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Explaining the major changes coming to Indiana high schools



Graduates walk during their commencement ceremony. State education officials hope to shift students' focus from counting classes to exploring career paths – creating opportunities for students to complete college programs, internships and apprenticeships before leaving high school. (WISH File Photo)

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(MIRROR INDY) – A major overhaul is coming for Indiana high schoolers.

With new proposals this week, state education officials hope to shift students' focus from counting classes to exploring career paths – creating opportunities for students to complete college programs, internships and apprenticeships before leaving high school.

Their goal is to give students more voice in their high school experience and to expose them to careers earlier. That comes with doing away with the current Core 40 diploma system and replacing it with a new, modernized approach in which students accumulate points for every educational experience they complete.

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The earliest high schools would feel the changes on a local level in 2029, meaning this year's seventh graders would be the first to graduate with the new diplomas.

State officials say they hope the reimagined diploma can address a problem in Indiana: 76% of Hoosier high school graduates say they plan to pursue some form of higher learning, but only 53% actually follow through. It's also an attempt to make sure high school is flexible to students' needs and prepares students for jobs that quickly adapt to the latest innovations.

"High school education has not changed, for most, in over 100 years," Indiana Secretary of Education Katie Jenner said Wednesday. "And, yet, the world around us is changing."

The overhaul would require increased collaboration between Indiana's schools, higher education institutions and local businesses. However, the resources needed to make it happen are unclear. That's where state officials say they want to hear from the public.



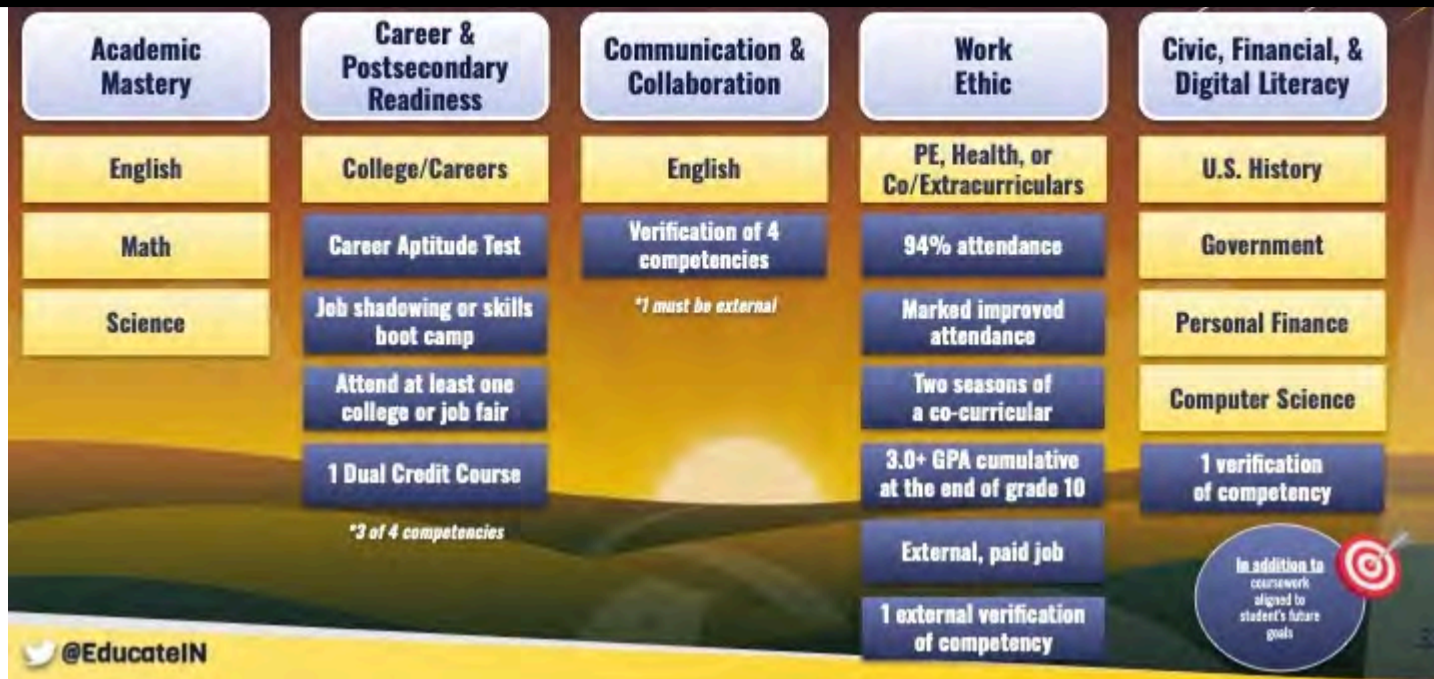
They're encouraging parents, educators, business leaders and students to share their thoughts on their first draft of new graduation requirements. A state feedback portal [went live online](#) Wednesday.

