

REFOCUSING SECONDARY EDUCATION

Discussion

The Kentucky Board of Education and the Kentucky Department of Education are engaging in a series of discussions on how to restructure the secondary education experience to raise the level of student achievement. Attached is an agenda item from a recent board meeting describing the proposed process and timeline. The department staff seeks comments from the P-16 Council about the issues and process.

KENTUCKY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

STAFF NOTE

Review Item:

Refocusing secondary education

Applicable Statute or Regulation:

KRS 158.140

History/Background:

Existing Policy. The Kentucky Board of Education and the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) have committed to providing a rigorous secondary education experience that allows every student to experience success and achievement. Since February 2003, the Board has engaged in a series of discussions on how to refocus secondary education including the work being done to engage and support schools that are ready to step out of the traditional comprehensive school model in highly innovative ways (Vanguard Sites) and on KDE's work on the examination of research on emerging models of secondary school reform, identification of promising practices and analyzing how state level policy can be used to drive the desired shifts in the secondary system.

Attached is a discussion paper titled "Refocusing Secondary Education" to set the context for the Board's discussion in June.

Policy Issues:

Kentucky Department of Education staff are asking for advice from the Board on whether they are proceeding in the right direction as they shape the recommendations relative to changes in secondary education that will come forward to the Curriculum Committee in August. Specifically, the Board is asked to consider the following from the attached discussion paper:

- What advice does the Board offer as to the priority issue areas that are identified?
- Are these priority issues areas on target?
- Are there others that need to be added?
- What input does the Board offer in regard to the current activities in process on the Individual Graduation Plan and end of course assessments?

Impact on Getting to Proficiency:

The secondary experience must be meaningful for each student in order for high schools to reach proficiency.

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Date:

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Background:

Kentucky's vision for high school students is that each one will reach proficiency and transition from high school prepared to be successful in postsecondary education and the workforce, not simply one or the other. Still, several years into reform academic achievement among middle and high school students continues to lag behind that of primary and intermediate students and achievement at the high school level has now dropped below that of middle schools. In 2003, the academic index of middle and high schools was 68.1 and 66.8, respectively. Moreover, the academic index of the middle schools increased by 3.1 points while the high school index increased by only 1.7.

Kentucky is not alone in confronting the problem of faltering high schools. Since 2002, several major reports on the status of the nation's high schools have been issued by organizations such as the National Association of State Boards of Education, the Council of Chief State School Officers, the National Governors Association and the National Association of Secondary School Principals. Also, the United States Department of Education has launched a High School Initiative to assist states in helping all students achieve postsecondary success. According to the National Center for Higher Education Policy Making and Analysis (the Center) for every 100 students entering the 9th grade:

2000 data	# Graduating from high school	# Entering college	# Still in college for sophomore year	# Graduating from college
Nationally	68	40	27	18
Kentucky	65	39	26	15
Kentucky's National Rank	35th	27th	30th	34th

While more recent data indicate that Kentucky's graduation rate has improved to the national average, it is clear that the existing system of secondary education has not adapted to meet the needs of substantial numbers of today's middle and high school aged students. For students who do graduate, college going and degree attainment are increasing – but not at the pace needed to support participation and prosperity in a 21st century economy. Students in Kentucky, like students nationally, are struggling to navigate key transition paths between middle and high school and between high school and postsecondary education and the workforce. The Kentucky Board of Education has challenged the department to identify how current state-level policy is impacting the state's secondary schools and to bring forward recommendations for a new policy framework that will accelerate the pace of reform at the secondary level and increase successful participation in the next level of learning. This initiative is called Refocusing Secondary Education.

Work has proceeded on two parallel tracks. One track is focused on engaging and supporting schools that are ready to step out of the traditional comprehensive school model in highly innovative ways, so that those results can be observed, communicated to the larger high school community and examined to inform state-level policy. These schools are called the Vanguard Sites. The second track includes KDE-based activity that examines research on emerging models of secondary school reform, identifies promising practices and analyzes how state level policy can be used to drive the desired shifts in the secondary system.

