Base Graduation From High School Not On Credits Earned But On Demonstrated Proficiency

Excerpted from <u>Time to Learn</u> (2005) by George Wood, Principal, Federal Hocking Middle & High Schools

When Leslie complains to me that her chemistry class "doesn't matter," what she means is that she does not need that credit to graduate. Unfortunately, she's right. As we have seen, our high school graduation standards are such that students do not need to do well in the work they are asked to do. By providing only minimal effort in about three-fifths of their classes, young people can earn a high school diploma. As long as credits are the key to graduation, we will have young people choosing to fail courses they do not "need" to graduate.

Certainly some of the frustrations with this state of affairs is what has given rise to calls for high school exit exams. Feeling that teachers cannot be trusted to insure that students reach high standards, tests are legislated in order to "force" students and teacher to perform. However, merely substituting a test for credits really does not change the experience students have. Just as with credits, a test is only seen as something to get through, not something that demonstrates a student's best work. It is something that requires minimal effort (indeed true given the basic nature of these tests) and that really "doesn't matter" in the overall scheme of things.

This is not the way to help our students do their best work. It isn't that kids don't want to do work of which they are proud. It is that we simply don't ask them to show us what they really can do. What if we substituted actual performance for mere credits or standardized tests? Why not tell students that while earning credits is part of the key to graduation, just as important is their actual ability to do the things outlined in the school platform? Would this make the time students spend in every class more valuable? Could they then see each and every class as helping them gain the skills that receiving a diploma requires? Would we see them do better work in response to this challenge?

The Coalition of Essential Schools, a national restructuring effort led by Ted Sizer, made this way of thinking about graduation the sixth of their Common Principles

Students entering secondary school studies are those who can show competence in language and elementary mathematics. Students of traditional high school age but not yet at appropriate levels of competence to enter secondary school studies will be provided intensive remedial work to assist them quickly to meet those standards. **The diploma should be awarded upon a successful final demonstration of mastery** for graduation—an "Exhibition." This Exhibition by the student of his or her grasp of the central skills and knowledge of the school's program may be jointly administered by the faculty and by higher authorities. As the diploma is awarded when earned, the school's program proceeds with no strict age grading and with no system of credits earned by "time spent" in class. This emphasis is on the students' demonstration that they can do important things.

Many schools are utilizing this approach to the awarding of high school diplomas, known as graduation by exhibition. Simply put, graduation by exhibition requires that students in some way demonstrate their mastery of the required skills for a high school diploma. The notion of an "exhibition" is taken from the arts. It is an opportunity for the student to display what (s)he has learned, to show to the faculty that (s)he can do those things that are expected of a graduate.

At FHHS we use an approach that combines a senior project, graduation portfolio, and course credits for graduation. Working backward from our list of desired skills presented earlier, we put together a graduation standard that would require students to demonstrate that they have mastered these skills. One piece would be a core set of courses for every student, within which the basic competencies are acquired. From these courses students would move on to assembling in the junior and senior year a portfolio made up of demonstrations of their competence in Active Democratic Citizenship, Career in College Planning, and skills for Lifelong Learning. As a capstone experience, a Senior Project encourages each student to take something (s)he is passionate and explore it in detail. Each of these experiences is outlined in the following:

Graduation Portfolios
Class of 2009
(Revised June of 2008)

With the assistance of the members of the Class of 2003, the administration and faculty of Federal Hocking High School developed several options for the Graduation Portfolios. After trying the options for a year, we found that almost all students used the Skills Demonstration Portfolio. However, students also wanted more flexibility in using

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that model and so we have expanded that option and have decided to use it as the model for the Graduation Portfolio. We think this outline will provide you with the flexibility to both meet school standards and make sure the portfolio represents what you value about your high school experience. As you go through the experience, please provide us with any feedback on the portfolio so we can continue to improve it.

There are two goals for the Graduation Portfolio. The first is to enable the faculty of FHHS to review each graduate's readiness to enter the world after high school. The second, and perhaps more important goal, is to enable each student to reflect on his or her education and how prepared he or she is for the responsibilities of democratic citizenship, the world of work, and a life of learning.

The Graduation Portfolio provides you with ways to self-assess your development in the areas of citizen, worker, and learner. Each potential graduate will take his or her own approach to the task. We look forward to the presentations of these Portfolios on **May 22nd 2009**.

Portfolio Presentation Notes

For the past several years the faculty has observed that while students spend a great deal of time preparing a presentation, most of that presentation does not deal with the portfolio itself. The presentation rubric that you will be using this year focuses more on your presentation of the work in the portfolio to the panel. While you are encouraged to take whatever approach you want to the presentation, please be advised that you are expected to present and discuss the work in the portfolio with the panel. The faculty feels that this places the emphasis on your accomplishments and work, rather than on your presentation skills.

