A blue circle on a black background

Description automatically generated

**MULTIPLE PATHWAYS FOR GRADUATION**

**Introduction**

With the national trend away from a single exit exam requirement for high school graduation, many states have developed a variety of ways for students to earn a high school diploma. There is increasing recognition that the traditional high school model does not serve all students well, and that high school needs to focus more intently on practical and so-called “soft” skills (collaboration, communication, etc.) to prepare students to be responsible, civically engaged citizens, and productively contribute to their communities.

This paper will examine some of the different state formulations of “graduation pathways” or “multiple pathways” to earning a high school diploma. Most states have certain basic course requirements for all students, but now many states are offering students a choice in the direction through which they can complete their high school program and matriculate to college or career. The idea is to engage students in a path that best speaks to their individual goals, talents and background while ensuring that they have the knowledge and skills they need to be productively employed, tackle citizenship, and flourish as individuals and members of their community. 

The various pathways among the states have overlap, but they are all arguably tailored to the needs of the students in the state and goals of the state for their graduates, expressed in documents such as a statewide Portrait of a Graduate.

Some states pathways are designed to offer failsafe mechanisms for those students who fail to meet traditional academic high school graduation requirements, rather than offering genuinely rethought requirements of the competencies and masteries students need to pursue a particular college and/or career path. Many states have essentially designed two (or three) different broad tracks—an academic track and a work-based or CTE track (with military service being the third track). The more thoughtful “multiple pathway” systems are designed to create real options for students and fulfill the state’s mission in assessing whether students have the necessary skills and knowledge to flourish individually, economically, and civically in the modern world. In the more thoughtful approaches that are aligned to well-considered graduate portraits, there are genuine locally designed, state approved options that focus on different, more performance-based ways that students can demonstrate the requisite skills and knowledge to justify being granted a high school diploma.

**Examples of Multiple Pathway Systems**

1. **Indiana.** Starting with the class of 2023, Indianarequired all students to meet the following graduation requirements: (i) earn credits necessary for a high school diploma; (ii) learn and demonstrate employability skills and; (iii) demonstrate post-secondary readiness. To meet these requirements, Indiana offers students three pathways, allowing students to individualize their education and tailor it to their post-secondary goals. These [pathways were recently revamped](https://www.chalkbeat.org/indiana/2024/12/11/new-diplomas-for-high-school-students-approved/) to begin to be implemented in the 2025-26 school year and go into full effect for 2028-29 for all Indiana students. Students can earn either an “honors” or an “honors plus” seal over and above the base credit requirement for a diploma in one of three pathways: enrollment, employment and enlistment/service.

The first pathway is “enrollment”. It may be thought of as the base academic pathway. The new base diploma requires completion of 42 credits, including 12 personalized electives, a computer science class, and a personal finance class. Geometry and Algebra 2 are no longer required. To ensure students earn a diploma, they are automatically placed on this pathway and must opt-out and select either the second or third pathway.

The 12 personalized electives requirements are designed to allow students to take courses towards their designated pathway. To earn one of the Honors Seals students must demonstrate college readiness through certain specific course credit requirements, minimum course grades, and college readiness requirements (AP, IB courses/exams, minimum ACT/SAT scores, or dual enrollment/college credits).

Notably, students earning the Honors Plus Enrollment Seal get automatic enrollment to in-state college, including the state flagship, Indiana University, and Purdue University.

The second pathway offers students an opportunity to demonstrate employability skills through work-based learning experience.

* Work-based learning enhances students’ “academic, technical and social skills”1 developed in the classroom through collaboration with employer partners. Through this pathway, students can engage in real-world workforce problems, establish skills necessary for employment, and explore future career opportunities.
* Students must also verify through an approved school process that they have attained requisite collaboration, communication, and work-ethic skills.

Students pursuing this pathway must complete a minimum amount of work-based learning hours to receive an Honors (150 hours) or Honors Plus (650 hours) seal.

The final pathway is enlistment/service. Students can attain these seals through a) public service courses or participation in Junior ROTC Courses; (b) a minimum Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) score; (c) meeting attendance goals (d) demonstrating skill development in work ethic, communication and collaboration through a mentorship with current military or public safety personnel.

These revamped pathways are designed for flexibility with the base requirements and then the personal electives. Essentially, however, they seem to track students into college-bound, post-secondary immediate employment, and military service lanes. The “enrollment” track remains course credit and standardized test based.

1. **New York:** Graduation requirements in New York are in the process of undergoing significant changes. This change is the product of the recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Commission that have been adopted by the Board of Regents. They will eliminate the passage of five Regents exams as a requirement for graduation and develop “multiple pathways” in which a student can demonstrate the knowledge.

