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SENATE BILL NO. 724

Offered January 15, 2026

A BILL to amend and reenact § 22.1-253.13:4 of the Code of Virginia, relating to high school graduation requirements; approved methods; consistency for cohorts of ninth grade students.

Patron—Head

Referred to Committee on Education and Health

Be it enacted by the General Assembly of Virginia:**1. That § 22.1-253.13:4 of the Code of Virginia is amended and reenacted as follows:****§ 22.1-253.13:4. Standard 4. Student achievement and graduation requirements.**

A. Each local school board shall award diplomas to all secondary school students, including students who transfer from nonpublic schools or from home instruction, who meet the requirements prescribed by the Board and meet such other requirements as may be prescribed by the local school board and approved by the Board. Provisions shall be made to facilitate the transfer and appropriate grade placement of students from other public secondary schools, from nonpublic schools, or from home instruction as outlined in the standards for accreditation. The standards for accreditation shall include provisions relating to the completion of graduation requirements through Virtual Virginia. Further, reasonable accommodation to meet the requirements for diplomas shall be provided for otherwise qualified students with disabilities as needed.

In addition, each local school board may devise, vis-a-vis the award of diplomas to secondary school students, a mechanism for calculating class rankings that takes into consideration whether the student has taken a required class more than one time and has had any prior earned grade for such required class expunged.

Each local school board shall notify the parents of rising eleventh and twelfth grade students of (i) the requirements for graduation pursuant to the standards for accreditation and (ii) the requirements that have yet to be completed by the individual student.

B. Students identified as disabled who:

1. Complete alternative requirements, in the form of credit accommodations specified in their individualized education programs, to earn required standard and verified credits shall be awarded standard diplomas by local school boards. Such credit accommodations may include (i) approval of alternative courses to meet standard credit requirements, (ii) modifications to the requirements for local school divisions to award locally awarded verified credits, (iii) approval of additional tests to earn verified credits, (iv) adjusted cut scores required to earn verified credits, (v) allowance of work-based learning experiences, and (vi) special permission credit accommodations for locally awarded verified credits; and

2. Complete the requirements of their individualized education programs and meet certain requirements prescribed by the Board pursuant to regulations but do not meet the requirements for any named diploma shall be awarded Applied Studies diplomas by local school boards. The Board shall develop and implement statewide requirements for earning an Applied Studies diploma for implementation at the beginning of the 2022-2023 school year.

The Department shall develop guidance, in multiple languages, for students and parents (i) informing them of the alternative path to earn a standard diploma through credit accommodations, including special permission credit accommodations for locally awarded verified credits; (ii) conveying (a) the limitations of the applied studies diploma, (b) key curriculum and testing decisions that reduce the likelihood that a student will be able to obtain a standard diploma, and (c) a statement that the pursuit of an applied studies diploma may preclude a student's ability to pursue a standard diploma; and (iii) supporting them to discuss these diploma options at the student's individualized education program meetings.

Each local school board shall develop a process for awarding locally verified credits to students with disabilities, require individualized education program teams to consider credit accommodations, including locally awarded verified credits, for students with disabilities to enable them to earn a standard diploma, and provide guidance from the Department to parents of students with disabilities regarding the availability of credit accommodations to earn a standard diploma and the limitations of the Applied Studies diploma at a student's annual individualized education program meeting corresponding to grades three through 12 when curriculum or statewide assessment decisions are being made that impact the type of diploma for which the student can qualify.

Each local school board shall notify the parent of such students with disabilities who have an individualized education program and who fail to meet the graduation requirements of the student's right to a free and appropriate education to age 21, inclusive, pursuant to Article 2 (§ 22.1-213 et seq.) of Chapter 13.

C. Students who have completed a prescribed course of study as defined by the local school board shall be

59 awarded certificates of program completion by local school boards if they are not eligible to receive a Board-
60 approved diploma.

61 Each local school board shall provide notification of the right to a free public education for students who
62 have not reached 20 years of age on or before August 1 of the school year, pursuant to Chapter 1 (§ 22.1-1 et
63 seq.), to the parent of students who fail to graduate or who have failed to achieve graduation requirements as
64 provided in the standards for accreditation. If such student who does not graduate or complete such
65 requirements is a student for whom English is a second language, the local school board shall notify the
66 parent of the student's opportunity for a free public education in accordance with § 22.1-5.