At the August meeting of the Kentucky Board of Education, the department will introduce the first in a series of recommended actions for Board consideration. It is anticipated that over the next year, several issues related to secondary to postsecondary transition will be referred to the P16 Council from the KBE for coordination.

Highlights of priority issue areas and activities to date are summarized below.

Priority Issue Areas:

To approach this work, the department, Vanguard sites and other partners have attempted to step back and challenge even the most fundamental assumptions about secondary schools:

- What value does the high school diploma have today? What does it really credential?
- What is the high school and how does it fit into the P16 continuum?
- Who attends high school? Who is eligible to earn a high school credential?
- What should students learn? How do we know that what should be learned is being taught? How do we know that learning is taking place? How do students know?
- How should schools be organized? Can learning be credentialed that takes place outside the school walls? Outside the school calendar?
- Are schools funded in ways that create the right incentives?
- Are schools structured in ways that create the right incentives for students?
- How should schools be staffed? On what basis should teachers and administrators be evaluated? What is the appropriate advising function and who has that responsibility?
- How do we know when students are ready to move to the next level of learning? To graduate?
- What role do students have in finding the answers to these questions?

Consideration of these questions has lead to the identification of priority issue areas. There is extensive work to be done before these ideas are developed into an aligned policy framework. Four issue areas that will also be discussed with the P-16 Council on June 15 are:

Better align K12 and postsecondary systems of standards, expectations and incentives for students.

- Incorporate a continuum of rigorous academic standards and workplace skills into instruction and assessments for all students.
- Establish shared policies around access, admissions, placement, funding, financial aid, credentialing and certification.
- Replace the grade 12 endpoint with a grade 11 – 14 transition model.
- Create data systems that support monitoring against key indicators as students move from K12 to and through postsecondary.

Reassess high school graduation requirements

- To maintain rigor and ensure that all students have access to standards-based curriculum, focus instruction and assessment on the essential core of what students must know and be able to do rather than on prescribing specific course-taking sequences alone.
- Provide tools and resources (e.g. curriculum maps, units of study, snapshot and end of course assessments) that schools can use to prepare and assess all students against uniform standards in the core.
- Tie student progression and graduation to performance, rather than seat time. Some students will need more time; some will need less.
- Provide expanded learning options for all students as part of the high school experience based on their career and academic interests (e.g. credit-based transition programs, community-based projects, internships, integrated studies, capstone projects, etc.).

Personalize the secondary school experience

- Use varied assessments to measure readiness for learning at the next level – from middle through the transition to postsecondary. Provide immediate and appropriate interventions and/or opportunities for acceleration.
- Promote variability and flexibility in organization, scheduling, instructional strategies, and curriculum. Actively pursue alternative instructional approaches and contextual learning as options for all students.
- Provide more intensive, individualized counseling and advising as well as connections to career-related communities of practice.
- Support each student in the development and implementation of an individual learning plan, grades 6 – 14.
- Provide a range of high quality college and career awareness services, providing intensive supports to underserved and underachieving students beginning in middle school.

End of Course Assessments – Some possible purposes of end-of-course assessments include:

- To calibrate the curriculum to standards.
- To reduce grade inflation and to ensure that all teachers hold all students to the same expectations.
- To diagnose needs for professional development.
- To facilitate the move to progression based on performance and away from the Carnegie unit by providing a mechanism for students to demonstrate mastery when they are ready.

- To allow students to demonstrate competency in areas of the pre-college curriculum where they may not have learned the content in the traditional manner, such as world languages.
- As the basis for awarding credit to older learners seeking a high school diploma.

Obviously, there are other key policy areas under examination including: teacher preparation and the supports they will need to be take on new roles, collaboration across disciplines and grade levels; responding to the needs of individual students; secondary school funding and finance; and, the role of technology.

Activities:

Clearly, many of the activities related to Refocusing Secondary Education are being carried out within the framework of other initiatives such as GEAR UP, the Kentucky Scholars Program and the American Diploma Project. The challenge will continue to be to ensure that all initiatives impacting secondary students are aligned along a core set of shared goals and coordinated policies.

