Comments on Core 24 and Grad rates to State Board of Education, March 13, 2019

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Background: I’m a parent in Highline. Some administrators in our district want to implement a trimester system in fall 2020. This is driven by the high rate of failure in Highline: with 30 credit opportunities over 4 years, students can fail a lot of classes and still get 24 “credits”. Two 12 week trimester terms, for a total of 24 weeks, with 65 minute classes, would result in the same “credits” as a student could earn in two semesters of 18 weeks for a total of 36 weeks, of 55 minute classes.

Key point: changing a few words of the Core 24 legislation, such as being able to waive two credits of the 24 through Unique circumstances or individual circumstances, is not enough to deal with the unintended consequences of Core 24. Also, I don’t think a lot of school boards and maybe even administrators are aware there is currently a waiver.

What to do:

1. One suggestion from a friend: “how about a district – wide waiver for districts that have a very high number of kids with the circumstances that apply for a waiver.”
2. Another option: reduce the number of electives for all districts so that students need 21 or 22 credits, not 24.
3. A third option is a 7 period day funded for all districts
4. And, please, present the waiver information in person, to school boards, in public meetings.

Why does this matter?

I’ve had some talks with teachers and counselors about the impacts of implementing Core 24 in Highline. Here are some of their stories about how the district wants to reduce quality in a five period trimester system:

1. A science teacher: “we are NOT going to cover an 18 week semester’s worth of content in 12 weeks. We are going to cover 12 weeks in 12 weeks.” I asked how can you call that a half credit? He said “there’s no state law about what a credit is. We could have a three week class and call it a credit. We do hope, but there are no guarantees, that AP classes can still be 36 weeks.”
2. A math teacher: “we are told we will not have continuous classes. So I could teach Alg 1A in the fall, Geometry 1B in the winter, Alg 2 B in the spring, all to different kids every 12 weeks.”
3. A language arts teacher: “I am told I need to consolidate a two full year IB Higher Level English Class that can earn college credit into four trimesters. And there’s no guarantee the class will be going on at the time of the IB testing in the spring. We do have some time in the current setup for college essay support. That’s the first cut so we can get through the IB material: the support for college applications for our students, which are 60% Free Reduced Lunch. “

Here are four metrics I would like to use when looking at our high school system.

1. Number of credits required
2. Graduation rate
3. Instruction time per credit
4. Mastery of content , the actual learning

The first three are numbers. The fundamental problem I see with Core 24: it emphasizes one metric, the number of credits, in a context where the second number, graduation rate, is very important as well. So, focusing on these two numbers potentially puts a major squeeze on the other two: instruction time per credit, and mastery of content.

I mention the word “potential”. In some districts, the actual squeeze is not a big deal. But in Highline, the context is very different. I learned the other day that we have about a 7% homeless rate for our youth. Several hundred of our high school students show up in a report about numbers of homeless youth. Also, according to the newly available Washington State Report card, just 41% of the students who have completed their first year of high school in Highline last year earned 6 credits.

In that context, what should administrators do if they want to meet the number of credits, and boost the graduation rate? One is to boost academics, another is to dumb credits down with a shell game.

The shell game is to cut the number of minutes per credit. Here's the math

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | # / year | Days/ Term | Instruction Mins /Day | Total mins/year (a full credit) | Comment |
| Trimester | 3 | 60 | 65\* | 7800 | 3900x2 – a credit is earned in 2 trimester terms |
| Semester | 2 | 90 | 55 | 9900 | 4950x2 – a credit is earned in 2 semesters |
| Lower amount in trimester |  |  | 10  | 2100 minutes less for a credit in the trimester system |  |

\*source: verbal statement on March 11, 2019, by Julie Hunter, saying days with advisory will hve 62 mins/day, and days without will have 67. So 65 is an average.

Basically, we have credit deflation. We have a dumbing down of what a credit is, in order to hit our numbers of credits and be able to check the box for the percentage of kids who graduate.

Under the framework you, the state board, have in place this is legal and acceptable.

And what’s the impact on parents and students?

1. Private schools – but they are not an option for most.
2. Running Start – but doesn’t work for a lot of kids
3. People move.

To close, this week has been a roller coaster with some key college admissions news. But it is not just a rejection or waitlist that’s sobering, it is hearing just how hard it is for even the kids who have done well in the current high school system to succeed in college. Their wish is even more mastery, not just checking off boxes on a dumbed down system with fewer instruction minutes per credit.

Please, don’t have a system that drives down learning and prep for college in some districts. There are alternatives, please implement them and be realistic about counselor resources to implement waivers for several hundred students.