

High School Graduation Validation Process Evaluation

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Prepared by:
Tiffany George, Ph.D.

Shared Accountability





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MCPS Graduation Validation

High School Processes and Outcomes



Evaluation Scope

This program evaluation examined the implementation of the high school graduation validation process at Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) during the 2024–2025 school year. It also investigated how high schools use this process, which involves a series of steps designed to support successful graduation by ensuring that students meet all required credits. This program evaluation supported the academic excellence pillar of the 2022–2025 strategic plan and was approved by the Board of Education for examination during the 2024–2025 school year.

Methods

A mixed-methods design was used to assess the effectiveness of the graduation validation process and to understand how well the process supported high school students for graduation. In addition, the evaluation investigated the implementation of the validation process by school-based staff on the graduation validation team. Qualitative data were collected through focus groups with high school principals, assistant principals, and counselors, and responses to open-ended survey items. One-on-one interviews were also conducted for staff members who were unable to join a focus group but still expressed interest in participating in the qualitative portion. Qualitative data from focus groups and interviews were analyzed using a thematic analysis and are presented together in the results. An online survey was distributed to all school-based staff involved with the graduation validation team at their school. Quantitative data from the staff survey were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

Results: Survey

The staff survey, administered across 25 high schools, achieved a 49.8% response rate and included items assessing staff perceptions of the graduation validation process. Nearly 90% of respondents agreed that the process helps students meet requirements and identifies those at risk of not graduating in a timely manner. Staff reported using a range of tools such as internal spreadsheets, the GradVal Dashboard, and student information system (i.e., Synergy) reports to monitor progress towards graduation. However, staff commonly noted concerns about errors caused by entering the same data in multiple systems (i.e., GradVal Dashboard, Synergy) and the limited integration among those systems. While most staff agreed that students are notified early and intervention is possible, fewer were satisfied with the efficiency of current systems and the adequacy of graduation validation funding, especially among school leaders. Feedback also indicated variability in communication structures, meeting consistency held at schools, and the clarity of roles for staff involved in the process, signaling the need for more streamlined and standardized implementation across schools.

MCPS Graduation Validation

High School Processes and Outcomes

Results: Focus Groups and Interviews

Focus groups and interviews with principals, assistant principals, and counselors revealed a consistent commitment to supporting graduation validation for seniors through a structured, collaborative process. Participants described their roles as project managers and case managers, with responsibilities ranging from data monitoring graduation requirements to personalized student planning. Emphasis was placed on early identification of students at risk of not graduating, recurring team meetings, and a clear chain of oversight to ensure that seniors are on track for graduation. Counselors reported tracking credits, MCAP testing, and Student Service Learning (SSL) hours, from as early as Grade 9, and highlighted the effectiveness of individualized academic plans, and cross-functional collaboration. Despite varying implementation across schools, the process was described as being built on checks and balances, accountability, and continuous communication with students and families.

Conclusions

Overall, findings revealed that the graduation validation process is widely viewed by staff as effective, collaborative, and student-centered. Both qualitative and quantitative results highlighted strong practices in early identification of students at risk of not graduating, structured team-based monitoring, and personalized support to ensure graduation readiness. While the majority of staff expressed confidence in the graduation validation process and its outcomes, they also identified critical areas for improvement—namely, the need for better-integrated data systems, clearer communication protocols, and more consistent implementation across schools. Despite limitations in sample size and variation in school-level practices, the program evaluation provides a clear direction for strengthening the process through greater standardization, improved tools, and sustained collaboration.



Evaluation Scope

The purpose of this program evaluation study was to examine how high schools use the graduation validation process to support students and to assess how effective that process is. The graduation validation process involves collaboration among staff to ensure that students meet graduation requirements on time. According to MCPS standards, the graduation validation process involves several key steps: School staff identify students not meeting graduation requirements and then send warning letters to those students. Counselors and assistant principals review grades in the graduation validation database or report cards to ensure that there are no missing or incomplete grades needed for graduation. Student Service Learning (SSL) coordinators, counselors, and assistant principals review SSL action plans and update lists of students who have not met the graduation requirement, and then provide students with opportunities to meet this graduation requirement. Previous research underscores the significance of developing these processes, linking them to college and career readiness as well as social and emotional learning outcomes (Atwell & Tucker, 2024). Effective graduation validation involves extensive collaboration among school administrators, principals, and counselors to ensure students meet graduation requirements on time (Farozin & Kurniawan, 2024). Counselors promote eligible students to senior status, if needed, and collaborate with the registrar to order diplomas. Counselors verify transcripts to ensure students are enrolled only in required courses, and this is done by monitoring the graduation validation database. If students lack the credits to graduate, counselors oversee summer school registration for credit recovery. Senior class administrators review potential graduates' status, and principals submit the final validation checklist attestation form. Overall, this streamlined process ensures all graduation requirements are met. This program evaluation supports the academic excellence pillar of the 2022–2025 Strategic Plan and the evaluation was approved by the Board of Education for examination during the 2024–2025 school year.

Purpose of Evaluation



To examine the extent to which the graduation validation process is implemented with fidelity and ensures that the credits needed to graduate high school for seniors are addressed and met.



To assess the effectiveness of the high school graduation validation process for the current school year 2024–2025.

Research Questions

1

To what extent does the graduation validation process ensure that high school seniors are earning the required credits needed for graduation?

2

To what extent do staff monitor whether students are on track to meet graduation credit requirements?

3

What are staff perceptions of the graduation validation process?

4

What are staff perceptions of the funding allocated for graduation validation?



This program evaluation study used a mixed-methods approach to assess both the quality of implementation of the Graduation Validation Process and the level of satisfaction among school-based staff involved in the process. Although focus groups were organized by both funding allocation group and staff position (principals/assistant principals and secondary counselors), responses were largely consistent across groups. Therefore, focus group findings were reported by staff position, either principals/assistant principals or secondary counselors, regardless of funding allocation. Descriptive statistics were provided for survey responses.

Outcome Measures



Qualitative Data:

- Focus groups were conducted virtually with principals, assistant principals, and secondary counselors via Zoom.
- One-on-One interviews were also conducted for staff who were unable to join a focus group session.



Quantitative Data:

- An online survey was administered to all school-based staff involved in the graduation validation process.
- The online survey included demographic questions and Likert-scale items for quantitative data.



Analysis:

- **Qualitative data:** A Thematic Analysis was conducted. Themes from open-ended survey items were included only if they were reflected by at least 10% of total responses. Themes from the principal and assistant principal focus groups were identified if mentioned by a minimum of 5 participants, while those from the secondary counselor focus groups required a minimum of 3 participants.
- **Quantitative data:** Descriptive Analysis (frequencies and percentages) was conducted on survey data.



Sample

- **Focus groups** were organized based on total staff funding allocations received based on the high school. When invitations were sent, participants were asked to provide three times that they were available.
- Participants were grouped into a high group (\$50,000 or more), Moderate (\$20,000-\$49,999) and Low (Below \$20,000) based on their funding.
- Assistant principals and secondary counselors were randomly selected because there were more than one person in those positions at their respective schools.
- **Four one-on-one interviews** were conducted and results were combined with those of the focus groups.
- A total of **20 principals and assistant principals**, and a total of **7 secondary counselors** participated in separate focus groups.
- **Survey invitations** were distributed to over 400 school-based staff, and nearly half (49.8%) responded to the survey after follow-up reminders.

Costs for High School Graduation Validation

FY 2025 Grad Validation Staff and Materials Allocation by High School

Albert Einstein HS	\$45,007	\$8,000
Bethesda-Chevy Chase HS	\$23,513	\$6,000
Clarksburg HS	\$31,113	\$7,000
Col. Zadok Magruder HS	\$31,705	\$8,000
Damascus HS	\$10,026	\$7,000
Gaithersburg HS	\$73,958	\$9,000
James Hubert Blake HS	\$52,678	\$9,000
John F. Kennedy HS	\$70,764	\$9,000
Montgomery Blair HS	\$72,232	\$8,000
Northwest HS	\$33,367	\$7,000
Northwood HS	\$41,587	\$9,000
Paint Branch HS	\$60,443	\$9,000
Poolesville HS	\$5,375	\$5,000
Quince Orchard HS	\$35,902	\$7,000
Richard Montgomery HS	\$33,818	\$6,000
Rockville HS	\$22,549	\$8,000
Seneca Valley HS	\$67,946	\$8,000
Sherwood HS	\$16,480	\$6,000
Springbrook HS	\$35,476	\$9,000
Thomas S. Wootton HS	\$8,833	\$5,000
Walt Whitman HS	\$5,124	\$5,000
Walter Johnson HS	\$42,659	\$5,000
Watkins Mill HS	\$52,014	\$9,000
Wheaton HS	\$79,187	\$9,000
Winston Churchill HS	\$2,054	\$5,000

■ Staffing Allocation
■ Materials (Online Licenses) Allocation.

The cost of each online course license for FY25 was \$105 per license.