Two important areas of activity that impact all aspects of this work are:

Individual Graduation Plan (IGP), or Individual Learning Plan

Personalizing learning for each student is at the center of the discussions in the secondary work, which means that each student needs a highly individualized plan. In Kentucky, each student must have an individual graduation plan as a requirement for high school graduation. The current IGP structure is a paper document that relies heavily on self reported information. The fact that the plan is paper-based restricts its use and value. The level of implementation of the IGP varies greatly across the state, including when students begin the planning process, who provides advising services to the students, how often the advising occurs, as well as the content of the advisement. Also, the nature of the current plan makes it very difficult to share with parents, to monitor progress against goals and make mid-course corrections or updates, or to use the plan to guide decisions about instruction, special learning opportunities, and timely interventions.

As part of the Refocusing Secondary work, the individual learning plan will be web-enabled and its use will be expanded to incorporate: assessments; course of study; outcomes; student needs; academic and career interests; and, supports for successful transition and readiness for postsecondary learning opportunities and work. This information will help schools:

- Identify and track the needs of individual learners over time.
- Plan for allocation of learning resources for individual students and groups of students with like needs.
- Identify expanded learning options related to individual career and academic interests.
- Help the student identify and track progress against the requisite coursework, knowledge and experiences, and credentials needed to enter their chosen postsecondary institution or profession.

- Provide the parent, and other appropriate adults, with a comprehensive view of the student's plan for the school years 6-14 and progression against that plan.
- Capture a history of the student's progression through secondary education, including academic and non-academic experiences as well as samples of work, that can be used for postsecondary admissions and/or placement.
- Integrate data to be extracted from existing systems with data input by students, parents, school personnel and others as appropriate.

Beyond written assurances, it is not possible to identify the extent to which schools are complying with the requirement for an individual plan for each student today. Frankly, the task of completing these plans in their present state is very time-consuming and sharing the plan with others once completed is even more burdensome. Typically, this task falls to a single school guidance counselor who can meet with the student only once a year for this purpose. Many highly effective schools use an advising team approach to student planning, which engages faculty in an advising capacity to a team of students with whom they work for multiple years. Web-enabling the planning process will facilitate the adoption of the advising team approach in more schools because the plans can be readily accessed, updated and shared.

The anticipated outcome of this project is that 100% of Kentucky's public school students grades 6-12 will be supported by a planning process that contributes significantly to their academic achievement and a successful, planned transition from middle school to high school and from high school to postsecondary education or training by providing services and experiences appropriate to their unique interests and abilities. The planning process will engage parents, schools, community resources, postsecondary institutions and potential employers. Parents and students will have a better understanding of the implications of choices made during the middle and high school years and, therefore, be able to plan more appropriately for life afterward.

To be effective, the web-enabled plan must be linked to the data held in the pupil attendance and accounting system (STI). This will mean that the most accurate and current information (demographics, course of study, assessment data) about the student is available through the plan for viewing but not for editing. In addition to data pulled from STI, the plan will include self-reported information as well as information supplied by advisors, documentation of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities and the student's plan for transition from high school through grade 14.

The individual student plan will be Kentucky public school students' interface to the new Go Higher web portal. The Go Higher portal, to be implemented in Fall 2004, is a P16 venture among the Kentucky Higher Education Assistance Authority, the Council on Postsecondary Education, the KDE, the KCTCS, and Kentucky colleges and universities. Go Higher will function as a "one-stop-shop" for college and career planning, financial aid, colleges and university admissions, and learning opportunities in the workforce. The new IGP would link directly with the new Go Higher web portal, allowing students to export plan and transcript data directly into college admissions and financial aid processes. The Go Higher portal will also be a means for students, their parents and advisors to share appropriate information from their plan with college admissions counselors, potential learning opportunity partners in the community, and others in a safe and secure environment.

The Kentucky Department of Education is in the process of securing approval to release a Request for Proposals (RFP) for the web-enabled student plan from the Governor's Office of Technology. Development of the RFP is underway so that it can be released as soon as possible after approval is secured. Meanwhile, the department continues to work with the Go Higher project to customize K12 information and to design the interfaces to the web-enabled plan.