67 D. In establishing graduation requirements, the Board shall:

68 1. Develop and implement, in consultation with stakeholders representing elementary and secondary
69 education, higher education, and business and industry in the Commonwealth and including parents,
70 policymakers, and community leaders in the Commonwealth, a Profile of a Virginia Graduate that identifies
71 the knowledge and skills that students should attain during high school in order to be successful contributors
72 to the economy of the Commonwealth, giving due consideration to critical thinking, creative thinking,
73 collaboration, communication, and citizenship.

74 2. Emphasize the development of core skill sets in the early years of high school.

75 3. Establish multiple paths toward college and career readiness for students to follow in the later years of
76 high school. Each such pathway shall include opportunities for internships, externships, and credentialing.

77 4. Provide for the selection of integrated learning courses meeting the Standards of Learning and approved
78 by the Board to satisfy graduation requirements, which shall include Standards of Learning testing, as
79 necessary.

80 5. Require students to complete at least one course in fine or performing arts or career and technical
81 education, one course in United States and Virginia history, and two sequential elective courses chosen from
82 a concentration of courses selected from a variety of options that may be planned to ensure the completion of
83 a focused sequence of elective courses that provides a foundation for further education or training or
84 preparation for employment.

85 6. Require that students (i) complete an Advanced Placement, honors, International Baccalaureate, or dual
86 enrollment course; (ii) complete a high-quality work-based learning experience, as defined by the Board; or
87 (iii) earn a career and technical education credential that has been approved by the Board, including its
88 diploma seal of biliteracy established pursuant to subdivision E 4, except when a career and technical
89 education credential in a particular subject area is not readily available or appropriate or does not adequately
90 measure student competency, in which case the student shall receive satisfactory competency-based
91 instruction in the subject area to earn credit. The career and technical education credential, when required,
92 could include the successful completion of an industry certification, a state licensure examination, a national
93 occupational competency assessment, the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery, the Virginia
94 workplace readiness skills assessment, or, in the case of the diploma seal of biliteracy, any examination set
95 forth in subdivision E 4. The Department shall develop, maintain, and make available to each local school
96 board a catalogue of the testing accommodations available to English language learners for each such
97 certification, examination, assessment, and battery. Each local school board shall develop and implement
98 policies to require each high school principal or his designee to notify each English language learner of the
99 availability of such testing accommodations prior to the student's participation in any such certification,
100 examination, assessment, or battery.

101 7. Require students to be trained in emergency first aid, cardiopulmonary resuscitation, and the use of
102 automated external defibrillators, including hands-on practice of the skills necessary to perform
103 cardiopulmonary resuscitation.

104 8. Make provision in its regulations for students with disabilities to earn a diploma.

105 9. Require students to complete one virtual course, which may be a noncredit-bearing course.

106 10. Provide that students who complete elective classes into which the Standards of Learning for any
107 required course have been integrated and achieve a passing score on the relevant Standards of Learning test
108 for the relevant required course receive credit for such elective class.

109 11. Establish a procedure to facilitate the acceleration of students that allows qualified students, with the
110 recommendation of the division superintendent, without completing the 140-hour class, to obtain credit for
111 such class upon demonstrating mastery of the course content and objectives and receiving a passing score on
112 the relevant Standards of Learning assessment. Nothing in this section shall preclude relevant school division
113 personnel from enforcing compulsory attendance in public schools.

114 12. Provide for the award of credit for passing scores on industry certifications, state licensure
115 examinations, and national occupational competency assessments approved by the Board.

116 School boards shall report annually to the Board the number of Board-approved industry certifications
117 obtained, state licensure examinations passed, national occupational competency assessments passed, Armed
118 Services Vocational Aptitude Battery assessments passed, and Virginia workplace readiness skills
119 assessments passed, and the number of career and technical education completers who graduated. These

numbers shall be reported as separate categories on the School Performance Report Card.