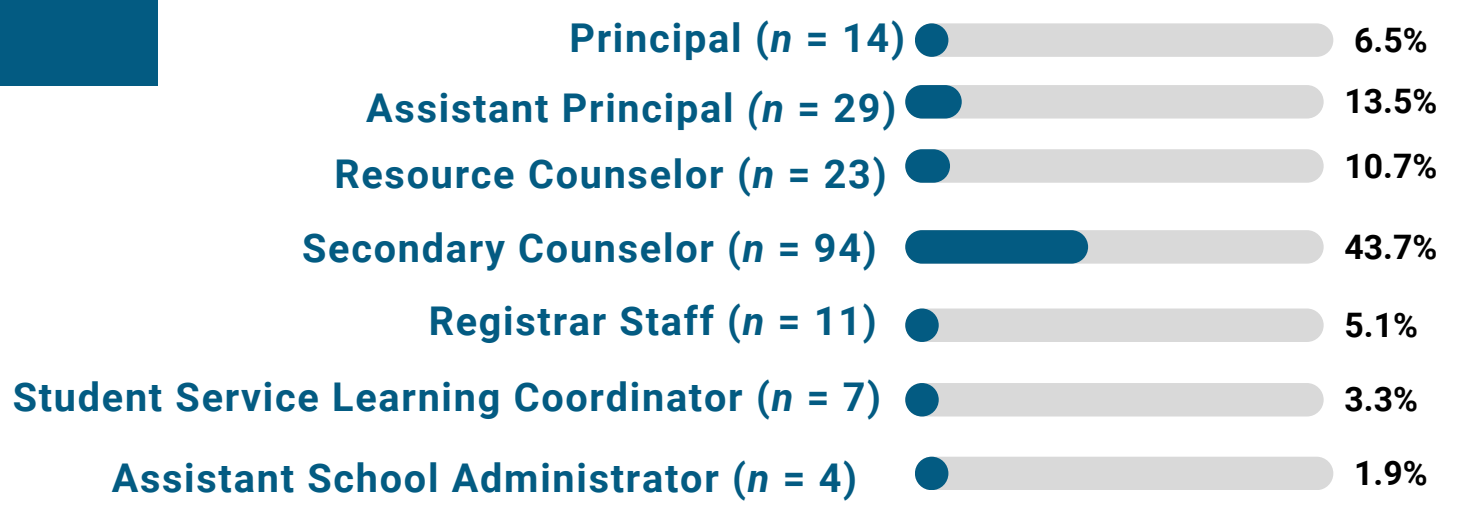


Results: Staff Background Information

Staff Survey (N = 182)



Current Position



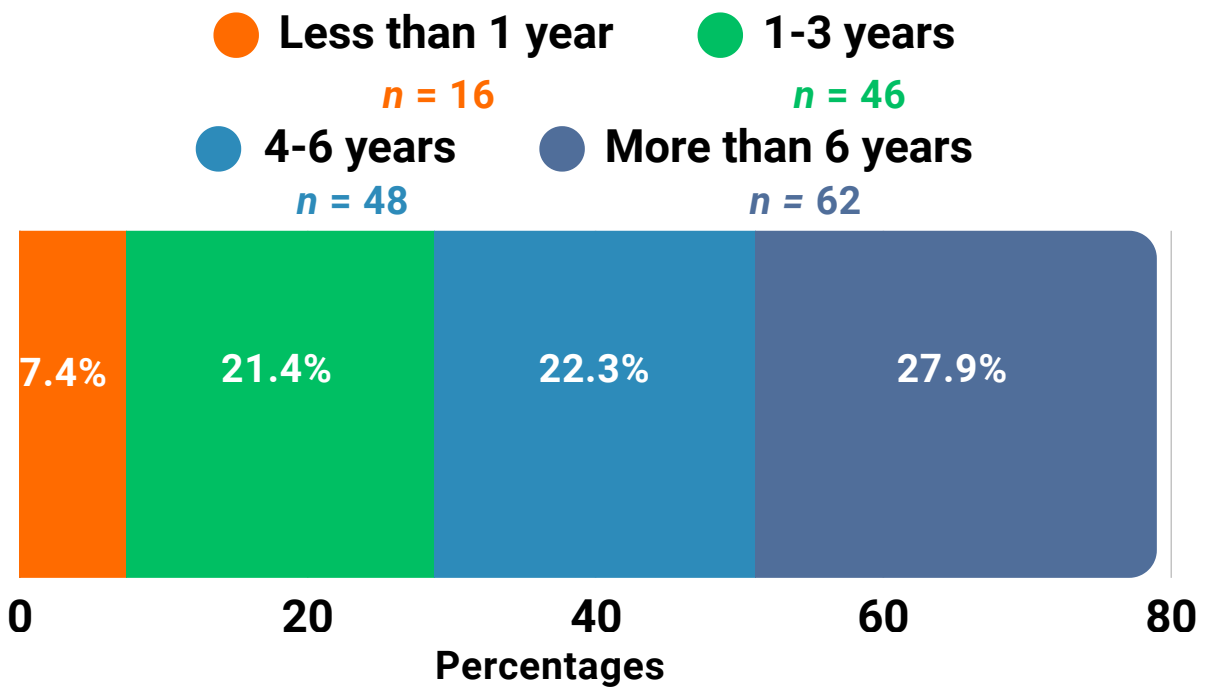
Findings

An online survey was sent to all school-based staff involved in the graduation validation process, which included: principals, assistant principals, resource counselors, secondary counselors, student service learning (SSL) coordinators, registrar staff, assistant school administrators, school testing coordinators, and resource teachers.

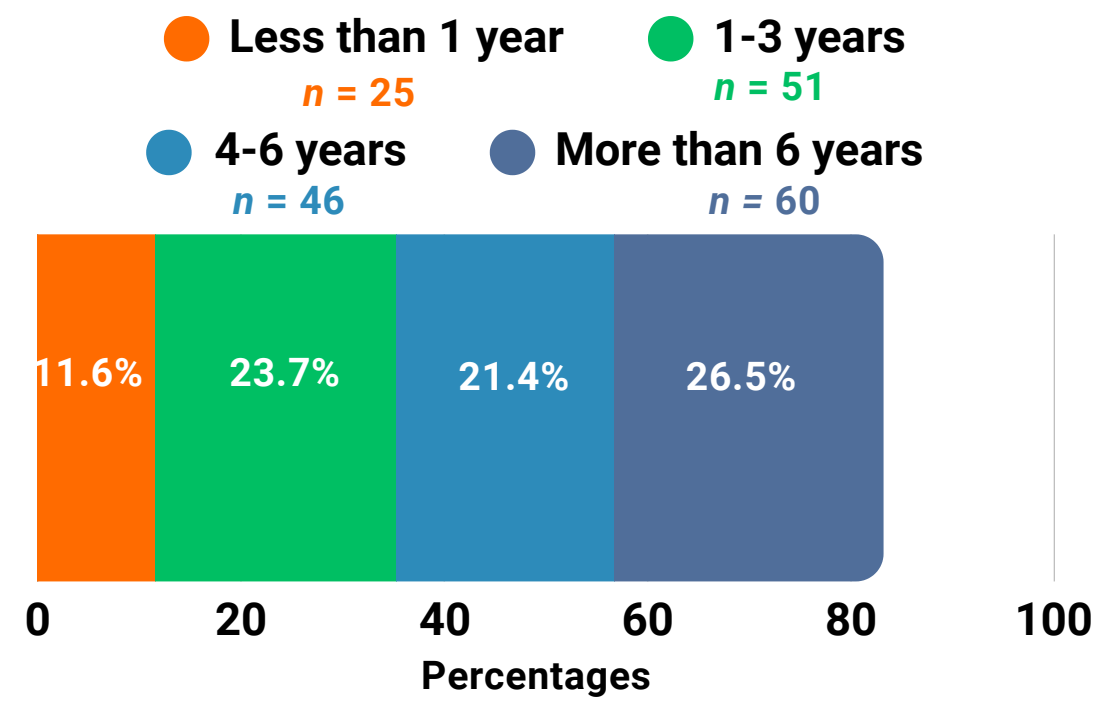
One-hundred eighty two high school based staff completed the survey, resulting in a 49.8% response rate. The sample of respondents included representation from all 25 high schools. Most respondents reported that they identified as a secondary counselor (43.7%). Other staff groups were less representative in the survey.

A majority of respondents had more than one year of experience participating on the graduation validation team at their respective high school (71.6%). This pattern was also apparent for those that reported being involved in the process. It is important to clarify that participating in the process does not necessarily mean the person serves on the school's team. The highest percentage of respondents came from those that reported that they had more than 6 years of experience on the graduation validation team at their school (27.9%), and had been involved in the graduation validation process (26.5%).

How long have you been participating on the graduation validation team at your school?



How many years have you been involved in the graduation validation process at your school?