To help you prepare for this presentation, you will be asked to write reflections on the portfolio to be included with your other work. These reflections will help you prepare your presentation. These reflections will be prepared in your Senior English class as part of your class work and will be evaluated by your teacher in that class.

There will be three different faculty members assisting you with your Graduation Portfolio. The role of each follows:

- Advisor: Your advisor will be helping you throughout your junior and senior year to pull together your materials for your portfolio. In Advisory you will have a check sheet that you and your Advisor will use to verify that the materials for the portfolio are included. It is your responsibility to make sure everything is in the portfolio so follow the check list closely. (**Note: Merely placing material in your portfolio does not mean it is acceptable. It is your job to make sure all materials are of high quality and will pass standards.**)
- Portfolio presentation coach: You chose a faculty member during your junior year who will help you prepare for the portfolio presentation. You will take your completed portfolio from you advisor to your coach **no later than April 17th** and together you will prepare your presentation.
- Portfolio presentation chairperson: There will be a team of three faculty members who will judge your portfolio. This will include your coach and two other faculty

members. One of these faculty members will be the chair of the committee and will be responsible for seeing that all of the forms and evaluations are turned in.

The Federal Hocking High School Portfolio Contents

The FHHS Graduation Portfolio is made up of **three parts, or folios**, demonstrating each graduate's readiness to go into a career, take on the role of active citizenship, and continue learning after high school. Each folio is described below. All FHHS graduates will take their own approach to the portfolio and we encourage you to make the portfolio your own. After each item description you will find a space for your advisor to initial and date when you have placed the finished item in your portfolio. This description and check sheet should be kept in your portfolio.

<u>Senior Project Proposal Guidelines</u>

With the assistance of the Class of 2004 a new format for the Senior Project has been established. You may choose from several different types of projects in order to complete this graduation requirement. Most importantly, <u>**you should choose a project for which you have a passion**</u>. The project you choose should take a minimum of 100 hours as it will equal one credit toward graduation. This is your turn to shine, to do your own work, to take control of your own education.

The first step in the process is submitting a proposal for approval by the senior advisors and the school administration. Your proposal should be turned in to your advisor who will present it to all the advisors for your class. Your proposal should include the following three sections:

<u>**Section One:**</u> What type of project will you be doing? You may choose a project that fits in any of the following areas. Remember, the project is worth one full academic credit so make sure it is something that will take about the same time you spend in one class. Be specific in your description and make sure it clearly fits the area you are choosing. **Make sure you state in your proposal what type of project this is.** For example, if you are choosing a project in the area of Academic Interest, point out how this project would take you beyond what you have been able to do in classes. Or you choose a project in the area of Personal Challenge, point out how the activity is a challenge.

<u>**Academic Interest:**</u> A project may involve pursuing an area of academic interest in more depth than the student has been able to do at school. For example, an extended research project on the Civil War ending in an essay that is submitted to the faculty.

<u>**Community Service:**</u> A project may involve carrying out a community service which results in something benefiting the local community. For example, fixing up a local park or taking on a church repair project. Note: While volunteering with a local group is a worthwhile activity, simply volunteering does not qualify as a project. You must undertake some activity or project to qualify as community service.

Personal Challenge: A project may involve taking on a personal challenge, which extends their current skills and abilities in a significant way, and meeting it. For example, a student may want to tour the State of Ohio by bicycle or rebuild a car.

Learn a new Skill: A project may involve a student learning a new skill and presenting that skill. For example, learning to play a Mozart concerto and playing it at a school concert.

School Service: A project may involve a student in carrying out a school service project. For example, landscaping a part of the school or creating a piece of public art.

Creating Something New: A project may involve a student in the act of creating something new. For example, this may involve the production of a major piece of art or the writing of a musical score for the band.

Research: A project may involve a student in an original piece of research. For example, a student may take on researching the quality of water in the local water shed or working on a piece of local history research.

Other: For students who can find nothing of passion in the above areas, s/he may work with her/his advisor to devise yet another approach to the senior project.

Section Two: What will the process be for you to complete the project? Include in this:
   what steps you think you will be taking;
   what skills you need to learn;
   who your outside learning resource person will be (part of the project is to find an
        outside educational resource, not a teacher or family member);
   what qualifies he/she to work on this project;
   an estimated budget for the project and how you will raise or find the funds for
        the project;
   if your project is going to involve another agency or part of the school (like
        athletic department) you should include a letter indicating that the project
        is acceptable to that organization (For example, if you are working with
        the Humane Society, have a letter attached that indicated that they are
        willing to have you do the project.)

