

OPAS Targeted E-Interview, July 2007: Administrators talk about Graduation Requirements

The OPAS Succeed Workgroup wants to start a conversation about the administrator/district/principal/building perspective on Oregon's new graduation requirements to help inform their work focus. Ideally, we will be able to formulate the right set of questions and then invite some teachers, principals and administrators to join us for a group interview. Our first draft questions were presented via email to Sean Gallagher, OPAS workgroup member and Superintendent of Lake County School District 7 and Bob Dunton, Superintendent of Corbett Schools. Bob has participated in OPAS discussions as his schedule and staffing permit, and made some valuable contributions to early discussions.

Questions

Q1: Given the participation and achievement gap, especially in STEM disciplines, what do you perceive as new challenges resulting from the new requirements in terms of STEM participation and achievement? Do the new requirements (more math, more science, lab science, Career-Related Learning Experiences aka CRLEs) make closing these gaps more or less difficult, from your point of view?

Sean: I used to have a sign above my door when I was teaching mathematics that read ... "I advise my students that when they drop mathematics to listen carefully to the sound of closing doors" by James Cabrello. Math and science skills seem to be a huge barrier for students attempting to succeed in a math/science intensive career path. Often times this challenge even includes those career paths that are not math/science dependent, but require a certain level of demonstration in basic skills to obtain their degree and/or licensure. Stats obtained from The Collegeboard website state:

- Almost 33% of all college freshman fail to pass basic entrance exams and are required to take remedial courses*
- At least in part due to academic difficulties, over 25% of college freshman drop out before their second year*
- 53% of all college students take either a remedial English or remedial Math course

This data simply points to the huge academic gap that exists between high school and college curriculum. Nobody wants to admit this exists, but it does.

The new state graduation requirements are an attempt at closing that gap. The difference between being 'college-ready' and 'workforce-ready' is almost nonexistent in today's economy. We must prepare our future students so they can maximize their opportunities for success.

There are a couple of major challenges that currently exist in implementing the new graduation requirements. The first hurdle revolves around both the public and the education community endorsing these new requirements. Not everyone is convinced this is the right thing to do. The second hurdle revolves around finding enough highly qualified staff to fill those key teaching positions. The logic being if you increase the math and science requirements, you will need more math and science teachers. Presently those

areas along with Special Education teaching positions are the most difficult to fill. How do we attract more people into those positions?

Bob: These requirements are 20 years too late for many schools in which students have been doing science and math all along. Any schools for which these mandates actually do increase graduation requirements will have to shift resources away from other curriculum areas and 'take away' opportunities that students have come to expect, meaning that many students will experience the change as a negative thing. Whatever shortage of math or science teachers currently exists in those schools will be exacerbated, and teachers of disposable subjects (like arts and humanities) will lose their jobs. CRLEs is a requirement that most communities have no capacity to support (imagine 200 high school students in a rural community of 500 people coming up with meaningful placements for those kids!)

Q2: How do you believe that the community beyond the immediate family can support the success of students in meeting the new requirements? What needs to happen for the community to become aware of what they can do, and do those things?

Sean: Communities need to be aware of these new requirements. Communities need to be aware of the global economy that exists and what it takes for our students to become competitive within that economy. I believe this starts with education from not only the school system, but from community & state leaders.

Bob: The community could best support schools by demanding adequate funding so that schools were able to adequately staff these requirements. Beyond that, they could make placements available for at least some limited number of students to gain their CRLEs, which are poorly defined and there are no performance standards associated with them, so they are mostly paperwork...

Q3: Are there new opportunities for students under the new requirements?

Sean: I believe that the new requirements create more opportunities for more students as a whole. I also believe that education is the economic equalizer between the 'haves' and the 'have nots'.

Bob: These changes don't offer anything that some students have not already participated in. Corbett has been doing all of this for some years now. But the capacity dilemma will overwhelm many systems and the CRLE requirements will be widely ignored or modified over time.

Q4: Do you have any suggestions as to how might the OPAS Succeed Workgroup support the success of underrepresented minorities (URM) and underserved students in meeting the new requirements?

Sean: I believe the focus needs to be on changing perceptions and social expectations. This is not an easy thing to do.

Bob: Pick a target, maybe just one school. Make a model work. Market it to others, probably near by. See what you can grow. Slowly.

Q5: What do you see as the biggest barriers to implementing the new graduation requirements including CRLEs?

Sean: CRLE's are easy to implement, the tough part is getting educators, parents, and students to endorse the concept. The increased math and science requirements will be difficult to implement because of challenges such as lack of highly qualified teachers, lack of expectations, lack of belief that all students can succeed in math and science, etc.... I believe that the most recent National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) Standards publication summarizes it best through what they define as the "Equity Principle" <http://standards.nctm.org/document/chapter2/equity.htm>

In summary, I believe that the State Board of Education is being extremely visionary in the new graduation requirements. These requirements will help to decrease the academic gap between HS and College/Workforce requirements. The task is not over yet. It is going to require the efforts of both educators and community leaders to get the job done.

Bob: There are not enough good teachers to offer the number of math and Science courses that are already in progress. There is nothing in place to bring more good teachers into the mix at this point. Lack of good teachers is always the only barrier. Every other consideration is secondary. Good teachers are the necessary-and-nearly-sufficient condition...some material support is required as well.

As for the CRLEs, they will be as big a non-starter as was CAM. The end result will be paperwork that takes time and money away from teaching. There have always been mentorships, job shadowing, etc. But they can only be meaningful if some particular player in the community has the will and the resources to create and support them. Do you remember any planning for that need prior to passage of this legislation?

Every reform that says 'every student will' is unfathomable hubris and bad policy. We don't do that in a school of 200 students. The kids just aren't that much alike.

CHS just sent a wonderful young woman off to Harvard. Her diploma was good enough for admission, but by next year it will be deemed inadequate by the state of Oregon (no CRLEs). Is this a joke? Could we be more blatantly dismissive of real education and more conspicuously in the service of the labor market?

My daughter is traditionally college bound. She doesn't need (and desperately doesn't want) to spend time in career exploration. She just passed her second-year advanced placement calculus exam...and she just turned fifteen. She will have taken a dozen advanced placement classes by the time she is done with high school. She probably won't decide what to do for a living for another six or eight years...nor does she feel any pressure to do so. And she doesn't need the state of Oregon mandating that she take time away from what matters to her (mostly 'Dungeons and Dragons') to do something that was designed by some wonk who doesn't know who she is or what she needs.

By the way, Corbett High School was recognized by Newsweek as the highest rated high school in Oregon and among the top 1% nationally for our Advanced Placement program. We have grown the program by another 45% this year and we intend to nearly double it again next year.

We anticipate being ranked among the top 20 public schools in the nation in two more years. And we have no participation gap. We just want the state to stay out of our way...we are better at this than they are.

We have about 25% free and reduced lunch, including 3 of our last 5 valedictorians. Our economically disadvantaged high school students meet state benchmarks at about twice the rate of their peers around the state and do considerably better than the general population. I honestly believe that the SES issue obscures more than it reveals. I don't know about the college experience of our parents. I also believe that disadvantaged students will be especially hard-hit by requirements that take students away from doing school in favor of 'career related learning'.