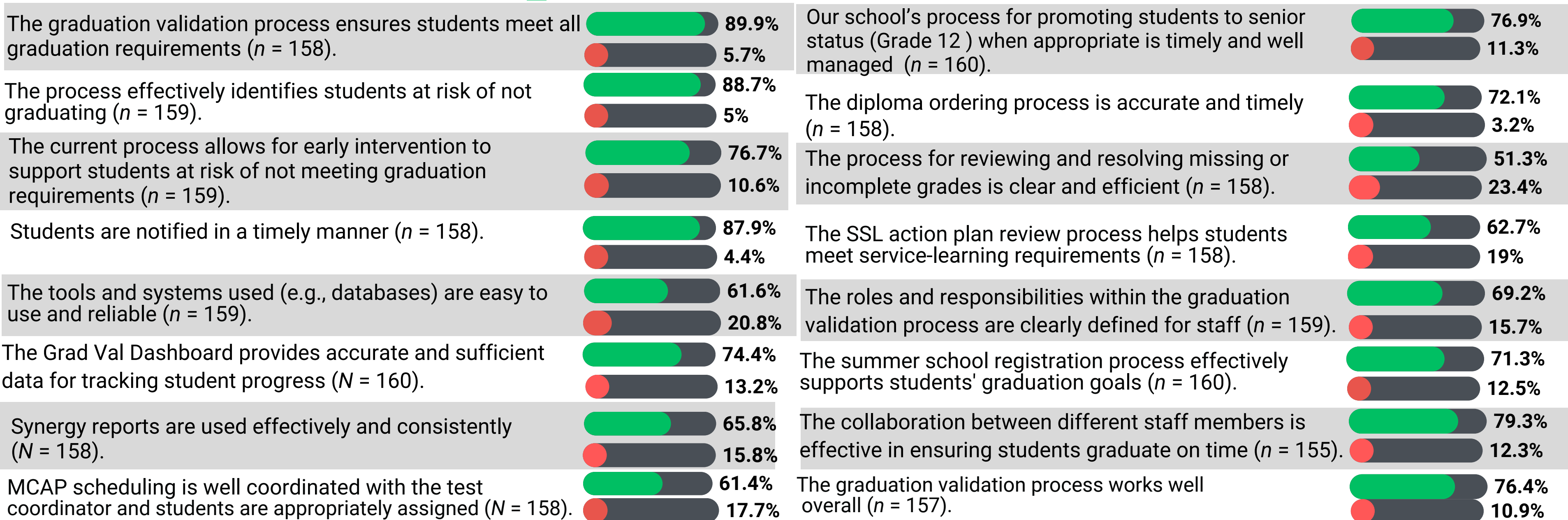
Results: Process Effectiveness

Staff Survey

Notes. Scale responses for these items include "Strongly Disagree", "Disagree", "Neither Agree nor Disagree", "Agree", "Strongly Agree", and "Do Not Know". The total number of respondents (n) varied by survey item. Percentages may not total 100 percent because some participants did not respond to every item.

Strongly Agree/Agree

Strongly Disagree/Disagree



Findings

Staff survey results show strong agreement of confidence in the graduation validation process, with 89.9% agreeing that it ensures students meet requirements and 88.7% of staff reporting it identifies those at risk of not graduating. Most staff also agree that students are notified in a timely manner (87.9%) and early intervention is possible (76.7%). However, areas like the use of tools and systems had lower agreement (61.6%), with over 20% expressing disagreement. Staff also acknowledged good coordination in MCAP scheduling (61.6%) and clarity in roles and responsibilities (69.2%), while collaboration across staff (79.3%) was highly rated. However, only 61.6% find the tools and systems easy to use, and just 51.3% believe the process for handling incomplete grades is efficient.

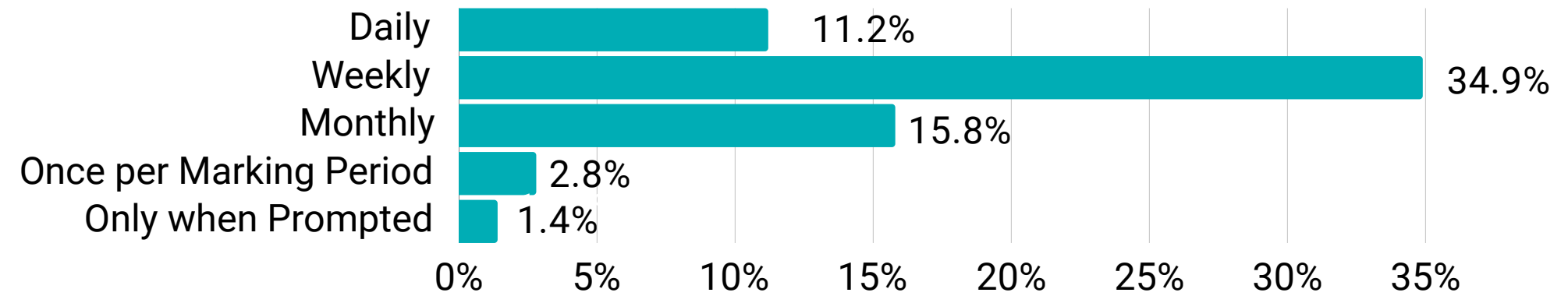
Overall, while the graduation validation process works well overall (76.4%), continuous refinement of certain components, especially communication and system usability, could enhance overall confidence and impact.



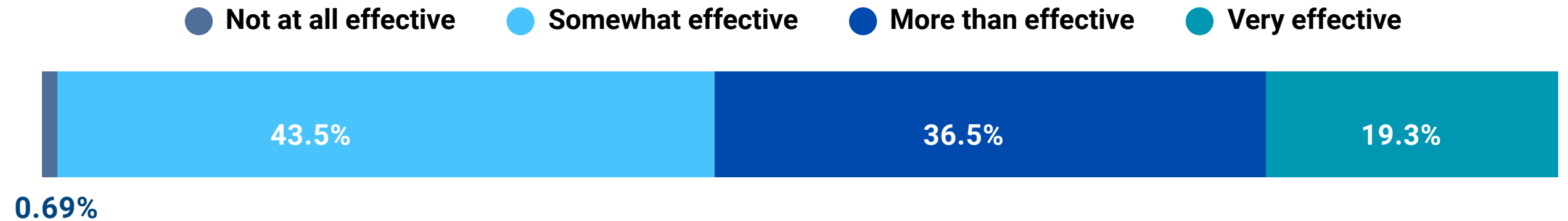
Results: Staff Monitoring

Staff Survey

How frequently do you monitor students' progress towards graduation requirements? (n = 155)



How effective are the methods of notification for students at risk of not meeting grad requirements? (n = 156)



Findings

The majority of staff (34.9%) monitor students' progress toward graduation requirements weekly, followed by 15.8% who do so monthly, 11.2% daily, 2.7% once per marking period, and 1.4% only do so when prompted.

In terms of perceived effectiveness, 43.5% rated the notification methods as "somewhat effective," while 36.5% felt they were "more than effective," and 19.3% considered them "very effective."

The total number of respondents (n) varied by survey item. Percentages may not total 100 percent because some participants did not respond to every item.



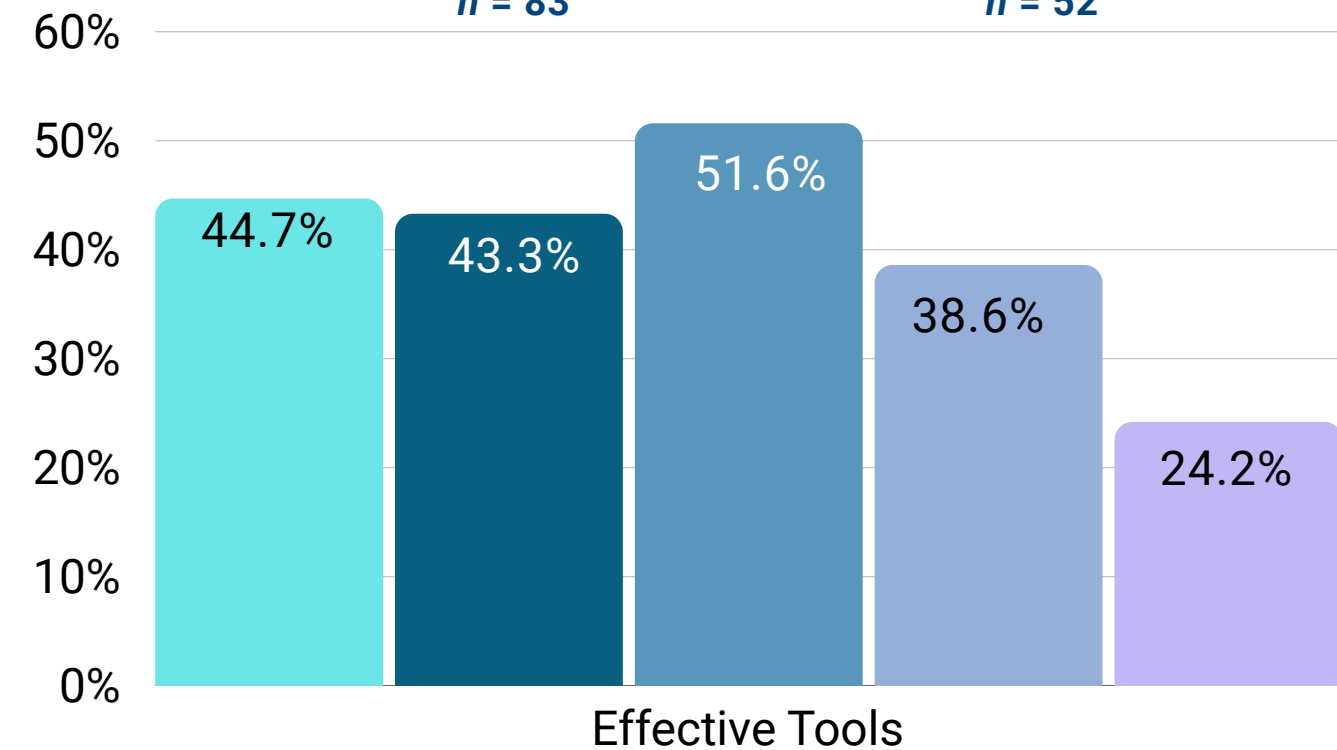
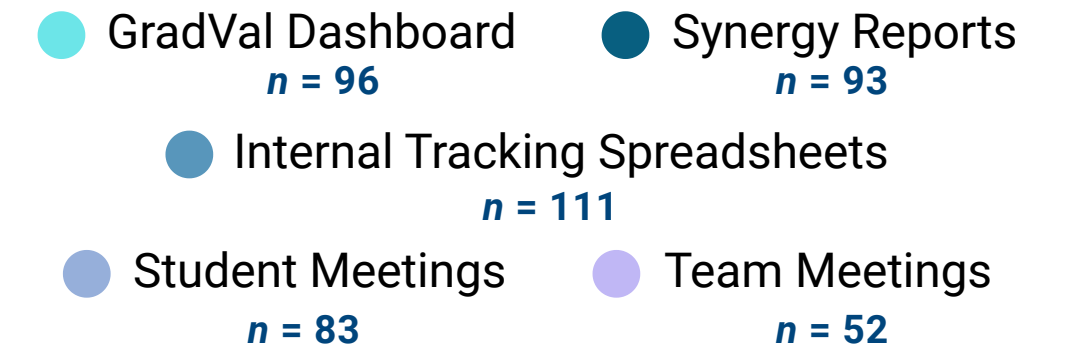
Results: Staff Monitoring