Multiple Pathways Prior to Graduation Requirement Changes

New York’s original “multiple pathways” were ways in which students could elect a +1 Pathway, meaning they had to pass 4 instead of 5 Regents exams but could substitute one of the Regents exams with an alternative “pathway”.  These +1s include:

Arts; Career and Technical Education (CTE); Career Development and Occupational Studies (CDOS); Civics; Humanities; Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM); and World Languages.

Each pathway contained assessments and credentials that qualify for replacing one of the five Regents for graduation. While these represent a very limited alternate route that is barely differentiated from global graduation requirements, they did provide a predicate for a more genuine and robust multiple pathway system contemplated under the new New York graduation requirements put forward by the Board of Regents.

New Multiple Pathways

In connection with its newly adopted statewide Portrait of a Graduate, New York is planning to implement a multiple pathways approach to gaining a high school diploma. In addition to certain common requisite high school courses, students may prove proficiency in the learning standards and elements of the Portrait of a Graduate in theses ways:

Approved work-based or service-based learning experiences; capstone learning experiences; early-college high school/PTECH; earning NYS Credentials or Seals; approved CTE programs; participation in the arts; passing approved assessments (including Regents exams).

These pathways are being phased in over the next several years. The idea is that students will be able to choose the manner in which they meet State graduation standards and expectations so that they are future ready.

1. **Colorado.** Colorado has perhaps the most flexible allowance for graduation pathways of any state. The pathways are locally designed but must fit into one of the articulated categories. In Colorado, the Pathways are designed to be structured academic and work-based learning opportunities that increase the relevance and alignment of learning experiences to student interests and postsecondary education and workforce skills and goals by providing targeted and personalized instructional and learning programs. This can include pathways for students who are missing previous learning. Developing multiple pathways requires programs, schools, or systems that are tailored to student interest, postsecondary education and workforce opportunity, and community need. Pathways are intended to increase opportunities for success by providing students with options and increase agency in their own learning through rigorous, relevant, and supportive approaches to learning.

Pathways build personalized experiences and make real-life connections between school and career options. Sometimes a pathway is a sequence of courses, sometimes it is applied learning opportunities within the same course, and sometimes it connects students with real-life or skills-based learning outside the classroom. Regardless of structure, according to the State “pathways should provide rigorous instruction and include core principles of student success, such as positive relationships with caring adults, quality instruction, opportunities to engage in learning experiences that connect life beyond school, as well as support and resources to help students explore postsecondary education and workforce options.”

Pathway programs in Colorado include: [Career and Technical Education](https://www.cde.state.co.us/postsecondary/cte) (courses and certifications); [Work-based Learning](https://www.cde.state.co.us/postsecondary/pwrplaybookwbl) (job opportunities and work training); [Innovative Learning Opportunities Pilot Program](https://www.cde.state.co.us/postsecondary/ilop) (blend of in-person, off-campus, or outside of the classroom opportunities); [Concurrent Enrollment](https://www.cde.state.co.us/postsecondary/concurrentenrollment); [Early College High School](https://www.cde.state.co.us/postsecondary/ce_earlycollegehighschool); [Colorado P-TECH](https://www.cde.state.co.us/postsecondary/p-tech)[; Online and Blended Learning](https://www.cde.state.co.us/onlinelearning); and [Alternative Education](https://www.cde.state.co.us/Accountability/StateAccountabilityAECs.asp) programs or schools.

In designing pathways, LEAs must fit into one of these state-recognized programs. The only other statewide requirement for students pursuing one of these pathways is meeting three specific requirements outlined in state statutes and board rules. All other graduation requirements are determined by local school board policy. (It’s a state that has local autonomy akin to Massachusetts). The three requirements are:

• Civics: All students receiving a diploma must pass one course in civics.

• Holocaust and Genocide Studies: All students receiving a diploma must pass one course that incorporates Holocaust and genocide studies.

• Graduation Guidelines: All students receiving a diploma must demonstrate readiness for college and career based on at least one measure in reading, writing, and communicating; and one measure in mathematics. The menu of available measures includes minimum test scores (ACT, SAT, IB, AP, Accuplacer), collaboratively developed standards-based performance assessment, district capstone, or concurrent enrollment.

In addition to these pathways, LEAs can design their own academic graduation requirements, such as minimum course requirements, capstone projects, portfolio, or various standardized tests and assessments.

1. **New Mexico** The passing of House Bill 171 (HB171) in the 2024 New Mexico legislative session amended current law to update New Mexico’s high school graduation requirements. Students are required to successfully complete a minimum of 24 units aligned to the state academic content and performance standards.