For the purposes of this subdivision, "career and technical education completer" means a student who has met the requirements for a career and technical concentration or specialization and all requirements for high school graduation or an approved alternative education program.

In addition, the Board may:

a. For the purpose of awarding credit, approve the use of additional or substitute tests for the correlated Standards of Learning assessment, such as academic achievement tests, industry certifications, or state licensure examinations; and

b. Permit students completing career and technical education programs designed to enable such students to pass such industry certification examinations or state licensure examinations to be awarded, upon obtaining satisfactory scores on such industry certification or licensure examinations, appropriate credit for one or more career and technical education classes into which relevant Standards of Learning for various classes taught at the same level have been integrated. Such industry certification and state licensure examinations may cover relevant Standards of Learning for various required classes and may, at the discretion of the Board, address some Standards of Learning for several required classes.

13. Provide for the waiver of certain graduation requirements and the subsequent award of a high school diploma (i) upon the Board's initiative, (ii) at the request of a local school board, or (iii) upon the request of the parent of any high school senior who died in good standing prior to graduation during the student's senior year. Such waivers shall be granted only for good cause and shall be considered on a case-by-case basis.

14. Consider all computer science course credits earned by students to be science course credits, mathematics course credits, or career and technical education credits. The Board shall develop guidelines addressing how computer science courses can satisfy graduation requirements.

15. Permit local school divisions to waive the requirement for students to receive 140 clock hours of instruction upon providing the Board with satisfactory proof, based on Board guidelines, that the students for whom such requirements are waived have learned the content and skills included in the relevant Standards of Learning.

16. Provide for the award of verified units of credit for a satisfactory score, as determined by the Board, on the Preliminary ACT (PreACT) or Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test (PSAT/NMSQT) examination.

17. Permit students to exceed a full course load in order to participate in courses offered by an institution of higher education that lead to a degree, certificate, or credential at such institution.

18. Permit local school divisions to waive the requirement for students to receive 140 clock hours of instruction after the student has completed the course curriculum and relevant Standards of Learning end-of-course assessment, or Board-approved substitute, provided that such student subsequently receives instruction, coursework, or study toward an industry certification approved by the local school board.

19. Permit any English language learner who previously earned a sufficient score on an Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate foreign language examination or an SAT II Subject Test in a foreign language to substitute computer coding course credit for any foreign language course credit required to graduate, except in cases in which such foreign language course credit is required to earn an advanced diploma offered by a nationally recognized provider of college-level courses.

20. Permit a student who is pursuing an advanced diploma and whose individualized education program specifies a credit accommodation for world language to substitute two standard units of credit in computer science for two standard units of credit in a world language. For any student that elects to substitute a credit in computer science for credit in world language, his or her school counselor must provide notice to the student and parent or guardian of possible impacts related to college entrance requirements.

21. Permit any student to substitute elective credits for completion of any industry-approved workforce credential, provided that such credential is included on the list of credentials that are uniformly accepted as substitutes for such required credits developed and maintained by the Board pursuant to subsection F of § 22.1-253.13:1.

E. In the exercise of its authority to recognize exemplary performance by providing for diploma seals:

1. The Board shall develop criteria for recognizing exemplary performance in career and technical education programs by students who have completed the requirements for a Board of Education-approved diploma and shall award seals on the diplomas of students meeting such criteria.

2. The Board shall establish criteria for awarding a diploma seal for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) for the Board-approved diplomas. The Board shall consider including criteria for (i) relevant coursework; (ii) technical writing, reading, and oral communication skills; (iii) relevant training; and (iv) industry, professional, and trade association national certifications.

3. The Board shall establish criteria for awarding a diploma seal for excellence in civics education and understanding of our state and federal constitutions and the democratic model of government for the Board-approved diplomas. The Board shall consider including criteria for (i) successful completion of history, government, and civics courses, including courses that incorporate character education; (ii) voluntary

participation in community service or extracurricular activities that includes the types of activities that shall qualify as community service and the number of hours required; and (iii) related requirements as it deems appropriate.