Staff Survey

Notes. The total number of respondents (n) varied by survey item. Participants were able to select all response options that applied; therefore, percentages do not sum to 100 percent.

How are students notified when they are at risk of not meeting graduation requirements?

Which tools do you find the most useful to monitor student progress?



Warning Letters (<i>n</i> = 146)	67.9%
Meetings with Counselors (<i>n</i> = 153)	71.2%
Emails (<i>n</i> = 142)	66.0%
Text Messages (<i>n</i> = 50)	23.3%
Automated Alerts in Student Portals (<i>n</i> = 24)	11.2%
Phone calls to Students or Parent/Guardians (<i>n</i> = 143)	66.5%
Individualized Academic Intervention Plans (e.g., personalized graduation plans) (<i>n</i> = 92)	42.8%
Meetings with Teachers or Academic Advisors (<i>n</i> = 92)	42.8%
Parent-Teacher Conferences (<i>n</i> = 124)	57.7%
Support Programs (<i>n</i> = 63)	29.3%
Peer Mentoring (<i>n</i> = 10)	4.7%



Findings

Students identified as at risk for not meeting graduation requirements are most commonly notified through meetings with counselors (71.2%), warning letters (67.9%), emails (66.0%), and phone calls to students or parents/guardians (66.5%). Less frequently used methods include text messages (23.3%), automated alerts (11.2%), and peer mentoring (4.7%).

Internal tracking spreadsheets developed by school-based staff were identified as the most useful (51.6%), followed by the GradVal Dashboard (44.7%) and Synergy Reports (43.3%). Student and team meetings were considered less useful, with 38.6% and 24.2% of staff finding them effective, respectively.



Results: Successful Aspects

Staff Survey Open-ended Comments.
Themes reflect at least 10% of responses.

What aspects of the graduation validation process are currently successful? (N = 90)

■ Theme 1 ■ Theme 2 ■ Theme 3 ■ Theme 4

“The GradVal Dashboard makes it easy to see a students’ graduation status at a glance and gives access to updated real-time reports.”

“The GradVal team is accessible and helpful.”

“The counselors know their students and can speak to what each student needs.”

“Spreadsheets with credit, SSL hours, and testing data have been helpful.”

“The counseling team, including support staff work well together in order to get as many students across the stage as possible.”

“The letters home that tell kids what credits are needed. Summer credit checks are most helpful.”

“Meeting early and mid year vs end of the year allowing for multiple passes at review with multiple people who are well-informed.”

“Bi-weekly check ins with the resource counselor and counselors had been useful.”



Findings

In total, 90 school-based staff members involved in the graduation validation process provided open-ended responses on what they believed were the most successful aspects of the process. These are some of the illustrative quotes for the themes identified. The themes extracted from these responses elaborated on the strengths highlighted by the staff regarding the graduation validation process.

Theme 1: Effective Tools for Monitoring Student Progress. Respondents consistently praised the effectiveness of the Graduation Validation Dashboard, Synergy Reports, and internal tracking tools for providing real-time access to student data and supporting proactive monitoring.

Theme 2: Team-Based Collaboration and Communication. Participants emphasized the value of collaboration across counselors, administrators, support staff, and central office staff as a major strength of the process.

Theme 3: Structured and Recurring Meetings for Review Processes. Many respondents highlighted the importance of structured, scheduled meetings (early in throughout the year), cross-checks, and having multiple sets of eyes on student data to identify and address issues proactively.

Theme 4: Counselor Expertise and Student-Centered Support. Counselors’ deep knowledge of their students, paired with targeted interventions such as credit recovery, and parent communication, were described as critical to supporting seniors on their path to graduation.



Results: Challenges

Staff Survey open-ended comments.
Themes reflect at least 10% of responses.

What are the most significant challenges you face in supporting the graduation validation process? (N = 93)

Theme 1 Theme 2 Theme 3 Theme 4

It takes days to enter this information and because it's such a tedious process, I'm positive I'm making mistakes. It is overwhelming and redundant.

There are parents, teachers, and students who do not actively communicate their needs or concerns related to graduation

Everyone approaches it slightly differently, so it's inconsistent depending on who you speak with.

Too many spreadsheets, emails, and databases. Why do we have to input data that is already in the database and Synergy?

I think the most challenging piece of the process is the lack of accurate and consistent data.

Lack of clarity on expectations for different meetings throughout the year.

The majority of the validation work falls to school counselors... it's not a team effort.

Having to know and execute other people's jobs and being held responsible for any error.



Findings

In total, 93 school-based staff members involved in the graduation validation process provided open-ended responses on what they believed were the most challenging aspects of the process. These are some of the illustrative quotes for the themes identified. The themes extracted from these responses elaborated on the challenges highlighted by the staff regarding the graduation validation process.

Theme 1: Inefficient and Redundant Data Entry tools. Participants cited frustration with tedious data entry, lack of integrated systems, and delays in testing and course data updates, especially in Synergy and the Graduation Validation Dashboard.

Theme 2: Lack of Timely, Accurate and Aligned Information. Based on the responses, mostly Counselors expressed concern over outdated or missing test scores, inconsistent data across systems, and delays in updates for critical graduation requirements (e.g., testing, credits, dual enrollment).

Theme 3: Unbalanced Workload and Role Clarity Issues. Respondents described a sense of disproportionate responsibility on counselors, lack of shared ownership among administrators and teachers, and insufficient support from central office.

Theme 4: Gaps in Communication. Challenges stemmed from poor coordination between staff, unclear meeting expectations, and limited engagement with parents, teachers, and students.



Results: Additional Resources

Staff Survey open-ended comments.
Themes reflect at least 10% of responses.

What resources or supports would make the graduation validation process more effective? (N = 124)

■ Theme 1 ■ Theme 2 ■ Theme 3 ■ Theme 4

“ If everything was connected (Grad Val Dashboard, Synergy, Letters) data would not need to be extracted and re-entered. ”

“ Smaller counselor caseloads for better monitoring. ”

“ More training for both counselors and admin on how to pull detailed reports, and more workshops for understanding Synergy. ”

“ The GradVal input process is extremely tedious. There should be a much simpler interface where we do not enter data twice. ”

“ [A need for more] truancy officers, data entry support, external test coordinators to free up admin for student support. ”

“ Better communication, and more meetings with 12th grade admin. ”

“ The grad val meeting needs to set a SMART goal...and define roles of each person in the room. ”

“ Begin the process for the following year's seniors toward the end of their junior year. More senior status meetings too. ”



Findings

In total, 124 school-based staff members involved in the graduation validation process provided open-ended responses on the resources that they believed they needed to make this process more effective. The themes extracted from these responses elaborated on the additional resources highlighted by the staff regarding the graduation validation process.

Theme 1: Streamlined, Integrated, and User-Friendly Data Systems. Staff emphasized the need for simplified data entry, better integration between platforms (Synergy, Dashboard), and tools that reduce redundancy and manual work.

Theme 2: Increased Role Support. Participants asked for smaller counselor caseloads, clerical support, and more help managing graduation tasks, especially for large senior classes.

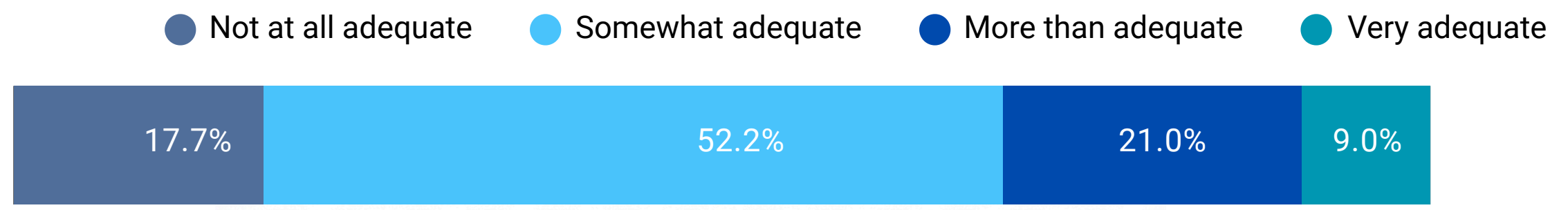
Theme 3: Earlier and Collaborative Planning. Many advocated for starting the process in junior year, increasing meeting frequency, and improving collaboration with admin and families throughout the year.