   (Additional note: Your project should not involve anyone being released from school to help you with your project. And if the project requires you to be out of school, make sure you note that and have appropriate permission.)

Section Three: What will the final product be? What will you present as evidence that your project is complete?
   Your proposal will be evaluated on the following standards:
   Are all parts of the proposal complete?
   Proper writing mechanics and conventions.
   Does the project engage you in a significant piece of work.

Senior Project Proposal Requirement Checklist
  Proper Proposal Format (refer to previous section) with Cover Page
  Senior Coach Signature of Approval
  Parent Signature of Approval
  Advisor Signature of Approval
  Proposed Budget Agreement and Budget Sheet
  Approximate Hours / Time Distribution
  Letters of Support / Permission
  Resource Person Acceptance Form

The Senior Project: A Capstone Experience

Drawn from FHHS students and their colleagues around the country, here's a sampling from A to Z of what a senior project could be:

Agriculture: One young farmer-to-be spent his senior year studying soybean cultivation in order to make his family's farm more profitable. His final exhibition was a plan for making the transition from corn to beans, complete with recommended variety, marketing target, and financing.

Beethoven: A young woman's study of the life and works of Ludwig van Beethoven culminated in a lecture and a recital of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata.

Dragons: A literary exploration of the use of dragons in fantasy and myth, comparing the Eastern and Western uses of this beast, led to a final paper and presentation accompanied by slides and photos of dragons through the eyes of writers and illustrators.

Education: Interested in a career in special education, one young woman undertook a study of how well her country was serving the needs of special populations. Interviewing teachers, students, parents, and school officials, as well as observing classrooms, she produced a report for the county superintendent.

Hemp: The uses of industrial hemp, its historic ups and downs, and the current legal status of hemp was the topic of a young woman whose parents were involved in the hemp industry. Her congressman now has her recommendations on how hemp could help area small farmers.

Kayak: Building on his interest in outdoor pursuits, one senior built a wooden kayak.

Landscaping: Two young men spent part of the first half of their senior year with a landscape design firm. The second half of the year they designed, financed and put into place a plan for the grounds of their school complete with a dry stone wall.

Pediatrics: When she was a child, no one thought she would make it through school owing to a series of mysterious ailments. But several doctors never gave up, finally diagnosing her epilepsy, and now her senior project is on the role pediatrics play in preventing the spread of childhood diseases.

Quail: Restoring quail to the region's habitat was the goal of another senior's project. After carefully researching the requisite ground cover, weather conditions, and hatchery processes, he obtained a grant to start the process on a nearby farm.

Ropes: On five acres of previously unused school property there is now a "ropes" course utilized in all physical education classes as well as by area youth groups—a senior project that will be visible for a long, long time.

Streams: Even though it didn't please several area industries, a report on the quality of stream ecosystems in the school district was compiled by a senior with an interest in biology. The township and city trustees each have a copy.

Underground Railroad: Missing from the textbooks used by students in her school was a reference to the important role her community played in the Underground Railroad. So this senior undertook a research project that yielded a set of maps for use by her teachers in showing exactly how escaped slaves made their way through the area.

Video: what better way to help the school understand the costs and benefits of the senior project than by making it into a movie? So this senior filmed the experiences of his peers and provided the school with a documentary record.

Women: They were there during the Civil War, weren't they? Again, noting something missing from her high school textbooks, this senior put together an essay on the contributions made by women during this time period, with an annotated bibliography for student use.

Zydeco: What is it, anyway? Simply one the many forms of indigenous American music that was included in this senior's audio portfolio of American sounds.

Looking over these examples, we can see several common themes:

1. Interest and Choice: The students *chose* their topics based on their own interests. These were things that had the power to hold their attention even through the rough spots.
2. Research: All the projects required students to go beyond what they already knew. They had to bring to bear all the tools they had learned throughout their schooling in order to find new information. .
3. Product: Something was actually produced by the student. This was not just a research paper; this was something kids actually did.
4. Audience: All of these involved students in preparing something for an audience beyond the teacher. Because so many eyes would see this, students knew it had to be good.

Changing the focus for graduation from course credit and tests to actual performance requires that high schools rewire the way they use time. As discussed in the prior chapter, time has to be used in flexible ways, especially if, as in this case, students are to have the time to carry out major pieces of work and faculty are to guide them. For example, the second semester of senior year might find a student with nothing on the afternoon schedule but Senior Project. During this time the student is allowed to come and go from school to accomplish the work at hand. For those whom this "freedom" gives pause, it is important to remember that upon graduation most seniors will go from high school, where they have little control over their time, to real life, where they have total control. Perhaps a little practice at time management while they are still around would be useful.