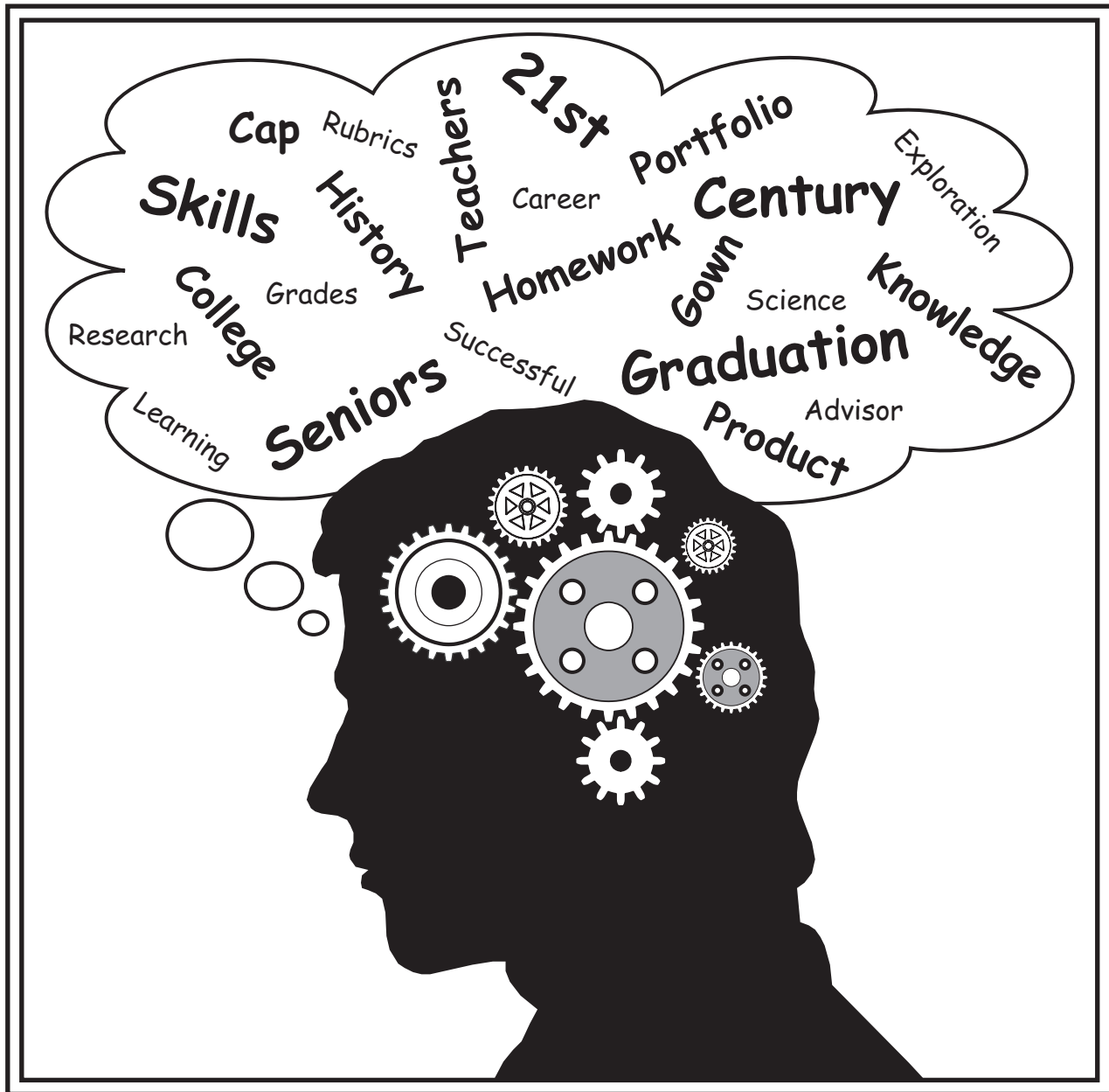


# The North Carolina Graduation Project

Standards of Quality and Verification Process  
for High School Accountability



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## ★ Introduction and Overview

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This document has been developed to provide guidance to high schools and local school systems regarding the North Carolina Graduation Project (NCGP). The goal is to equip high schools with the necessary information to meet expectations for North

Carolina's school accountability program as it relates to the NCGP. The first section of this document provides the history of graduation projects in North Carolina.

The second section of this document contains the Standards of Quality. In December 2011, the State Board of Education (SBE) included a graduation project as one of the six indicators in the high school accountability model. The Board specified that high school graduation projects must meet defined Standards of Quality in order for a high school to receive credit for the NCGP. High schools are not penalized if they do not require a graduation project; however, information is reported out for both those that do and those that do not require a graduation project.

