

Connecticut High School Graduation Requirements Unpacked

Brief 7: Community Engagement + Communications

New Graduation Requirements: “(c) Commencing with classes graduating in 2023, and for each graduating class thereafter, no local or regional board of education shall permit any student to graduate from high school or grant a diploma to any student who has not satisfactorily completed a minimum of twenty-five credits, including not fewer than: (1) Nine credits in the humanities, including civics and the arts; (2) nine credits in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics; (3) one credit in physical education and wellness; (4) one credit in health and safety education, as described in section 10-16b; (5) one credit in world languages, subject of the provisions of subsection (g) of this section; and (6) a one credit mastery-based diploma assessment.”

— Public Act No.17-42; Sec. 1(c)

This brief focuses on the basic principles and ideas of authentic community engagement and effective communication. Successful engagement with a broad audience of constituents can make or break a change process. Since high school graduation serves as the culminating experience for the entire system of public education, changes here easily can cause anxiety for teachers, students, families, community members, and staff.

To ensure that any changes implemented in schools reflects the needs and desires of the community, school and district leaders should proactively develop plans for ongoing stakeholder communication and engagement. Ensuring that stakeholders both understand the coming changes and have a seat at the table to collaboratively develop shared expectations, create feedback loops, and—where possible—shape decisions not only creates a stronger system but also increases support and eases uncertainty.

Not all engagement strategies are the same. Engagement activities can fall along a spectrum from informing stakeholders to joint decision-making. This spectrum does not imply that some strategies are “good” and others are “bad.” It simply provides an opportunity to clarify what strategy you are deploying in any given opportunity for engagement.

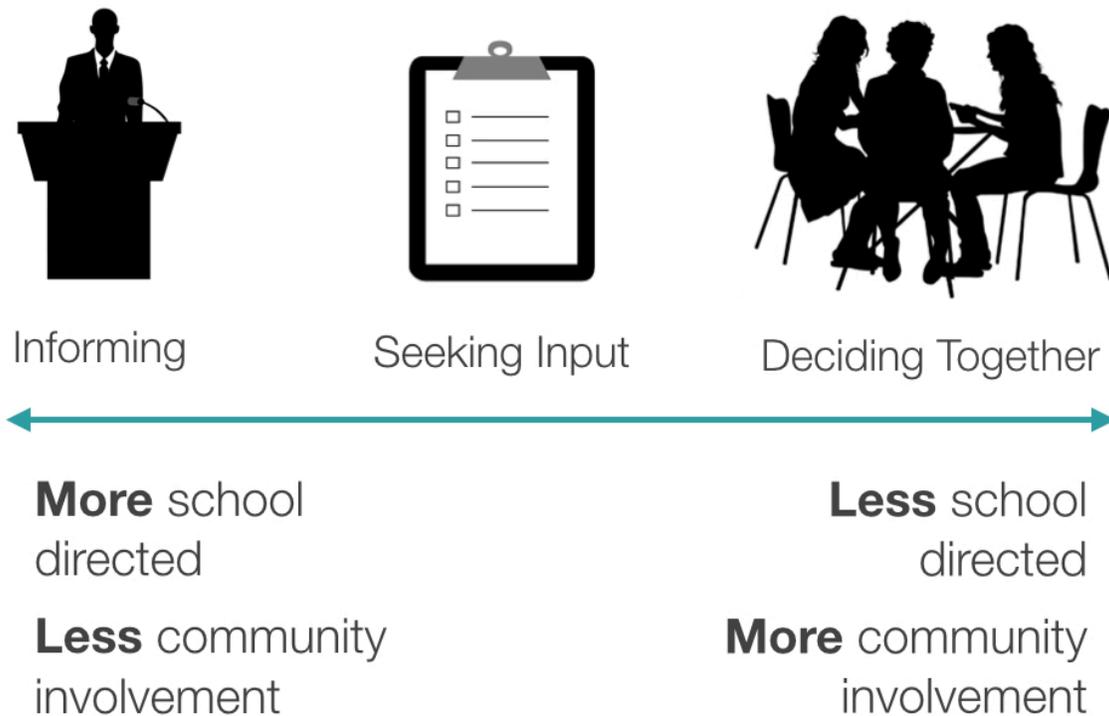
The spectrum frames several critical insights for education leaders:

1. Align your engagement strategies with your intended outcomes.
2. Stay reflective about the range and types of opportunities you provide—and to whom.



3. Communicate clearly with stakeholders about what the objective of each engagement activity is to set expectations and determine whether you have achieved the objective.
4. Think about communications as just one aspect of—not a substitute for—authentic engagement.

Engagement Spectrum



In the case of changes to graduation practices and policies, most districts will employ a range of engagement strategies that exist at multiple points along this continuum. For example, early on in the process, a district could effectively run information sessions that share the new statute and strategies other districts have employed to demonstrate how this statute could work. These activities would largely exist on the informing end of the spectrum. As community understanding develops, the district could engage parents and guardians in a process to identify the essential skills and knowledge that their graduates should demonstrate in order to graduate, moving to the opposite end and engaging in joint decision-making. The school board could then use the community vision created by these joint decisions to write draft graduation policy language which the board then shares with parents to gather additional input.

Here are a few tips for creating your plan:

Communicate clearly, transparently, and consistently with students, families, teachers, staff, and community members at every stage of the transition to new graduation expectations—from planning to implementation to ongoing refinement. Stakeholders want opportunities to have a voice, they want to know they have been heard, and they want to see that their priorities, aspirations, or contributions have been acted on or incorporated into the plan. Even strong communication strategies will only get school

leaders and educators so far: students, parents, and families don't just want to be told what is happening, they also want to be involved in making it happen.