WHAT'S IN THE NEW DIPLOMA?

Under the proposal, a majority of students would graduate with either the Indiana GPS Diploma or the Indiana GPS Diploma Plus. A small number of students would qualify for an alternative diploma that Indiana is federally required to offer to those receiving high-need, special education services.

The Indiana GPS Diploma, as Jenner describes it, is "the pillar holding the bridge up." It would establish foundational skills students must study as ninth and 10th graders, and would create more flexibility for juniors and seniors to fulfill graduation requirements with experiences both in and out of the classroom.

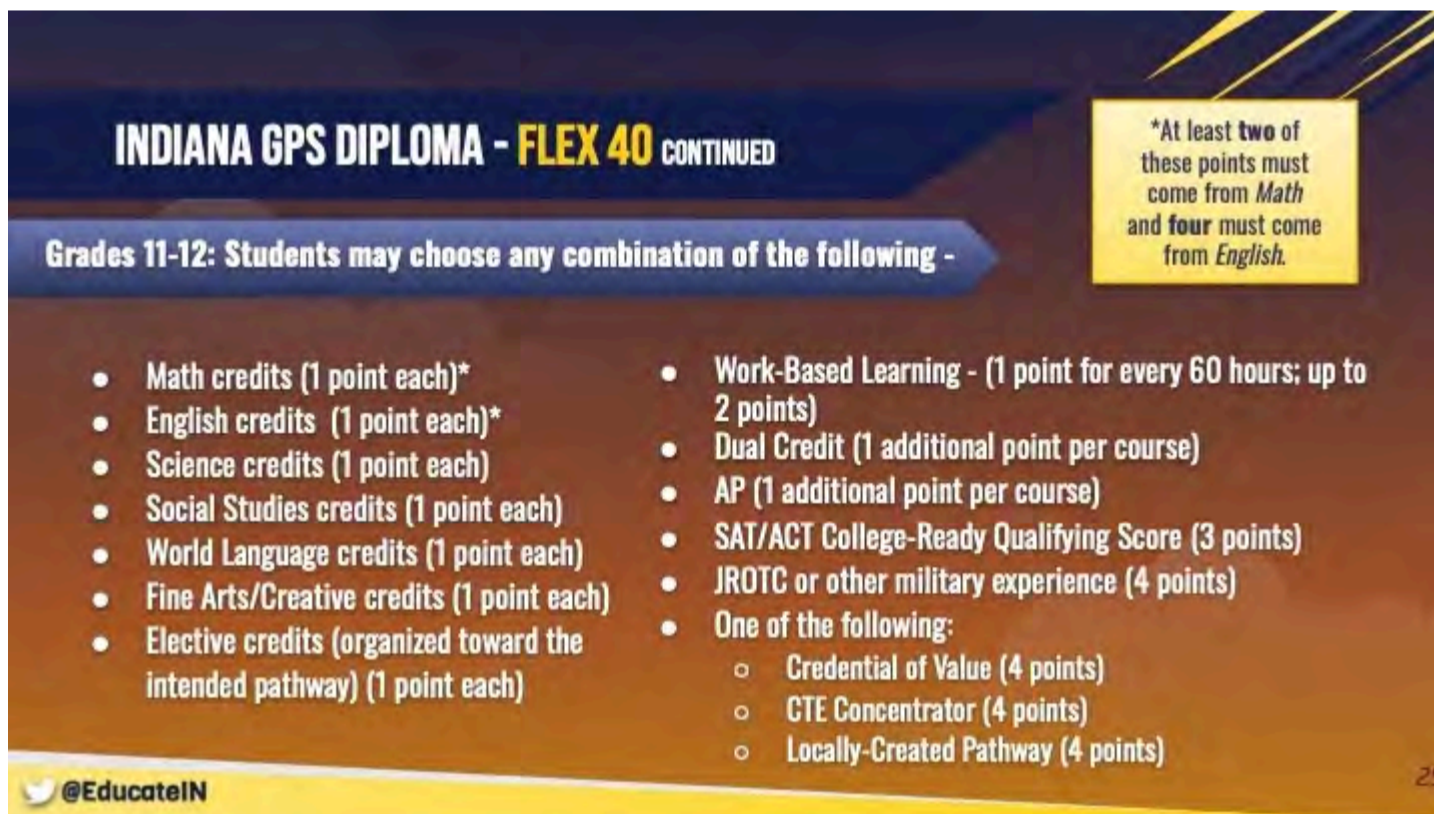
Foundational skill requirements would be organized by attributes like academic mastery, work ethic and communication rather than by subject matter like math, science or English. Students can earn credit through both classes they take at school and actions like going to a job fair, participating in co-curriculars and maintaining high attendance. State officials say this structure places an emphasis on skills students should be learning rather than classes they need to complete.