Theme 4: Training, Communication, and Consistency. Staff called for clear expectations, regular training on tools, and alignment across schools, databases, and meetings.

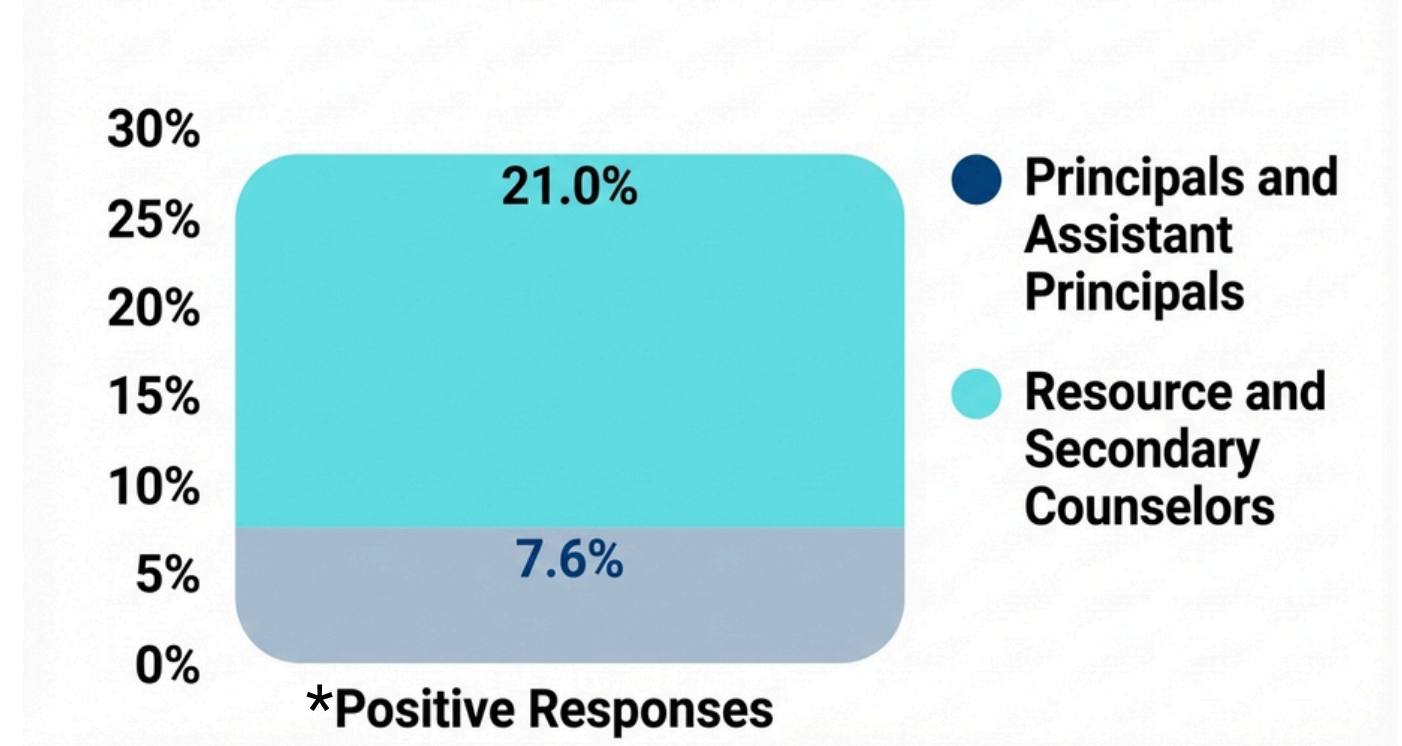
Results: Perceptions of Funding Allocation

Staff Survey (N = 119)

To what extent do you believe funding for the graduation validation process is adequate?



Extent to which Principals and Assistant Principals and Resource and Secondary Counselors indicated that funding was more than and/or very adequate



Note. *Results reflect the combined percentage of 'More than Adequate' and 'Very Adequate' responses for principals, assistant principals, resource, and secondary counselors, as these groups accounted for the majority of responses and were the only participants invited to the focus groups, ensuring consistency with the overall report.

Findings

Staff survey results revealed mixed perceptions regarding the adequacy of funding for the graduation validation process. Among the 119 respondents, just over half (52.2%) felt that funding was only "somewhat adequate," while 17.7% indicated it was "not at all adequate." On the more positive end, 21.0% reported funding as "more than adequate," and 9.0% found it "very adequate." When disaggregated by role, 21.0% of Resource and Secondary Counselors gave positive responses (i.e., more than or very adequate), compared to only 7.6% of Principals and Assistant Principals. These findings suggest that while a majority of staff perceived the funding as somewhat sufficient, there is notable variation in perceived adequacy across roles, with school leaders expressing the lowest levels of satisfaction.

Results: Staff Roles and Responsibilities in the Process

Principal and Assistant Principal Focus Groups (N = 20)

Themes were identified if they were raised by at least 5 participants.

Theme: Project Management and Oversight

Roles in the graduation validation process vary by position and school but revolve around monitoring, oversight, and intervention. Principals described themselves as overseers or project managers, responsible for ensuring that staff are aligned, informed, and effective. Assistant Principals noted that they were directly involved in tracking student progress.

Theme: Integrated Process: Collaboration is key

Participants indicated that graduation validation is not a standalone process but an integrated one. It was noted that effective collaboration among staff is essential to the process, though the structure and depth of this collaboration vary by school.

“We’re effectively the project manager...ensuring they understand the process... because the thing about seniors is that it is constantly fluid (P).”

“We oversee. I make sure that the grade level administrator is having consistent or continuous meetings with the counseling department prior to the Senior year (P).”

“Monitoring and overseeing, make sure all parties come prepared to meetings (P).”

“I think I think the collaboration happens naturally, because it's it's not an option. There's not one single person who can complete the task with fidelity. Because you need so much information from others on the gradval team (P).”

“We have a smaller team of us for grade 12, but also we have an extension team. We also had the special education team step up to support (AP).”

“I pull data at the beginning of the year to determine which of our students (seniors) are still in need of specific credits, and what the plans will be for each of those students (AP).”

“I work directly with the Principal, counseling team, and senior class (AP).”

“I am there to help oversee and ensure our counselors are doing what they are supposed to be doing (AP).”

“I am checking in meeting with my resource counselor, meeting with my assistant principal, and meeting with my counselor. It's kind of following up and making sure that all those different pieces are actually happening (P).”

“We have Admin counselor teams. So it's like 2 counselors and an administrator, and they have a chunk of kids, and they're monitoring them 9 through 12. We pull in staff members as needed (P).”

“We have some unique partnerships with community organizations for GED, and post-secondary options (P).”

“We use teams for specific support groups, which includes counselors, ELD teachers, special educators, PPWs (AP).”

“We started setting up summer meetings with the well-being team. It resulted in creating graduation plans for each individual kid which was critical. So that was super helpful (AP).”

Results: Monitoring Student Progress to Graduation

Principal and Assistant Principal Focus Groups (N = 20)

Themes were identified if they were raised by at least 5 participants.

Theme: Data-Driven Monitoring and the Use of Early Targeted Interventions

“It can be 4 [to] 25 [students at risk of not graduating] at one point. It can be 500 at one point and making sure that they're staying on top of that so effectively, our role is to meet with the leader who is leading the Grad Validation team and ensure that they know what they're doing (P).”

“I have found my role has really been to use a combination of the Grad Val dashboard as well as some internal data management systems to identify targeted groups that aren't that aren't on track, and then to work with counselors, teachers, other admin to create and design targeted interventions for those students to help them either get back on track or to stay on track (AP).”

“And we just, you know, month by month, we meet to talk about those students and where we're moving meet with the SSL Coordinator to ensure that our kids are actually you know, accessing SSL opportunities. We meet with with students who are in danger of not getting across the stage. We meet with those students and we meet with parents (P).”

“We're using a tracker... So for each student, we're inputting their status, and it helps us know who we've already reviewed and what still needs to be done (AP).”

Findings

A significant aspect of the graduation validation process involves continuous data monitoring and the implementation of targeted interventions for students at risk of not graduating. Participants described that monitoring includes tracking student progress, identifying deficiencies, and providing necessary support. Beyond individual reviews, participants explained that the process includes formal systems. Participants reported using trackers, data reviews, and regular meetings to ensure consistency and identify issues early.

Results: Effectiveness of Graduation Validation Process

Principal and Assistant Principal Focus Groups (N = 20)

Themes were identified if they were raised by at least 5 participants.

