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## Oregon wants to know what you think about high school graduation requirements

By Elizabeth Miller (OPB)

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**Citizens are invited to fill out a survey or attend community conversations over the next two months.**



Cailyn Benson graduated from Reynolds High School in 2021. This year, officials are seeking feedback on what possible changes to make to high school diploma requirements.

*Beth Nakamura for NPR*

Last year, Gov. Kate Brown signed SB 744 into law, requiring a review of the state's high school graduation requirements. The bill spurred debate and national headlines last summer, as advocates questioned the ongoing suspension of the expectation that students prove they have mastered certain "essential skills."

Now, Oregonians are invited to share their perspective on what they think matters most in an Oregon high school diploma.

“What we’re hoping to determine ... is that we develop a better understanding of what Oregon’s citizens think the value of a diploma should be,” said Dan Farley, Director of Assessment for the Oregon Department of Education.

“What knowledge, skills, and dispositions should Oregon students graduate with in order to be prepared for their workplace and/or university, community college, post-secondary opportunities?”

There are a few ways to share input: an online survey open until April 15 and community conversations happening now through March 17.

The community conversations, happening virtually over Zoom, are organized by the 19 education service districts in the state and Oregon’s Kitchen Table, a community engagement group housed at Portland State University.

“It’s just a way to capture the full geography of the state, so people have a chance to participate with their neighbors,” said Oregon’s Kitchen Table director Wendy Willis.

Farley said the goal of the conversations, as well as of SB 744 is to learn more about student outcomes and what keeps students from graduating.

“We’re really trying to gather information about how our entire system and set of graduation requirements can be made more equitable and more fair,” Farley said, “so that we are able to continue to make progress in narrowing the opportunity gap that exists for our communities of color, our students who are from tribes that are in Oregon.”

Currently, Oregon students are required to earn 24 credits to graduate. Until 2020, students also had to demonstrate proficiency in a set of essential skills. Under SB 744, that requirement is “paused” until 2024 to give state legislators and education officials time to figure out what’s working and not working among Oregon’s graduation requirements.

The passage of SB 744 drew significant media attention and backlash from some worried that removing the essential skills requirement would make it “easier” to graduate and lessen the value of an Oregon diploma.

Oregon education officials acknowledged they don’t have a “full picture” of how essential skills affect student graduation. But looking at students who graduate in five years, Farley said completing essential skills is not a barrier to graduation.

“The situation is rather complex...but the assessment of essential skills requirements are not the reason why the majority of students are having difficulty graduating on time,” Farley said.

The state said other factors play more of a role, including the credit requirement.

Seeking engagement through statewide conversations is something ODE has done before. When planning for the Student Success Act, the state legislation that created a business tax to fund early learning, school districts and state education initiatives, officials traveled across Oregon to hear from school communities.

Farley said the outreach is a commitment to making sure Oregonians have a say in the state's education system.

"Education agencies across the country are realizing, finally, that it is really important for us as stewards of community and public servants to involve communities in decision-making processes," Farley said.

"It's not possible from where I sit to understand all of the complexities that exist in a system unless I'm connecting to those whom the system impacts."

In addition to the statewide survey and virtual community conversations, Oregon's Kitchen Table is also hosting smaller conversations to get input from specific communities outlined in SB 744.

Under the bill, Oregon is required to seek engagement with communities including students with disabilities, English language learners, youth-led organizations, and representatives from racial or ethnic groups experiencing academic disparities.

Farley said engagement over the next several months will also include talking to counselors and principals, school staff that has a front-row seat to Oregon high school graduates.

When Farley and his team present their report to state education and elected officials later this year, it'll also include research on graduation requirements in other states and recommendations out of the public engagement sessions. Before that, the Oregon Department of Education said they'll share drafts with communities they've engaged with.

"We want to make sure that all participants know how their input was cared for, and how it did or didn't get incorporated into the final report, and why," Farley said.