High schoolers will need to complete these foundational skills under education officials' proposals to change Indiana graduation requirements. (Provided photo/Indiana Department of Education)

English and math credits would still be required but students would have more flexibility in choosing classes. High-level calculus courses, for example, were adopted in schools during the Space Race in the 1980s, Jenner said. Now, state education officials are looking at more applicable math classes, such as data science, that could be used in artificial intelligence or tech careers.

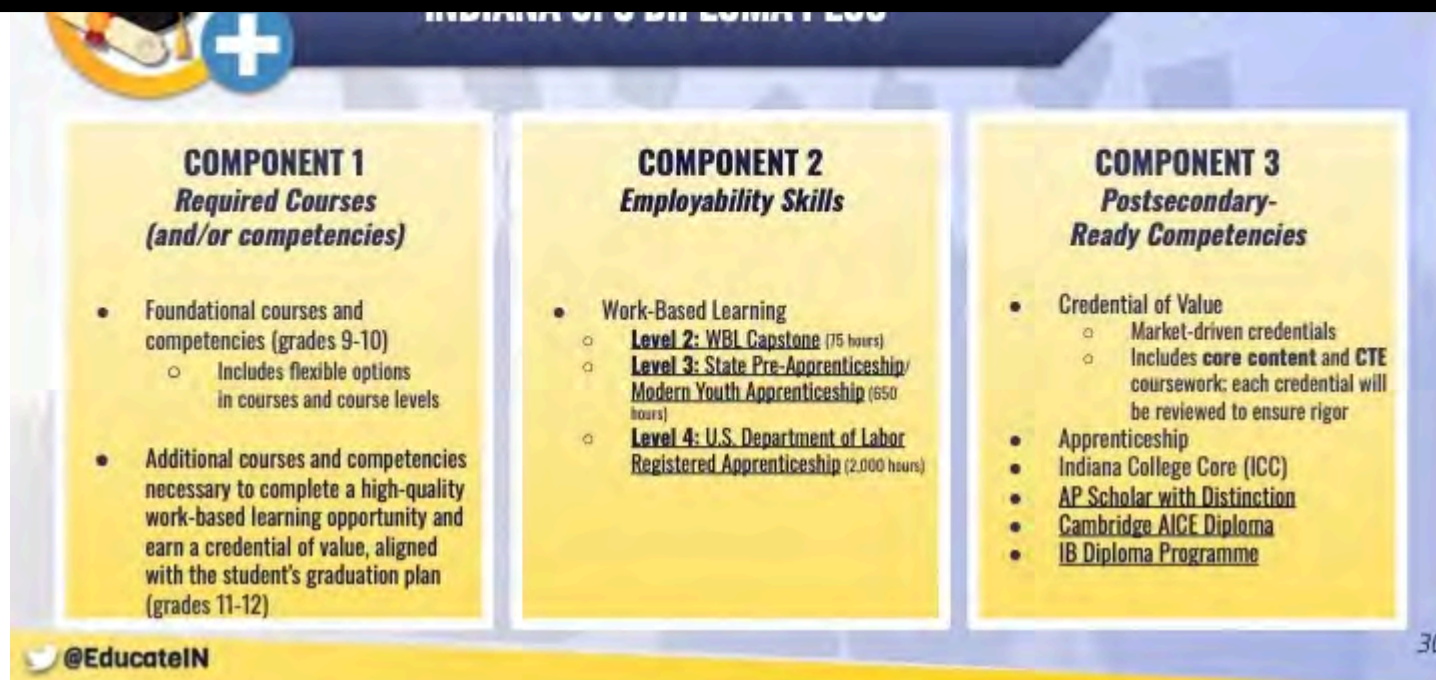
Once students complete the foundational skills requirements, they would have flexibility to complete their diploma with educational experiences both in and out of the classroom using a newly proposed point system. A semester of English, for example, would earn a student one point while participation in an internship or school JROTC program could be worth two or four points. State officials say the point system would allow students to craft a high school experience that best fits their interests after high school.