Students are **no longer required** to complete demonstrations of competency (DOCs) in core academic subjects (i.e., mathematics, reading and language arts, writing, social studies, and science) to receive a high school diploma. Although HB 171 removes the state’s requirement for students to demonstrate competency in the five core subject areas, districts or charter schools may exercise their local authority to require local demonstrations of competency (e.g., portfolios, capstones, end-of-course exams). In certain instances, students can earn credit for core academic course work through specific work-based learning experiences where the core content is a required element of the experience. For example, an approved accounting internship can get a student a core credit for math.

The graduation pathway options available to students are part of the 5.5 unit “electives” component of the 24-unit course requirement) of concentration of the student’s choice in:  a language other than English, including American Sign Language (ASL); fine arts; health; military career preparation; career technical education; student service leaning; community or service learning; capstone courses; and work-based learning. Each LEA also sets two units that meet department academic content and performance standards.

It should be noted that nothing in the minimum graduation and enforced pathway requirements stops an LEA from requiring more units for graduation or to complete a particular pathway or a student from taking AP, honors, IB, or distance learning courses offered by a school, or dual credit courses offered with an institution of higher education.

The entire New Mexico graduation system is built on the premise that students should have a robust array of choices to determine a tailored, culturally relevant, path to graduation where they can acquire real-world and life skills necessary to operate in society and the economy. It is acutely responsive to issues of chronic absenteeism and dropout rates among disadvantaged populations.

1. **Pennsylvania** offers five pathways for students to earn a high school diploma: Keystone, Keystone Composite (3-score or 2-score), Career and Technical Education (CTE) Concentrator, Evidence-Based and Alternative Assessment.

The first and second pathways, the Keystone and Keystone Composite, are standardized assessments which require students to earn a minimum passing score on Algebra I, Biology, and Literature exams. Students who do not meet the minimum scores required for the Keystone exams are eligible for the remaining pathways. Although they did not earn a passing Keystone score, these students must meet local grade-based requirements for the same content areas.

*CTE Concentrator Pathway:*

After fulfilling the local grade requirements, students can then choose from three options to earn their diploma under this pathway:

* Earn an Industry-Based Competency Certification related to their program of study, which can extend credibility for students transitioning into the workforce after high school.
* Demonstrate high likelihood of success on an approved Industry-Based Competency Assessment through course performance, benchmark assessments, alignment with career goals, or any similar measurement as determined by a school administrator. Students who choose this option must pass the competency assessment by the end of their 11th grade.
* Demonstrate readiness for continued, relevant engagement in their program of study. Students can demonstrate their readiness through the same measures as those described in the previous option. Determination must also be made by the end of 11th grade.

*Evidence-Based Pathway:*

Under this pathway, a student must also provide three pieces of evidence in order to earn a diploma. While there are slight restrictions on the types of evidence students may submit, the evidence-based pathway offers students great flexibility to demonstrate their readiness for postsecondary success.

* At least **one** piece of evidence must come from an extensive list of options, including: standardized exam scores, local course grades, International Baccalaureate exam, successful completion of a dual enrollment or post-secondary course, acceptance into a non-profit higher education institution, or obtaining an Industry-Recognized Credential.
* The remaining pieces of evidence can also come from: obtaining a passing score on a Keystone exam, successfully completing a service-learning project, internship, externship, or cooperative education program, NCAA course compliance for college-bound student athletes, or evidence of full-time employment.

*Alternative Assessment Pathway:*

Under this final pathway, a student must also meet **one** of six options:

* Pass an alternative assessment
* Successfully complete a pre-apprenticeship program
* Earn an established score on an AP or IB exam in the same content area as the Keystone exam they did not earn a minimum score on
* Earn dual credit (high school credit and postsecondary) on an LEA-approved concurrent enrollment course in the same content areas as the Keystone exam they did not earn a minimum score on
* Earn acceptance into one 4-year program in an accredited non-profit institution of higher education.

1. **Florida** offers students five options to earn their diploma. In terms of the concept of multiple pathways, Florida’s array of options is largely constricted to a variety of traditional academic programs, whether State created and certified, modified for struggling learners, or a commonly recognized and used external program.  The only pathway that does not fit this category is the CTE pathway. Students must successfully complete one of these in order to graduate:

* Earning 24 credits in a traditional program which lists the number of courses and credits by content.2
* Earning 18 credits in an Academically Challenging Curriculum to Enhance Learning (ACCEL) program
* Earning at least 18 credits through a Career and Technical Education (CTE) Pathway
* Completing an International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum
* Completing an Advanced International Certificate of Education (AICE) curriculum

       7. **Washington.** In 2019, Washington State got rid of its exit exam graduation requirement and replaced the exit exams with multiple pathways to graduation. Beginning with the Class of 2020, students must fulfill the pathway requirement to graduate, which must align with their High School and Beyond Plan.