End of Course Assessments, or Readiness Assessments

In response to interest on the part of local districts and based on research associated with the Refocusing Secondary initiative, the Kentucky Department of Education is pursuing making end of course assessments available as an instructional resource through the Greater Assistance to Teachers initiative, also known as Kentucky Learns. In a July 2002 report, "State Policy Review of High School End of Course Assessment Programs," the National Association of System Heads (NASH) describes end of course assessments as "a promising tool for calibrating expectations in core academic courses." The report found that fifteen states include end of course assessments, or exams, as part of their high school assessment systems: Arkansas, California, Indiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Georgia, New York, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia and West Virginia.

While some of these states require schools to administer end of course (EOC) exams and to report all scores to the state department of education, this is not Kentucky's intention. In the context of the NASH report, end of course assessments are state-standardized exams usually administered during state-mandated assessment windows. Kentucky's plan is to provide districts with the ability to access EOC exams from the assessment repository, and to administer them to individual students, groups of students or all students at any time throughout the year. Decisions about if and how to use EOC exams would be made at the local level. The department's role would be to make them available as one component of an aligned instructional resource system, along with curriculum maps, units of study, snapshot assessments and other tools for teachers and administrators.

End of course exams differ from final exams because they are standardized across classrooms, schools and districts. End of course (EOC) exams differ from high school exit exams because they are administered at the time the student is completing a course and are associated with a specific course and course level.

Specific examples of how Kentucky schools might use end of course exams follow. These represent some of the ideas being generated by districts and schools through the Refocusing Secondary initiative:

- To calibrate the curriculum to standards.
- To reduce grade inflation and to ensure that all teachers hold all students to the same expectations.
- To gain insight into the effectiveness of individual teachers.
- To diagnose needs for professional development.
- To facilitate the move to progression based on performance and away from the Carnegie unit by providing a mechanism for students to demonstrate mastery when they are ready.

- To be included in requirements for high school graduation.
- As a basis for credentialing diverse learning paths and experiences.
- To allow students to demonstrate competency in areas of the pre-college curriculum where they may not have learned the content in the traditional manner, such as world languages.
- As the basis for awarding credit to older learners seeking a high school diploma.

As evidenced by the NASH report, the American Diploma Project, and discussions here in Kentucky, the interest in end of course exams is closely related to the strong sense of urgency building around the need to move more students to a rigorous curriculum. Yet, while more students are participating in these courses results on national and state accountability tests do not reflect that students are indeed learning at higher levels in proportional numbers. In other words, simply adopting the pre-college curriculum or any specific course taking sequence as the default curriculum does not produce higher levels of learning for all students. The NASH study, Education Trust research and other recent reports find that:

- The titles of courses may change, but the curriculum may not.
- Curriculum slippage is greater at the high school level than at the lower grade levels.
- Expectations are often different for different groups of students, such that an “A” in a high poverty school would earn a “C” or “D” in a more affluent school.
- This means that the challenge goes well beyond increasing the numbers of students in pre-college curriculum or other higher-level courses. In this context, end of course assessments may function as an indicator of instructional equity.

Although many of the states in the NASH study do not have a long history with end of course exams, their early findings suggest that:

- End of course exams are an effective means of establishing clear expectations for students and teachers.
- Analysis of results can be used to align comprehensive professional development plans with student needs.
- Analysis of results at the school and classroom level can be used to diagnose and respond to the professional growth needs of individual teachers.
- High school students, in particular, benefit from being able to make connections between the assessments and consequences in the real world, such as postsecondary admissions or work placement.
- End of course exams can be a key leverage point for moving schools away from the Carnegie unit system to one in which students progress based on performance.

End of course exams, as a component of a comprehensive assessment system, have the potential to:

- Drive the curriculum into closer alignment with state standards.
- Create a system of incentives and accountability for students that will drive higher levels of achievement.
- Align postsecondary admission and placement policies with end of course exam performance, which would clearly articulate shared expectations for students and reduce the numbers of students placed in developmental courses.