Processes have also been defined for the purpose of verifying that a high school's graduation project meets the Standards of Quality developed for high school accountability. There are two verification options available to high schools. One option is open to any high school. The other is open to all high schools within a school district in which the local board of education has adopted a districtwide policy regarding a graduation project. The verification processes are described in the third section of this document.

The Standards of Quality and verification processes emphasize the desire to be faithful to the high school accountability model indicator as approved by the SBE. However, the development of the content for the Standards of Quality and the verification processes came from practitioners in high schools and school systems throughout North Carolina. A special thank you goes to those local education agency (LEA) individuals who worked during the spring of 2012 to assist in this endeavor, ensuring that the expectations were consistent with the integrity of NCGPs while also providing flexibility to high schools and school districts across the state.



## Section I: History and Rationale

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The NCGP began as the Senior Project, developed by Far West EDGE in 1986. High schools in North Carolina began utilizing the Senior Project as a process facilitating high school students' integration of research, writing, and presentation skills with the knowledge they have obtained in high school to create a significant presentation before a community audience. In 1995, the North Carolina Standards and Accountability Commission endorsed the Senior Project as an authentic assessment of students' abilities. The SBE supported the initiation of Senior Project programs in high schools by providing scholarships to train teachers interested in implementing this approach in their high schools. Far West EDGE sold the rights to Senior Project to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNC-G) and SERVE in 2002. SERVE continued to support the training and implementation efforts throughout North Carolina.

A milestone was reached in 2005 when the SBE voted to require an expanded version of the Senior Project, renamed the North Carolina Graduation Project (NCGP), as a state graduation requirement beginning with the Class of 2010. The NCGP began as a single-year and single-subject-area assessment. It then transitioned to a multiyear, performance-based assessment in which students generate various elements of the project spanning multiple content areas. The SBE adopted rubrics for each of the four required components, these being a 1) research paper, 2) presentation, 3) portfolio, and 4) product. An extensive implementation guide and associated required rubrics for grading the project were developed and disseminated statewide. School systems began devising new systems or modifying existing systems to meet the state requirements.

The North Carolina General Assembly in 2009 passed Session Law 2009-60, HB 223, which, in effect, removed the NCGP as a state requirement for graduation but allowed LEAs to decide whether to require it as a local exit standard. There were two key provisions to the law:

1. "The State Board shall not require any student to prepare a high school graduation project as a condition of graduation from high school prior to July 1, 2011; local boards of education may, however, require their students to complete a high school graduation project."
2. "The Program Evaluation Division of the General Assembly shall study the cost and effectiveness of a statewide high school graduation project and report the results of its study to JLEOC on or before July 1, 2010."

One of the outcomes of the first provision of the law was that many LEAs ceased their efforts to require the NCGP as a local condition for graduation, although other LEAs continued to require it. The study required by the second provision of the law was completed by the General Assembly's Program Evaluation Division and can be found at <http://www.ncleg.net/PED/Reports/RecentReports.html>.

Three additional studies have been completed on the effectiveness of the graduation project in North Carolina as well as a study by SERVE focusing on schools participating before the SBE's requiring the project for graduation. All three studies demonstrate clear educational benefits to students who have participated and completed a graduation project. Additionally, the North Carolina Business Committee for Education (NCBCE) endorses the NCGP because "the Graduation Project is yet another example of an essential strategic linkage between the outputs of North Carolina's education

process into the primary economic engine for the state: the business community. The graduation project is a focused tool that will assess the readiness of our youth to step into the next level of the education process and eventually into North Carolina's workforce." Abstracts of all four studies on the topic are found in Appendix A of this document.

In response to the research, the continued participation of the majority of high schools requiring a NCGP, and the endorsement of the NCBCE, the SBE determined that one of the six indicators in the revised high school accountability model would be the NCGP (State Board policy GCS-C-020). The accountability model gives credit to high schools whose Graduation Project meets the Board's Standards of Quality for Graduation Projects. This document provides guidance regarding those Standards of Quality and outlines the processes for verification of compliance to the Standards.



## **Section II: Graduation Project—Standards of Quality**

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High schools will be recognized through the READY accountability model approved by the SBE for implementation if the high school requires a graduation project and the project meets certain Standards of Quality.

The following Standards of Quality were developed by a task force during the spring of 2012 and approved by the SBE under the auspices of the high school accountability model (December 2011). Graduation projects must meet all of these Standards of Quality in order for the high school to receive credit within the model. The process for certifying that Standards are met is found in Section III of this document.

