



PROGRAM EVALUATION DIVISION

NORTH CAROLINA GENERAL ASSEMBLY

April 2010

Report No. 2010-01

High School Graduation Project Requirement Should Remain a Local School District Decision

Summary

Evaluation purpose. On its own authority in 2005, the State Board of Education required all public high school students, starting with the class of 2010, to complete a senior project in order to graduate. Session Law 2009-60 suspended the statewide requirement until July 1, 2011 (starting with the class of 2015) and directed the Program Evaluation Division to evaluate the cost and effectiveness of a statewide high school graduation project requirement.

North Carolina Graduation Project model. The State Board of Education mandated that schools implement the requirement in accordance with the Department of Public Instruction's *Implementation Guide*. The *Implementation Guide* defines the Graduation Project as a performance-based assessment of students' ability to integrate knowledge, skills, and performance within a topic area of their choosing. Students complete a paper, product, presentation, and portfolio as part of the project. The Graduation Project was intended to be implemented school-wide, rather than in one content area, and over four years, rather than in the senior year.

Although 69% of schools require some version of a culminating project, very few follow the Graduation Project model. The Program Evaluation Division found the majority (69%) of North Carolina high schools required students in the class of 2010 to complete a culminating project, but very few schools followed the Graduation Project model as prescribed by the *Implementation Guide*. Each school spent an average of \$7,214 on its version of the requirement in the 2008-09 school year.

Due to insufficient empirical evidence of outcomes, statewide implementation would not be worth the \$6.6 million investment required. Although there is anecdotal support for culminating projects, there is no compelling empirical evidence that completing a project achieves intended student outcomes. At present, the investment and effort that would be required for statewide implementation of the Graduation Project cannot be justified. However, the Program Evaluation Division did not find evidence to support prohibiting individual schools and school districts from offering a graduation project experience. Proponents of culminating projects reported that they provided a unique learning opportunity for students and encourage community involvement in schools.

Project requirement should remain a local school district decision. The Program Evaluation Division recommends the North Carolina General Assembly direct the State Board of Education to delegate authority to school districts to decide whether to implement a high school graduation project requirement.