Theme: Accountability, Shared Responsibility, and Preparation

“ Having another another set of eyes making sure that every single one of the criteria were met, so that students were on track and nobody got missed. There is a lot happening in a school building-this makes it more accurate (AP). ”

“ I really like the smaller, more intimate meetings that we did with the counselors and their admin pairs. So they met with the the Central Office team, and we just rotated through those those pairs. That was very effective (P). ”

“ There is value in structured meetings where, we have updates on student progress (AP). ”

“ I prefer times when everybody got in the room together. You can tell if someone wasn't prepared...there was accountability (P). ”

“ Checking every single kid with the counselors one on one to make sure if anything was missed. These big meetings with all these people in one space, that time spent was not well (P). ”

“ The other thing that was helpful was when the central office team came in and sat with individual counselors (AP). ”

Findings

Participants strongly preferred structured, whole-group meetings where counselors present updates with admin present. This fostered a culture of transparency, and accountability. Participants expressed a strong commitment to accuracy in student records. This theme emphasized the accountability built into the process to avoid last-minute issues or surprises.

Results: Factors Affecting Process Implementation

Principal and Assistant Principal Focus Groups (N = 20)

Themes were identified if they were raised by at least 5 participants.

Theme: Dynamic Nature of Student Data and Tracking

Focus group participants identified the ongoing challenge of tracking students' frequently changing credit-earning status toward graduation. Participants emphasized that this dynamic nature makes continuous monitoring and maintaining accurate data a significant and ongoing task for staff.

You do not start with a static number of well, we got 450 seniors. It can change. We have to always make sure that they're staying on top of that effectively. We have to communicate and meet with the leader who is leading the Grad Validation team and ensure that they know what they're doing (P).

But then you have students that come in February, that are credit deficient, that we have to then get on track to graduate. It's constantly fluid and just making sure that whoever the lead is understands that and knows how to work with counselors to constantly ensure that they're staying on top of that. And they're constantly monitoring that fluid data that is constantly changing (P).

We ended up having, like 2 students who took like dual enrollment classes. But then they took a dual Enrollment Science class. But it wasn't actually a science class that counted for graduation (AP).

I'm checking in to see how the process is going and work with them on any cases that deviate from the norm, or a little bit more complex, or where, like there's maybe not an error, but something complicated where the parent has to be involved or like Central Office has to be involved (AP).

Theme: Logistical Hurdles in Coordination and Execution

Participants described the practical difficulties and administrative obstacles encountered during the graduation validation process, ranging from staffing constraints, inconsistencies in data systems, and logistical hurdles.

The database is great, but there's times in which the information is not updated as timely, or for whatever reason it just lags. There are times in which it can be inaccurate or report that a kid didn't sit for the MCAP, but they did, and it's just for some reason showing up as not met (P).

We have 3 admin. Even when we split caseloads, it's tough to find the time to make sure that everyone is having multiple meetings with the parent, the Admin, the counselor, and the student. Just because there are a lot of polls on time (AP).

We requested, as a school, to have a second follow up because we were down a few counselors, and we just wanted to make sure that with that being the case, we had everything ready to go (P).



Results: Recommendations

Principals and Assistant Principals Focus Groups (N =20)
Themes were raised by at least 5 participants.

What recommendations do you have for improving the process?

Theme 1 Theme 2 Theme 3 Theme 4

I want to make sure that the grade level administrator is having consistent or continuous meetings with the counseling department prior to the Senior year (P).

Cautiously review data for our seniors who are on track or not on track with the senior class administrator. We need to make sure that we're getting kids the interventions that they need to make sure they graduate (P).

There needs to be a system that produces every possible variable (P).

We need meetings with Central Office to make sure that our numbers align with their numbers and the monitoring. How many of them are on track vs in danger? (AP).

Continue to use a combination of the Grad Val dashboard as well as some internal data management systems to identify targeted groups that aren't on track (AP).

These systems need to work with precision, not "Oh, well, I guess," (AP).

At the grad val meeting, you need to listen to questions that Central Office was asking and get feedback, so that when we came back as a school, I would know what to ask about and things to look for (AP).

I know that I don't know the things that counselors know, So I felt like it would be important for me to work with them on any cases that deviate from the norm, or complex cases where parents or central office has to be involved (P).



Findings

The themes extracted from these responses elaborated on the recommendations highlighted by principals and assistant principals regarding the graduation validation process. Themes were identified if they were raised by at least 5 participants.

Theme 1: Proactive Collaborative Approaches for Continuous Improvement. This theme emphasizes improvements needed that centered on initiating communication, data sharing, and planning much earlier in the year, particularly before the critical senior year, to prevent issues and ensure a smoother validation process.

Theme 2: Consistently Review Data and Create Targeted Interventions. This theme focuses on recommendations from school leaders derived from past experiences, particularly challenges, and staff requested the creation of specific protocols, checklists, and data-driven targeted support systems to prevent recurring issues and ensure no student is overlooked.

Theme 3: Promoting Transparency and Inclusivity Through Shared Information. This theme highlights staff needs for fostering a more transparent environment within the graduation validation process, ensuring that relevant information is shared widely and that all key stakeholders, including parents and central office, are well-informed and involved.

Theme 4: Need for Stronger tools, Systems and Structures. Staff highlighted a need that graduation monitoring must be data-driven and systematic, not spreadsheet-based or loosely tracked. Precision is essential.

Results: Staff Roles and Responsibilities in the Process

Secondary Counselor Focus Groups (N = 7)

Themes were identified if they were raised by at least 3 participants.

Theme: Credit Monitoring and Academic Planning

Counselors reported that an important part of their role involved monitoring credits and ensuring students were on track for graduation. Participants described creating academic plans to help students meet requirements and reviewing student schedules to ensure all necessary coursework was included. Counselors noted that they tracked student progress throughout the year to identify students who were at risk of not graduating.

“We live it at various points in the year; now it is heavy. I would just add one of the things in addition to credits and creating academic plans and sometimes really creative academic plans. To get kids across the line.”

“My responsibility is to ensure that their schedules have all the classes they need for graduation, that if there's something that they cannot do outside of their schedule, that they have alternate ways to complete those credits. We have senior (in-danger meetings) so if they are off track in credits, we identify them super early.”

“My role kind of in the graduation validation process is checking credits, making sure students are on track to earn their credits, and if they're not making a plan so that they are on track.”

Theme: Documentation and Record Management

Counselors reported that they were actively involved in monitoring students' completion of testing requirements and SSL hours. Participants described collaborating with testing coordinators to verify testing completion and address outstanding requirements. Counselors noted that they maintained spreadsheets or tracking tools to monitor credits, SSL hours, and testing status, in addition to using the dashboard. They also reported verifying information included in communications sent to families and ensuring that graduation-related information was accurately reflected on transcripts.

“And the testing is a bee's nest, like, you know, trying to make sure that our kids have testing and that we can get accurate scores and accurate records and all of that.”

“My responsibility is to ensure that their schedules have all their testing done. I am one member of a team when it comes to testing, and SSL.”

“I am responsible to verify the information that is going home in letters that we send throughout the years to families. Essentially, everything has to be posted.”

“We have a senior spreadsheet. And we'll put in their name, their id, like the classes that they need for graduation, if they need SSL hours, if they need testing and like which tests.”

Theme: Case Management and Individualized Support

“We're the ones who basically case manage those walking across stage the entire year.”

“We really do give kids a lot of opportunity to graduate in 4 years. Even to some extent, we have kids taking classes that do dual enrollment at Montgomery College. And that's another avenue for them.”

“Only thing that is concerning for me, that should be in addition to our role is that we need to provide context and stories, because every student is just not a data point. They are individuals with a story.”

“Each kid is not the same. So not trying to do the same thing for one kid that you do for someone else, because different goals, different work ethics and different maturity levels.”

Findings

Counselors described their role as functioning similarly to case managers, explaining that they guide students throughout high school to help ensure graduation requirements are met. Counselors emphasized that, given the workload and range of responsibilities, they often felt responsible for coordinating and monitoring students' progress over multiple years. They noted that they tailor their approach based on individual student needs and described helping students access opportunities such as credit recovery, summer coursework, online pathways, and dual enrollment. Several counselors highlighted that this support is especially intensive for seniors to ensure requirements are completed prior to graduation.

Results: Monitoring Student Progress to Graduation

Secondary Counselor Focus Groups (N = 7)

Themes were identified if they were raised by at least 3 participants.

Theme: Targeted Oversight for Students At Risk of Not Graduating

Theme: Timely Verification of Requirements and Final Auditing

Counselors described that a key part of monitoring involves identifying and closely tracking students who are off-track or at risk of not graduating. Counselors explained that this allows for focused interventions and tailored support to help students meet their requirements.

As students approach graduation, counselors highlighted that the monitoring process culminates in a thorough verification and auditing of all requirements, including testing, SSL hours, and course completion before the final graduation validation step.

“We have specific meetings for students who are deficient in credits.”

“Regular check-ins with students who have attendance issues impacting credit.”

“Identifying the seniors who are in danger is a priority early on.”

“We keep a very close eye on those students who are on the bubble. Our alerts system helps us flag students needing immediate attention.”

“We do a final audit of all requirements before submitting names for graduation.”

“We confirm every student has completed their SSL hours.”

“Ensuring all testing requirements are met is a major part of the monitoring.”

“The last stage is to confirm all academic requirements are checked off. The final list of graduates goes through several layers of verification.”

