development. Humanities and social sciences are also being cut as schools struggle to accommodate more math and science classes.

As more students are forced to take classes they do not want to take, teachers face increased pressure to teach specifically for standardized testing or directly from a book. When teachers skip creative lesson plans in favor of more direct teaching methods, classrooms become dull. Classrooms should be inspiring and exciting, not boring.

Drop out rates will skyrocket as the Class of 2011, the first class to which the new requirements apply, nears graduation. In the same way that not everyone has the same physical capacity, not everyone has the same mental capacity. The new requirements discourage economically disadvantaged students and those not benefited by a traditional education from earning a high school diploma. Again the new requirements simply ignore our differences. Instead, different students should have different routes to a diploma.

Recommendations:

While the recently revised graduation requirements are fundamentally flawed, reverting to the previous requirements would be a serious mistake. Requiring fewer classes for everyone would not improve the situation and it would send the wrong message to high school students. Many of these subjects should be introduced before entering high school. For instance, foreign language should be assimilated into the elementary curriculum by the 3rd grade level in small amounts, continued through middle school, with a two-year requirement on the high school level.

We propose amending the requirements by creating a pathway system. A pathway system allows more freedom in class choice while still providing more structure than the state offered before the recent changes. Under our proposed pathway system, all students must take the following classes in addition to the classes required by their pathway:

- Math (2 credits)
 - Algebra 1
 - Geometry
- English (3 credits)
 - Verbal, Written & Electronic Communication (1 credit)
 - Two additional credit
- Science (2 credits)
 - Biology or Chemistry (1 credit each)
 - Physics or Earth Science (1 credit each)
- Social Science (2 credits)
 - United States History (1 credit)
 - Civics (1/2 credit)
 - Economics (1/2 credit)
- Foreign Language (2 credits)
- Fine Arts (1 credit)
- Online Learning Experience (1 credit)
- Health (1/2 credit)

The above requirements would apply to everyone, and students would not have much freedom in class choice during their first two years of high school. After meeting the requirements, students can choose from four pathways to guide their final two years of class selection. The pathways are described below.

Career Preparatory Pathway, designed for students hoping to enter the workforce immediately after graduation, requires the following credits:

- Math (1 additional credit)
 - Consumer Math (1 credit)
- English (2 additional credits)
 - Technical Writing (1 credit)
- Science (1 additional credit)
 - Career Applied Science (1 credit)
- Career Program (at least 3 credits for 2 consecutive years)
 - ie: education for employment, career center, job cooperative, or professional internship

Higher Education Preparatory Pathway, designed for students hoping to attend a college or university after graduation, requires the following credits:

Academic Courses (8 additional credits)

- Interpersonal Communication (1 credit)
- Seven additional Math, English, Science, or Social Science credits

Fine Arts Education Preparatory Pathway, designed for students hoping to attend an institution for the fine arts after graduation, requires the following credits:

Math

- Consumer Math (1 credit), or
- Algebra II or higher (1 credit)
- (1 additional credit)
- English
- (1 additional credit)

Fine Arts theory (2 credits)

- i.e. Music Theory, Art History, etc.

Fine Arts Application (3 additional credits)

- i.e. Painting, Sculpture, Choir, Band, Orchestra, etc.

Special Needs Pathway,

Current state expectations are that all students will meet the new graduation requirements. If a student does not meet the goals of a class, full credit will not be given. It is our belief that the special needs students will hardly ever be able to pass all of the same grade level expectations.

- The inflexibility of the current system needs to be amended to accommodate special needs students.
- Individualized Education Program (IEP) Committee. This committee should include family members, school staff, specialized professionals, and any others important to the process of making individualized decisions on graduation requirements.
- Requirements should mandate that a special needs student can receive a diploma if he/she reaches all the goals set by the Individualized Education Program Committee. IEP's are mandated by Federal Legislation and referenced in the Portable Document Format (pdf) produced by the Michigan Department of Education.

Conclusion:

The new graduation requirements set in place by the Michigan Legislature will be detrimental to Michigan's education system. By simply increasing the difficulty of courses high school students are required to take, without making changes in our education system, we will see not only an increase in the drop-out rate, but will also see a lack of preparation in those students entering the workforce directly after high school. Developing a pathway system will prepare Michigan students for the lives they plan to lead. Those planning on going to college will be able to take the courses they are most interested in, while still gaining the academic preparation needed for college. Those planning on entering the workforce will gain the skills needed to run successful lives.

We feel that our proposal maintains the high standards set in place by the current requirements, while creating an exception for students with special needs and allowing for more choices in educational objectives. As high school students from all over Michigan, we are familiar with the diversity present from region to region. Not every student plans to get a four-year college degree, nor should every student be required to take Algebra II or four years of English. Our proposal establishes a system that enables people to pursue specialized interests and goals as well as having a well-rounded education. Graduation requirements should allow students to pursue multiple goals; they should open the door for the rest of a student's life.