Washington has three buckets of pathways: 1) the Armed Services Aptitude Battery Test; 2) a Career and Technical Education (CTE) course sequence. Local CTE Graduation Pathways are designed and submitted by districts or State-Tribal Education Compacts (STECs); 3) an ELA and Math Pathway

There are numerous ways in which a student can fulfill an ELA and Math Pathway. They include: 1) College admission exam scores, AP, IB, Cambridge exam scores and courses; 2)  Dual Credit (Enrollment) Courses; 3) Performance-based pathway pursuant to a local policy that meets state requirements. The Performance-based Pathway allows students to show what they know and can do in real-world, hands-on ways that align with their individual goals for life after high school; 4) Smarter Balanced Assessments; 5) Transition courses to college; 6) the WA-AIM Assessment designed for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities

As this [recent Chalkbeat article](https://www.chalkbeat.org/2025/05/27/diploma-pathways-help-washington-students-graduate-but-present-challenges/) explains, the problem with the multiple pathways created in Washington is ensuring the robustness of the various pathways and equity and access to various programs and coursework throughout remote and under resourced regions of the state. The percentage of students who have not chosen a pathway is much greater among minority, ELL, low-income, and disabled students.

**Seals**

A diploma seal is a designation option that can be added to a standard diploma, which provides another option to establish graduation requirements, but with greater flexibility. Because seal acquisition is above the baseline diploma requirements, it is unclear the extent to which they foster a genuine pathway rather than an indication of certain additional competencies.

**Ohio** defines 12 seals; nine are state-defined and three are local. Students must earn two seals to qualify for a diploma, one of which must be state-defined. Below are the 12 seals:

* The *Biliteracy* Seal is state-defined. Students must demonstrate proficiency in English and another language to earn this seal.
* The *Citizenship* Seal is state-defined. Students must satisfy course requirements in American History and American Government.
* The *College-Ready* Seal is state-defined. Students earn this seal by achieving minimum scores on the SAT or ACT.
* Students can earn the *Community Service* Seal by successfully completing a community service project as defined by their local district.
* Students can earn the *Fine and Performing Arts* Seal by demonstrating expertise in the arts through an evaluation determined by their local district.
* Students can earn the *Honors Diploma* Seal through successful completion of one of the following honors diplomas: (i) Academic Honors; (ii) Career-Tech Honors; (iii) International Baccalaureate Honors; (iv) STEM Honors; (v) Arts Honors Diploma; and (vi) Civics and Social Sciences Honors.
* The *Industry-Recognized Credential* Seal is state-defined. Students must earn a specific number of points for a credential or obtain a license for a profession requiring an examination.
* The *Military* Seal is state-defined. Students must provide evidence of enlistment in any branch. Students can also earn this seal if they participated in a Junior Research Officer Training Corps (JROTC) program, were appointed to a US military service academy, or earned a scholarship into a ROTC.
* The *OhioMeansJob Readiness* Seal is state-defined. Students must demonstrate their readiness for the workforce through attainment of professional skills, as evaluated by a mentor.
* The *Science* Seal is state-defined. Students can earn this seal by demonstrating their science knowledge and skills through course grades (local or dual enrollment) and assessment scores (Ohio State Test, AP, IB).
* Students can earn the *Student Engagement* Seal through their substantial participation in extra-curricular activities.
* The *Technology* Seal is state-defined. Students can earn this seal by demonstrating their technology knowledge and skills through course grades (local or dual enrollment) and assessment scores (AP, IB).

Requiring a minimum number of seals, if designed in an intelligent way, can enhance student ownership and choice of pathway or specialization above and beyond certain base diploma requirements like minimum coursework or demonstration of competencies.

**Conclusion**

Graduation pathways should reflect the considered democratic judgment of the State regarding what it wants its high school graduates to know and be able to do. They should also provide genuine opportunities for students to pursue paths of interest, passion, and profession/vocation. In order to successfully accomplish that goal, devised pathways must be supported with adequate resources. If a pathway is created and offered, the state must support local districts in designing and implementing courses and programs that match the available pathway. Students must be informed of and have equal access to these courses and programs. For work-based, service and CTE pathways, partnerships must be developed with local employers and industries. Assessments that develop and evaluate competencies and skills must be in place.

Multiple pathways can provide choice and opportunity for students that would otherwise not find their way in school.  They can help students find paths that befit their interests and talents. But announcing pathways is itself inadequate; resources must be dedicated to bring those graduation options to fruition.