Results: Monitoring Student Progress to Graduation

Secondary Counselor Focus Groups (N = 7)

Themes were identified if they were raised by at least 3 participants.

Theme: Continuous Tracking and Regular Reviews

Counselors described monitoring student progress as a systematic and ongoing process rather than a one-time review. Counselors reported continuously tracking credits, attendance, and graduation requirements throughout the academic year. Counselors emphasized that this monitoring begins early and is sustained through regular updates and reviews to ensure students remain on track.

“ We continuously update our senior spreadsheet. ”

“ Every week we’re pulling reports to see where kids are at. ”

“ It is a continuous process from the beginning of the year. ”

“ This process is not just a spring thing; it’s year-round. We constantly review the academic records. ”

Theme: Utilizing the Data and Record Keeping for Oversight

Counselors described relying on specific data points and documentation, including spreadsheets and official records, to maintain oversight of students’ progress toward graduation. Counselors reported routinely verifying and cross-checking information for students eligible for graduation. Counselors characterized the process as data-driven and emphasized the importance of documentation in supporting accurate validation.

“ We verify all the information in the database. ”

“ Spreadsheets are essential for keeping tabs on senior status. ”

“ Our system is pretty good to track. We ensure all necessary data is recorded on their transcripts. ”

“ We cross-reference our internal tracking sheets with official school records. ”

Results: Effectiveness of Graduation Validation Process

Secondary Counselor Focus Groups (N = 7)

Themes were identified if they were raised by at least 3 participants.

Theme: Integrated Support Network for Students: Multiple checks and balances

Counselors described the graduation validation process as effective because it operates within a collaborative support network. Counselors emphasized that multiple school staff members such as counselors, administrators, and testing coordinators are involved throughout the year, creating shared responsibility for monitoring student progress. According to counselors, this system of ongoing checks and balances helps ensure graduation requirements are met and provides an added safety net for students.

“The system is built in where it’s a constant check and balance for the system to work.”

“We do check and balance throughout the entire school year. It’s not something where we start in April to confirm and validate who’s graduating.”

“There’s so many different pieces that are in place to ensure that students are graduating.”

“And that’s why this process works, because it’s a system of checks and balances.”

Theme: Early Intervention and Preventative Measures

Counselors identified early identification of students who are at risk of not graduating as a key strength of the process. Counselors highlighted that reviewing credit progress as early as 9th and 10th grade allows schools to intervene proactively and plan targeted supports. Counselors explained that this early intervention helps prevent last-minute issues during senior year and increases the likelihood of student success.

“Because a lot of these kids are taking high school credits in middle school. So we’re working with them on meeting graduation requirements right from the beginning.”

“They’re not, you know, we’re not sending a letter home in April of their senior year saying, oh, by the way, you’re missing a math credit.”

“Those kids who are already behind, we identify them usually in the first nine weeks. The earlier we know, the better.”

“We’re helping the kids actually, even before they enter senior year.”

Results: Effectiveness of Graduation Validation Process

Secondary Counselor Focus Groups (N = 7)

Themes were identified if they were raised by at least 3 participants.

Theme: Tailored Pathways and Flexibility

Counselors explained using a personalized approach. They expressed commitment to finding various avenues and "creative academic plans" to help students meet their graduation requirements, including credit recovery options.

“Our school has many different avenues for credit recovery.”

“We really do give kids a lot of opportunities to graduate and get across that stage.”

“Providing a good environment and some rigor, but also being aware that each kid is not the same.”

“We're constantly making sure that we are fitting a program for them that best meets their needs.”

Theme: Robust Monitoring and Transparent Communication

Counselors described using systematic tracking methods, such as spreadsheets, combined with consistent communication with families. Counselors explained that this ensures that everyone is aware of the student's progress towards graduation and any outstanding requirements.

“My responsibility is to ensure that their schedules... have all the classes they need for graduation.”

“Every semester, every interim, every summer you're running your failure report. If I see a struggle, even in that first quarter, I am calling home.”

“And then closer to like the graduation time, so to speak, is making sure that they have received all credits.”

“I'm responsible to verify the information that's going home in letters that we send throughout the year to families.”

Results: Factors Affecting Process Implementation

Secondary Counselor Focus Groups (N = 7)

Themes were identified if they were raised by at least 3 participants.

Theme: Lack of Student Engagement and Responsibility

Counselors identified a lack of student ownership of academic progress and engagement as significant challenges. Counselors described ongoing issues such as attendance, completion of required coursework, and students following up on plans.

“The seniors that are not graduating are also the ones that are not coming to school.”

“Some seniors just don't care, and that's the hardest part.”

“Getting students to do the work, that's another thing.”

“We have a lot of seniors who are just not invested in their future at this point.”

Theme: Complexity and Fluctuation of Requirements

Counselors identified the complexity of graduation requirements, particularly related to testing and multiple pathways, as a significant challenge. Counselors noted that these requirements may change over time or be interpreted differently, creating additional challenges for consistent implementation.

“Sometimes the requirements seem to change mid-year.”

“It's hard to keep up with all the nuances of what's required.”

“There's often confusion about what exactly counts for graduation.”

“The different pathways to graduation can be really complicated to manage.”

Results: Factors Affecting Process Implementation

Secondary Counselor Focus Groups (N = 7)

Themes were identified if they were raised by at least 3 participants.

Theme: Time Constraints and Workload Burden

Counselors often expressed feeling overwhelmed by the sheer volume of work and the limited time available to manage all aspects of the graduation validation process, especially for a large caseload of students.

“We are so swamped, especially this time of year (May).”

“It's a lot of work for a small number of people.”

“The caseloads are really heavy, and it makes individual attention difficult.”

“There just aren't enough hours in the day to do everything. The constant influx of new issues means we're always playing catch-up.”

Theme: Lack of Communication and Data Synchronization

Counselors identified challenges stemming from difficulties in seamless communication and data sharing between different departments or systems within the school, leading to discrepancies or delays in updating student information.

“Sometimes the communication between departments isn't as smooth as it could be.”

“There are often errors in student data that we have to correct.”

“Information doesn't always flow efficiently from one office to another.”

“Getting updated information from outside agencies can be a real headache. The biggest challenge is making sure everyone is on the same page with student records.”



Results: Recommendations

Secondary Counselor Focus Groups (N = 7).

What recommendations do you have for improving the process?

Theme 1 Theme 2 Theme 3 Theme 4

“ Making sure all information is in one accessible place would be a huge improvement. Reducing the amount of manual data entry would free up more time for counselors. ”

“ We need more bodies, honestly, to handle the caseload. If we had more time to sit down with each student, it would make a difference. ”

“ More parent workshops on understanding graduation requirements. ”

“ We need a more centralized system for tracking student progress that everyone can access and update easily. ”

“ The resources just don't match the demand sometimes. More administrative support for the data verification process would be appreciated. ”

“ Students need to know their credit situation starting from 9th grade, not just senior year. Maybe providing them with a dashboard. ”

“ Training needs to be updated regularly to reflect changes in policy. A more standardized approach across all high schools would be beneficial. ”

“ We need to ensure everyone is on the same page regarding requirements. Better training for new counselors coming into the role would really help. ”



Findings

The themes extracted from these responses elaborated on the recommendations highlighted by secondary counselors regarding the graduation validation process. Themes were identified if they were raised by at least 3 participants, given the sample size.

Theme 1: Streamlined Communication and Data Management: Counselors recommended improving the efficiency and clarity of communication channels and data systems, to ensure timely and accurate information flow.

Theme 2: Increased Staffing and Resource Allocation. A recurring recommendation was the need for more counselors or support staff to manage the heavy workload and allow for more individualized attention to students, especially those who are at risk of not graduating.

Theme 3: The Need for More Training and Standardized Procedures. Counselors suggested that more consistent training and clearer, standardized procedures for the graduation validation process would reduce confusion and ensure uniformity across schools and among staff members.

Theme 4: Empowering Students and Families with Earlier Awareness and Tools. Recommendations included providing students and their families with earlier, more comprehensive information and tools to understand graduation requirements, fostering greater student ownership and proactive planning.

Summary of Key Findings

The Graduation Validation Process is perceived to be largely effective and well-structured.

High Staff Confidence: Nearly 90% of staff agreed that the graduation validation process helps students meet requirements and identifies those at risk of not graduating in a timely manner.

Early Identification and Intervention: The majority of staff reported that they are able to intervene with students at risk of not graduating well before the end of senior year, often beginning as early as 9th or 10th grade.

Multiple Checks and Balances: Staff described the process as involving a series of checks—individual reviews, team meetings, and formal verifications—to ensure accuracy and prevent errors.

Strong collaboration across school teams supports student success for graduation.

Team-Based Approach: Collaboration among counselors, administrators, registrars, and other support staff was cited as a strength. Schools used team-based approaches to manage the validation process.

Accountability Through Structured Meetings: Regularly scheduled meetings involving multiple staff members, including admin-counselor teams and central office representatives, fostered accountability and enabled real-time data sharing.

Case Management Model: Counselors adopted a case management approach, tailoring academic plans to fit student needs.

Monitoring systems and tools are valued but are not seamlessly integrated.

Useful Tools Identified: Staff reported that the Graduation Validation Dashboard, Synergy Reports, and internal tracking spreadsheets are among the most effective tools.