4. The Board shall establish criteria for awarding a diploma seal of biliteracy to any student who demonstrates proficiency in English and at least one other language for the Board-approved diplomas. The Board shall consider criteria including the student's (i) score on a College Board Advanced Placement foreign language examination, (ii) score on an SAT II Subject Test in a foreign language, (iii) proficiency level on an ACTFL Assessment of Performance toward Proficiency in Languages (AAPPL) measure or another nationally or internationally recognized language proficiency test, or (iv) cumulative grade point average in a sequence of foreign language courses approved by the Board.

F. The Board shall establish, by regulation, requirements for the award of a general achievement adult high school diploma for those persons who are not subject to the compulsory school attendance requirements of § 22.1-254 and have (i) achieved a passing score on a high school equivalency examination approved by the Board; (ii) successfully completed an education and training program designated by the Board; (iii) earned a Board-approved career and technical education credential such as the successful completion of an industry certification, a state licensure examination, a national occupational competency assessment, the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery, or the Virginia workplace readiness skills assessment; and (iv) satisfied other requirements as may be established by the Board for the award of such diploma.

G. To ensure the uniform assessment of high school graduation rates, the Board shall collect, analyze, report, and make available to the public high school graduation and dropout data using a formula prescribed by the Board.

H. The Board shall also collect, analyze, report, and make available to the public high school graduation and dropout data using a formula that excludes any student who fails to graduate because such student is in the custody of the Department of Corrections, the Department of Juvenile Justice, or local law enforcement. For the purposes of the Standards of Accreditation, the Board shall use the graduation rate required by this subsection.

I. The Board may promulgate such regulations as may be necessary and appropriate for the collection, analysis, and reporting of such data required by subsections G and H.

J. For each student who first enters the ninth grade in a given school year, the Board shall apply, for the duration of that student's high school enrollment, (i) the graduation requirements and (ii) all approved methods for satisfying such requirements that are in effect for that school year, except as otherwise provided in subsection L.

K. No change adopted by the Board or the Department to any graduation requirement or approved method shall apply to any student who has already entered the ninth grade prior to the effective date of such change. Any such change shall apply only to students who first enter the ninth grade subsequent to the effective date of such change. Neither the Board nor the Department shall retroactively remove, alter, or invalidate any approved method that is applicable to a cohort of ninth grade students.

L. Notwithstanding subsection K, a student may elect to utilize an approved method that is adopted after the student enters the ninth grade and a local school board may elect to permit a cohort of ninth grade students to utilize an approved method that is adopted after such cohort enters ninth grade, provided that such method constitutes an additional, optional means of satisfying a graduation requirement and does not eliminate, narrow, or invalidate any approved method previously available to such student or cohort. No student shall be required to utilize an approved method that is adopted after the student enters ninth grade.

M. The Board and the Department shall use only the approved methods that are applicable to each individual cohort of ninth grade students for the purpose of determining the accreditation, accountability, or performance of any high school or local school division.

N. Prior to the implementation of any change to any graduation requirement or approved method, the Department shall publicly post on its website updated and accurate guidance documents that clearly identify the change, specify its effective date, state whether the change is mandatory or optional, and identify the cohorts of ninth grade students to which the change applies. All such guidance shall be posted in a timely manner and shall accurately reflect all Board-approved requirements and approved methods.

O. Local school boards and school divisions shall implement the provisions of subsections J through N to ensure that each entering cohort of ninth grade students is provided stable, consistent, and predictable graduation requirements and approved methods for the duration of their high school program.

P. As used in this section, "approved method" means any Board-approved means, pathway, process, assessment, performance task, work-based learning option, set of criteria, or cut score by which a student may demonstrate completion of or proficiency in any graduation requirement, including any verified credit requirement. "Approved method" includes the manner in which graduation requirements may be completed, demonstrated, or satisfied and any interpretation of, guidance on, or implementation standard for graduation requirements that is issued by the Board or the Department.

2. That the provisions of this act shall apply beginning with students who enter the ninth grade on or after July 1, 2027. The Board of Education and the Department of Education shall, prior to July 1,

243 2027, take all actions necessary to implement the provisions of this act, including updating public
244 guidance documents.

INTRODUCED

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