Students can combine classes and activities to achieve a required number of points under state education officials' proposal for a new high school diploma. (Provided photo/Indiana Department of Education)

The Indiana GPS Diploma Plus option would take graduation requirements a step further. In addition to meeting the requirements of the Indiana GPS Diploma, students seeking the Plus diploma would earn credit by completing an apprenticeship or work-based learning capstone.

For example, a student who worked 650 hours in a state-approved apprenticeship would meet the employability skills requirement of the proposed Diploma Plus model.



Students seeking the Indiana GPS Diploma Plus will need to meet these requirements under state education officials' proposals. (Provided photo/Indiana Department of Education)

By exposing students to potential college or career paths in high school, state officials say, they hope to put students on the right track to pursue their interests after graduation.

"Does every student in our country need to have the same 30 to 40 classes or should we really understand what the student's purpose or path may be?" Jenner said. "Let's expose them to that career potential, let's see if they like it in high school, let's connect them with business leaders in that sector, but really light that fire and purpose earlier than we're doing right now."

COMMUNITY SUPPORT NEEDED FOR NEW DIPLOMA REQUIREMENTS

Education officials acknowledge that community partnership is key in successfully adopting the new diplomas. They will need buy-in from business and industry leaders across the state to support a growth of student internships and apprenticeships – something State Board member B.J. Watts was quick to point out during Wednesday's meeting.

"EVSC has 1,200 seniors," said Watts, who also works with the Evansville-Vanderburgh School Corporation. "If I flush 1,200 seniors into my business partners, are there places for them to land?"

The Department of Education also will need higher education officials on board to expand dual credit opportunities and to agree to admit students who graduate with the new diploma. Jenner said she's met recently with leaders at Indiana University and Ivy Tech Community College, and will consider their feedback as the department revises its proposals.

"Feedback is going to be key," Jenner said. "It will not be perfect out of the gate, but we cannot let the perfect get in the way of the good on this. We have to start somewhere."

Multiple state board members offered their feedback in real-time Wednesday, asking if world languages could count toward students' communication and collaboration skills, and whether high schoolers could earn points for a summer internship.

It's unclear what support will be in place for the hundreds of teachers and school counselors who will be tasked with creating programs to meet the new diploma requirements and helping students navigate the changes. State officials say they want educators to tell them what they need.

Board member Scott Bess, who is also executive director of Purdue Polytechnic High Schools, pointed to the state's recent blitz on elementary school reading, which [has seen multimillion-dollar investments](#) from public and private partners.

"We're going to do the exact same thing with this," Bess said. "The department's going to step up. The legislature's going to step up. Our philanthropy in Indiana is going to step up."

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

The State Board of Education gave its unanimous approval to begin adopting the new diplomas. It's the first step in a long series of state agency approvals that will need to take place over the next year.

resources are needed to support the transition.

A second public comment period is expected in June and July. Jenner said she also plans to take information about the new graduation requirements on the road.

“I plan to hop around the state and specifically listen to Hoosiers,” Jenner said. “It’s going to be a very, very active next four months.”