Manual Data Workflows: Despite their usefulness, these systems are not well-integrated. Redundant data entry, delays in updates, and inconsistent data across platforms create inefficiencies and frustration.

Data Accuracy Concerns: Staff highlighted issues such as missing test scores, incorrect course data, and difficulties tracking dual enrollment credits—especially for students with complex academic pathways.

Summary of Key Findings

Communication and process clarity vary widely by school.

Process Is Not Standardized Across Schools: Roles and responsibilities were sometimes unclear, especially for new staff or in schools where collaboration was less structured.

Inconsistent Meeting Expectations: Staff noted that the purpose and frequency of meetings varied, and that some meetings lacked clear goals or follow-through.

Disparities in Engagement: While some schools reported strong parent communication strategies (e.g., regular letters, family meetings), others found it difficult to engage parents consistently.

Students face persistent systemic and engagement challenges.

Low Engagement Among Students At Risk of Not Graduating: Counselors reported that some students lack motivation or ownership of their academic progress, particularly those with chronic absenteeism or credit deficiencies.

Complexities found within Graduation Requirements: Staff described challenges navigating the many pathways to graduation, particularly for students in dual enrollment or alternative programs.

Tailored interventions are a priority.

Personalized Support Pathways: Schools are increasingly implementing “creative academic plans” to meet students where they are. Principals, Assistant Principals, and Counselors emphasized the importance of recognizing that students are more than data points.

Early Warning and Intervention Systems: Many schools use data trackers and senior status spreadsheets to flag students at risk of not graduating and initiate early outreach.



Conclusions

Limitations

Low sample size and small number of focus groups: One notable limitation is the relatively low sample size in some staff groups, particularly within the focus groups and open-ended survey responses. While the survey achieved a 49.8% response rate overall, certain positions—such as registrar staff, testing coordinators, and SSL coordinators—were underrepresented, limiting the generalizability of findings across all team members involved in the process. Additionally, qualitative insights were drawn from a small number of focus groups conducted with principals, assistant principals, and secondary counselors only, which may not fully capture the variability of experiences across all high schools and staff positions.

Variation in Team Structure and Limited Documentation of Expectations: Graduation validation teams were structured differently across schools. Because there is no documented districtwide expectation for how teams should be structured or how meetings should be conducted, it is difficult to determine whether differences in staff perceptions reflected variations in effectiveness or simply variation in how schools carried out the process. As a result, findings should be interpreted with caution.

Overall Summary

To improve the graduation validation process, schools must address these systemic challenges by adopting more standardized data systems, enhancing support for overburdened counselors, and ensuring clarity in roles and expectations. Standardized protocols, comprehensive training, and clearly defined responsibilities are critical to building a more cohesive and sustainable graduation validation process. Additionally, earlier identification of students at risk of not graduating, starting as early as ninth grade, and more collaborative planning between counselors, administrators, central office, and families can improve outcomes and reduce last-minute interventions. With these improvements, the district can better ensure equitable and timely graduation for all students.



Recommendations

1

Strengthen Data and Communication Consistency and Quality

Staff reported facing redundant data entry, outdated or inaccurate records, and poor integration between platforms (e.g., Synergy, Graduation Validation Dashboard, internal spreadsheets). There is a need to improve platforms, and eliminate the need for manual cross-referencing or re-entry. Although collaboration occurred among staff, the process could be improved through more effective communication. It is important to standardize communication structures with families and staff through clear templates, regular updates, and consistent meeting structures. Together, these steps will ensure that staff, students, and families are working from reliable and timely information.

2

Clarify Roles, Responsibilities and Training

To address the issue of unclear roles and responsibilities across graduation validation teams, which often results in inconsistent practices and confusion, particularly for new staff, standardized protocols should be developed that clearly outline expectations, timelines, and specific responsibilities by role, including counselors, registrars, administrators, and testing coordinators. In addition, recurring training should be provided for all members of the graduation validation team. This training should include refreshers before each school year as well as comprehensive training sessions throughout the year to ensure consistency and support for both new and returning staff that are supporting the graduation validation process.

3

Provide Targeted Support for Counselors and Students

Counselors reported facing unsustainable workloads and limited support, particularly in schools with large senior classes or a high number of students at risk of not graduating. It is recommended to reduce counselor caseloads or reallocate duties during peak graduation months. Assigning tasks to other graduation validation team members, including those serving on cross-functional teams, can further support critical tasks. Building in planning days or providing time for counselors to focus on graduation validation tasks without interruption will help ensure timely and accurate graduation validation for seniors.



Recommendations

3

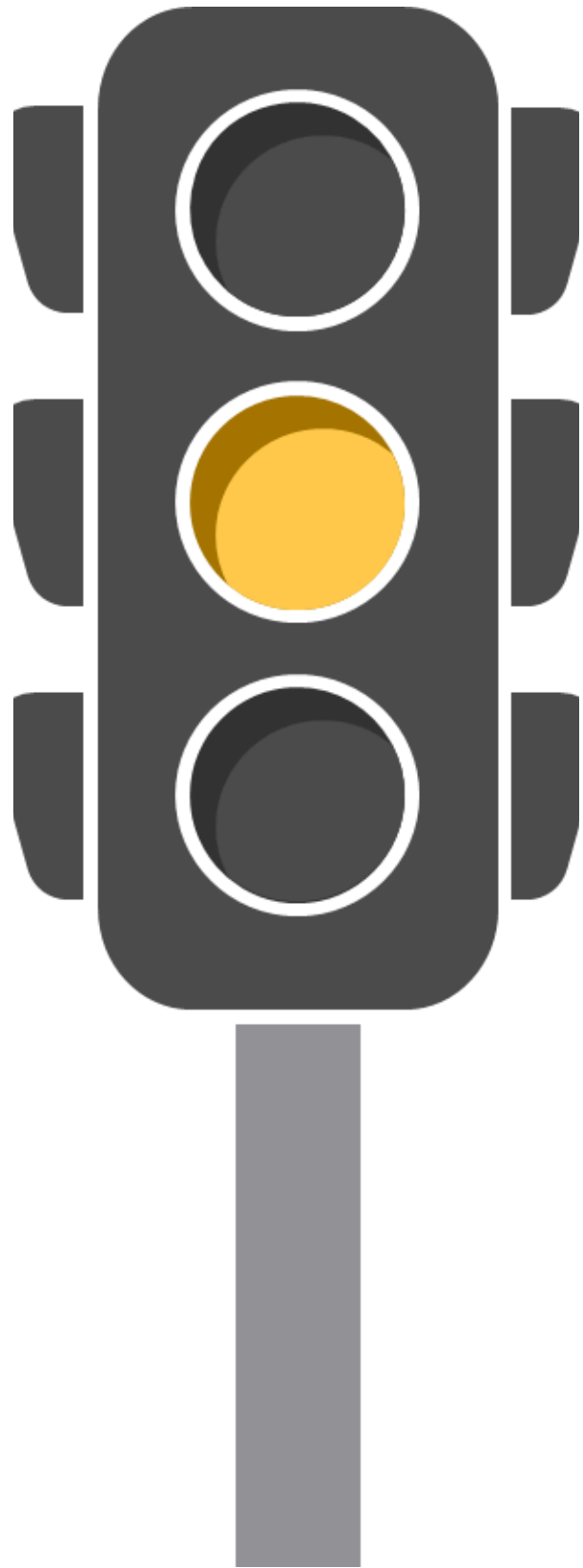
Provide Targeted Support for Counselors and Students (cont.)

While some schools currently identify students at risk of not graduating early, others wait until late in the senior year. This is often too late for effective intervention. To address this, schools should schedule frequent quarterly senior review meetings that include staff, students, and families to monitor progress and proactively address any emerging issues. Additionally, incoming students with complex academic histories, such as late transfers and dual enrollment participants, should be flagged for early review to avoid delays in support. Finally, expanding monitoring efforts before senior year is critical, particularly for students showing early indicators of risk, such as chronic absenteeism or failing core courses. These steps can help ensure that academic issues are identified and addressed early, improving the likelihood of on-time graduation.

4

Build Systems for Continuous Improvement and Accountability

Schools currently lack consistent structures for feedback, reflection, and adjustment of graduation validation practices. To strengthen these processes, each school should conduct post-graduation debriefs to reflect on successes, challenges, and areas for improvement in order to inform future practices. Establishing feedback loops with the central office is also essential, providing schools with opportunities to review and address discrepancies between school-reported and district-level graduation data.



PROCEED WITH CAUTION

It is recommended that MCPS maintain the current graduation validation process to provide continuity and support ongoing improvement efforts. Sustaining the existing structure allows high schools and central office teams to continue refining collaborative practices, monitoring tools, and communication systems already in place. However, findings from this evaluation also make clear that maintaining the status quo without enhancements will limit the overall effectiveness of the graduation validation process. While the system is largely functioning well, staff feedback highlighted the need for critical improvements. For example, errors with inputting the same student data twice across multiple systems, unclear expectations for meetings, and limited support for counselors during peak times were frequently cited challenges. During the next year, there is a need to prioritize implementing more centralized and user-friendly data systems, standardizing protocols across schools, and expanding training and resource supports. A continued year of implementation that is paired with targeted improvements will allow MCPS to evaluate the impact of these changes, assess consistency across schools, and determine whether additional modifications are needed to ensure equitable, efficient graduation outcomes for all students.

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