Systems that are informed and shaped by the needs and contributions of teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders are generally stronger and more successful systems. Regardless of where an activity falls on the spectrum of engagement, authentic engagement always begins with listening. Make time for teachers, students, families, and community members to voice their values, desires, and concerns, and then explicitly address their feedback and suggestions in the design, implementation, and rollout of any and all changes. Even if the graduation requirements are coming from the state legislature, identify and talk about the reasons the requirements will be good for students, families, and the community. If you jump right into the technical requirements or the implementation process, you may miss an opportunity to activate people's hearts and minds, which can be critical to building momentum and sustaining people's long-term investment.

It can also be helpful to set and communicate appropriate expectations by clearly and transparently establishing "negotiables" and "non-negotiables." While teachers will determine the curriculum, assessments, and grading, for example, schools can create opportunities for students, parents, and family members to contribute to the design of pathway opportunities or mastery-based diploma assessment options.

Engagement Strategies and Considerations

- When school leaders and educators know what their stakeholders want, or what they may be anxious about, it becomes much easier to develop communication strategies or engagement opportunities. One of the best ways to start is by asking students, parents, and families some basic questions: How do they typically receive information from the school? How do they prefer to receive information? Is it through the school website, email newsletters, Facebook, or handouts sent home with students? What do they want to learn more about? What are they concerned about? How would they specifically like the school to improve communications or engagement in ways that work best for them?
- When collecting and sharing information, schools should utilize multiple formats to ensure they are reaching as many stakeholders as possible. For example, some people prefer email or social-media surveys, while others prefer face-to-face conversations. A mix of surveys, focus-group-style discussions, and one-on-one conversations will reach a much larger number of stakeholders and elicit more diverse viewpoints and actionable insights.
- Invite teachers and students to tell their stories—they are usually the most credible and compelling voices in a school. When students stand up and describe learning experiences that transformed their view of themselves or the world, that made them more confident or excited about learning, or that set them on the path to higher education, parents and community members stop and listen.
- Create opportunities for students, families, and community members to be directly involved in decisions about your local graduation requirements. In the classroom, students can be given opportunities to shape learning experiences through their student success plans, mastery-based diploma assessments, and other strategies. Parents and family members can participate in student-led conferences, demonstrations of learning, home visits, or advisory committees. And community members can contribute through volunteerism, internships, mentorships, or service-learning projects.
- When students, families, and community members are actively involved in decision-making, they not only understand far better how and why decisions were made—they also feel a sense of

ownership. School leaders should map out and identify areas that can be informed by or co-created with stakeholders. Likewise, schools can set up planning and advisory committees for any number of number of activities—just remember that those teams, committees, or working groups should include a diverse and representative cross-section of stakeholders, viewpoints, and cultural backgrounds.

- As you consider engagement strategies, reflect on your own identity and power as a school administrator. Develop mindfulness of how race, socioeconomic status, educational background, and other facets of identity influence your interactions, communications, and assumptions and your willingness to share leadership. Be open and honest about your own journey toward inclusivity and equity.
- Take the time to identify specific people who historically do not take part in activities and make it a point to talk with them. Get to know them as individuals, and allow them to get to know you. Share coffee or a meal together. Go for a walk. Authentic engagement is all about relationships, not just a transactional exchange of information.
- Beyond inviting people to the table, you should “set the table.” In other words, leading up to each opportunity for engagement, ensure that people are equipped to meaningfully participate. Whether you’re asking participants to explore a data set, shape pathway options, or serve on a workgroup, make sure that they have the background information and baseline skills to take on the role. This may mean that you need to build participants’ capacity. Support could range from embedded, in-the-moment explanations and context to more extensive formal training in preparation for a role or commitment. Find out what relevant knowledge and skills people already have and build a strategy accordingly.
- There is power in storytelling. Give lots of different people opportunities to contribute to the narrative of your transition process, including, as appropriate, activities like workgroup updates, social media sharing, school board presentations, community- and neighborhood-based information-sharing, etc. Consider creating an interactive, shared timeline that documents important moments along the way and is accessible to the public. While the messaging may not be as streamlined, the plurality of voices will grow people’s investment in the outcomes of the process.
- Celebrate successes and accomplishments during the transition process. Take time to visibly mark milestones with an informal party, a newsletter, a press release, a social media post, or some other creative activity. Remember to share photos, too—a picture is often more powerful than a lengthy narrative. While it may feel like such activities slow the work down and consume resources, the investment is almost certain to pay off by rejuvenating participants, keeping your efforts transparent and top-of-mind, and creating a sense of fun and togetherness—both among those who are already involved and those who are considering becoming involved

Design Questions for Consideration

1. How will you engage stakeholders in decision-making processes around implementing new graduation requirements?
2. How will you ensure that historically marginalized voices are invited into the engagement and decision-making processes?
3. How will you collaboratively craft a vision for all graduates with the broader school and district community?

4. What aspects of your districts' transition to new graduation requirements are "non-negotiable," what are the areas for community involvement and co-creation?
5. As a community, how will you name and wrestle with the tension between flexibility and equitable opportunities and outcomes?

Additional Resources

1. [Everyday Democracy Recruitment Strategy Worksheet](#)
2. [ASCD Starting With the Why](#)

For More Information

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