

7-15-2009

An Alternative Pathway to a High School Diploma is Needed

Kevin Hollenbeck

W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, hollenbeck@upjohn.org

Timothy J. Bartik

W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, bartik@upjohn.org

Follow this and additional works at: <https://research.upjohn.org/testimonies>

Citation

Hollenbeck, Kevin, and Timothy J. Bartik. 2009. "An Alternative Pathway to a High School Diploma is Needed." Michigan, House Education Committee, July 15.

<https://research.upjohn.org/testimonies/3>

This title is brought to you by the Upjohn Institute. For more information, please contact repository@upjohn.org.

AN ALTERNATIVE PATHWAY TO A HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA IS NEEDED

Handout Accompanying Testimony

before

House Education Committee

July 15, 2009

By

Dr. Kevin Hollenbeck, Senior Economist

Dr. Timothy Bartik, Senior Economist

W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research

Kalamazoo, MI

Hollenbeck@upjohninstitute.org

Bartik@upjohninstitute.org

Reasons for Alternative Pathway

1. Issue is not whether a rigorous curriculum should be required of Michigan high school graduates; issue is whether a “one-size fits all” approach is optimum.
2. Underlying assumption is not correct that the skill/knowledge requirements for all high wage jobs are the same as the requirements for admission to a four-year college such as the U of M or MSU.
3. Skills/knowledge that employers say are necessary to be productive (from mailroom to boardroom) are the following:
 - a. Basic academic knowledge (ninth grade level)
 - b. Basic employability behavior – attendance and punctuality
 - c. Communication skills
 - d. Problem solving skills
 - e. Understanding “big picture” – inputs, processes, outputs
 - f. Customer interaction skills

Curricula such as the Michigan Merit Curriculum (MMC) may be *correlated* with these skills, but there is no study that we are aware of that indicates that an MMC-like curriculum *develops* these skills. Furthermore, it is also the case that success in rigorous CTE courses is probably correlated with these skills.

4. Potential unintended consequences of the MMC include declines in student success (and potential dropping out); well-publicized incidents of students struggling with Algebra, and we suspect that similar struggles are occurring with World Languages. Lack of academic success is a primary reason for dropping out of school.
5. Another potential outcome is that high schools, in order to accommodate 18 credits and still leave some room for electives, are adopting block schedules or trimesters. No studies that we are aware of show these schedules improve student learning, and there are lots of reasons to believe that they are causing reductions in curriculum coverage.
6. There has been an alarming decline in enrollments in career and technical education courses. These courses do impart the general employability skills that employers want, and from a teaching and learning perspective, they meet the needs of the majority of students who are hands-on learners. The EFE program in Kalamazoo County, which not too long ago was rated as one of the five best programs in the country, has experienced a 27 percent decline in planned enrollment. The Berrien County EFE program, which is also highly rated, is down 15 percent.

7. So the bottom line is that an inflexible curriculum may result in the exact opposite of what it is intended to accomplish, i.e., may result in (1) a watered down curriculum for the 50 to 75 percent of the students who would have taken that curriculum even if it hadn't been mandated and thus making Michigan students *less* competitive nationally and internationally; (2) academic frustration and subsequent dropping out of some students seriously reducing their prospects for sustainable careers; and (3) de-emphasis on the career and technical education courses that may be imparting the skills that employers indicate that students need in order to get to a high wage job.

Suggested Alternative

We support the general direction that is at the heart of HB 4410, which is to allow a second pathway to the high school diploma. We do have some “tweaks” to it that we think are recommended. In short, our suggestions are as follows:

1. Two pathways to a diploma. As opposed to the MMC’s “one size fits all” approach, we believe a better alternative allows for flexibility in rigorous skill requirements by having two pathways to follow in order to achieve a high school diploma: a core subject-intensive option and a career and technical education-intensive option. Both the Bartik/Hollenbeck proposal (in table 1) and HB 4410 provide for these alternative pathways. Both pathways would lead to the same diploma.
2. Overlap between pathways. Both high school diploma pathways should have sufficient overlap that it would be feasible for students to switch to a different pathway without much delay. For example, in their junior year, a student may discover that the CTE course that they are taking is really not for them. He or she should be able to easily achieve the core-subject intensive option. Alternatively, in their sophomore year, a student may take a CTE course as an elective, and get “turned on” to that subject area. So he or she should be able to easily achieve the career and technical education-intensive pathway. Both our proposal and HB 4410 do so. For example, both bills require ALL students to do both Algebra I and geometry.
3. No more than 16 required credits. To give sufficient room for electives, the state government should not impose more than 16 required credits. In 6 period day schedule, high school only has 24 total credits.
4. Don’t force districts to move to block or trimester. Block or trimester allows for up to 32 or 30 high school credits. But these systems water down course content because they award course credit for less learning time; in addition, block and trimester reduce continuity of math and world language instruction.

5. Math/Science. The core subject-intensive curriculum would be identical to the MMC except that we believe that there is no need to have a senior year *requirement* in math, and we believe that key elements of the health/PE courses should be incorporated into biology. The CTE-intensive curriculum would require 3 math and 3 science credits. Again, we presume that health/PE would be incorporated into biology, but also some career-relevant science units would be permitted. While it may appear as though the CTE-intensive curriculum is a slight reduction in math/science emphasis from the core subject-intensive curriculum, it should be recognized that there is a considerable integration of math and science into CTE courses.
6. Visual/Performing Arts and World Languages. Clearly, visual/performing arts and world languages are vital subject matter from which many students would benefit. The MMC requires 1 credit in the former and 2 credits in the latter. In our core subject-intensive curriculum, we keep the 2 credit world languages requirement, but suggest that key elements of visual/performing arts curriculum should get incorporated into social science (specifically, history courses). We delete the world language and visual/performing arts requirement in the CTE-intensive curriculum in order to accommodate a maximum of 16 required credits. Students would have room in their schedules (and would presumably be encouraged) to take these as electives if they so chose.
7. On-Line Course. With the ever-accelerating access to and capability of technology, this requirement seems antiquated.
8. Details in Table 1. Table 1 outlines the Michigan Merit Curriculum, our alternative proposal, and HB 4410 (after 2012), and goes through some of the detailed differences. Our proposal restricts both pathways to 16 required credits, whereas both the MMC and HB 4410 have 18 credit requirements. We also suggest other specific differences in course requirements, which we can discuss in response to questions.
9. High skill requirements and school reform are not the same as “one size fits all”. In sum, the choice is not between the MMC vs. no skill requirements at all. Both pathways to the diploma should be rigorous in skills requirements; both expect students and schools to do a lot more; and both require dramatic changes in what schools do.

Table 1 Comparison of Michigan Merit, Bartik/Hollenbeck Proposal, and HB 4410

Feature	Michigan Merit Curriculum	Bartik/Hollenbeck Proposal		HB 4410
OPTIONS FOR STUDENTS	One option for all	Core-subject intensive pathway	CTE-intensive pathway	Michigan Merit or general diploma (after 2012)
NUMBER OF REQUIRED CREDITS	18	16	16	18
ENGLISH CREDITS	4 (English 9–12)	4 Same as MMC	4 with technical writing substituted for one of regular English	4 Same as MMC
MATH CREDITS	4 incl. Algebra I, geometry & Algebra II, plus math senior year	4 Same as MMC except no senior year reqt.	3 incl. Algebra I & geometry	3 incl. Algebra I & geometry
SCIENCE CREDITS	3 incl. biology & physics or chemistry	3 Same as MMC	3 with more career-relevant science permitted	2 incl. biology
SOCIAL SCIENCE CREDITS	3 incl. government economics, U.S., world	3 Same as MMC	3 Same as MMC	2 incl. civics
HEALTH/PE CREDITS	1	Incorporate key elements into science	Incorporate key elements into science	1
VISUAL/PERFORMING ARTS	1	Incorporate key element in social science	Incorporate key element in social science	—
WORLD LANGUAGE CREDITS	2	2 Same as MMC	Not required	2 Same as MMC
CAREER & TECHNICAL EDUCATION CREDITS	Not required	Not required	3	3
ON-LINE COURSE	Required	Not required	Not required	Required
ADDITIONAL ELECTIVES	None req'd.; room for 6	None req'd.; room for 8	None req'd.; room for 8	1 required; room for 6 more