A revised plan could be brought back to the State Board of Education for their approval in August or September, Jenner said, with a final plan to head to the attorney general and governor by December.

Mirror Indy reporter Carley Lanich covers early childhood and K-12 education. Contact her at carley.lanich@mirrorindy.org or follow her on X [@carleylanich](https://twitter.com/carleylanich).

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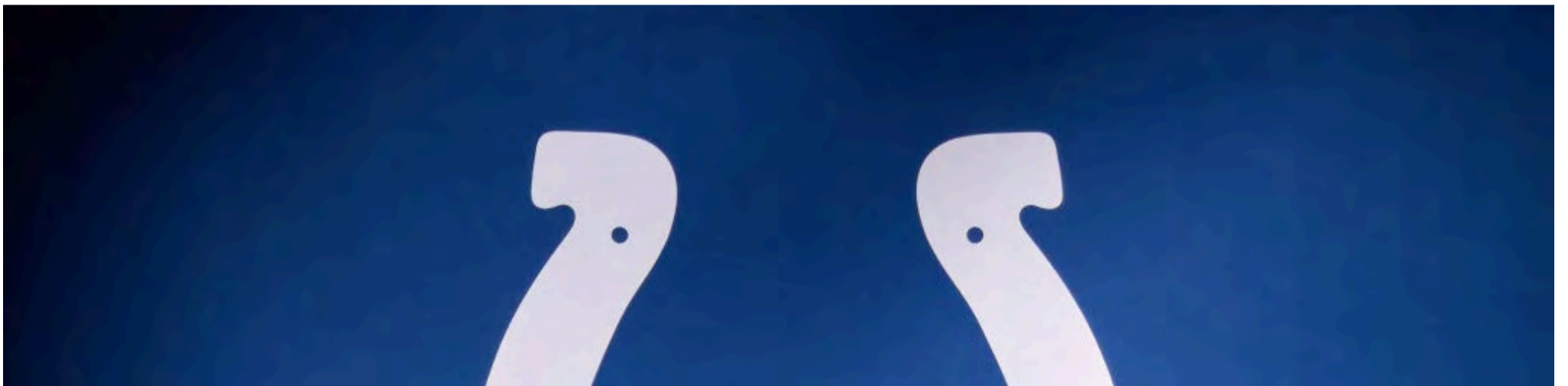
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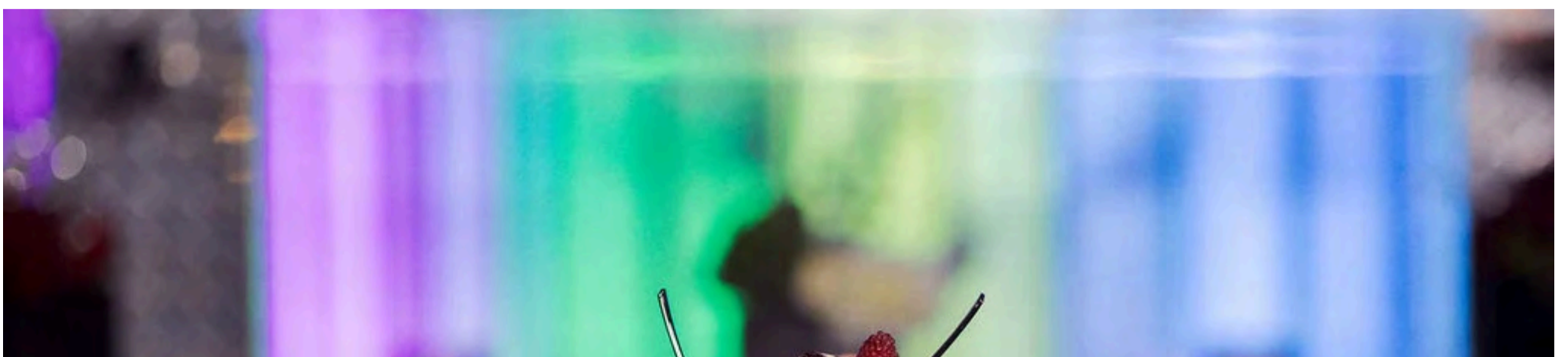
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