1. The high school shall provide a graduation project handbook that outlines all of the processes and requirements of the school's graduation project program and is available to teachers, students, parents, and the public. The handbook shall clearly address each of the SBE's Standards of Quality for graduation projects.
2. The graduation project shall consist of the following four components on a common topic:
  - a. A research paper in a standard format to be selected by the school
  - b. A juried presentation to a panel whose composition is to be defined by the school
  - c. A research-based product that may be a physical or nonphysical product
  - d. A portfolio documenting the activities associated with the project to the extent defined by the school
3. The topic for the graduation project shall emanate from a student's interest and demonstrate global readiness including 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills (e.g., entrepreneurship, self-enrichment, job shadowing/career explorations, volunteerism, physical product, etc.).
4. The high school shall clearly define the roles and responsibilities of the members of the school's infrastructure for supporting the student's completion of the graduation project (e.g., graduation project committee, mentor, academic advisor, graduation project coordinator, project review panel member, etc.—this list is illustrative only).

5. The high school shall define a systematic evaluation process for the graduation project (e.g., rubrics, grading criteria, etc.).
6. The high school or LEA shall clearly define how the evaluation of the project will significantly affect a student's grade in a course or courses required for graduation and/or how it will otherwise affect his or her opportunity to graduate from high school (a district policy may be required to permit graduation to be contingent on successful completion of a graduation project as a stand-alone graduation requirement).
7. The high school shall require all students to participate in the graduation project with clearly defined guidelines giving consideration to Exceptional Children, Limited English Proficient students, and Section 504 students, as needed.
8. The high school shall require some stated level of collaboration with an approved school or a community-based mentor having knowledge of the subject of the graduation project. The collaboration may be face-to-face, but may also be virtual or via phone, email, standard mail, etc.
9. The high school shall define modifications for transfer students whose circumstances clearly affect their ability to complete either a part of or the entire graduation project as defined by the high school.



### **Section III: Verification Process for the Standards of Quality for the North Carolina Graduation Project**

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There are two options for verification of the Standards of Quality for the graduation project:

1) verification of a districtwide implementation of a graduation project that meets the SBE's Standards of Quality or 2) verification of an individual high school's implementation of a graduation project that meets the SBE's Standards of Quality.

1. Districtwide Implementation
  - a. The local board of education must have a policy (see example Appendix B) requiring *all* high schools within the district meet the SBE's Standards of Quality for graduation projects if this option is to be used.
  - b. During the fall of each school year, the local accountability director will submit the NCDPI verification form (see Appendix C) indicating the policy is in effect and *all* high schools intend to follow the local policy.
  - c. The local school system's superintendent will sign the form verifying intended compliance and, by October 15, return the form to the Regional Accountability Coordinator, attaching a copy of the local policy regarding the graduation project Standards of Quality.
  - d. During the spring of each school year, the superintendent will indicate actual compliance with the Standards of Quality as a part of the larger READY accountability report.
  - e. The verification form and the READY accountability report will serve as documentation to indicate school-by-school compliance with the graduation project Standards of Quality within the school district.

## 2. Verification for an Individual High School

- a. The high school will complete the NCDPI verification matrix (see Appendix D) during the fall of each school year. The matrix must indicate where in a high school's graduation project handbook each of the Standards of Quality is addressed. Completion of the matrix will be coordinated by the local accountability director.
- b. The completed matrix and a copy of the graduation project handbook will be forwarded to the local accountability director. The local accountability director will review the matrix and the documentation in the handbook to verify intended compliance.
- c. The superintendent will sign the verification matrix, and the matrix will become the documentation for intended compliance. The signed verification matrix and the graduation project handbook will be forwarded by October 15 to the Regional Accountability Coordinator who will review and provide final approval of the verification for intended compliance.
- d. The verification matrix will provide an option for schools that have demonstrated compliance in previous years to certify their graduation project handbook has not changed and compliance is being requested based on the earlier review. If this option is utilized, there will be no need for the school to submit another copy of its graduation project handbook for review; only the verification matrix indicating the utilization of this option is required.
- e. During the spring of each school year, the superintendent will indicate compliance of each high school with the Standards of Quality as a part of the READY accountability report.





## APPENDICES

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- A. **Research Abstracts: Senior Projects/Graduation Projects**
- B. **Example of an LEA High School Graduation Project Policy**
- C. ***LEA Verification Form for Districtwide Implementation of a Graduation Project That Meets the North Carolina State Board of Education's Standards of Quality***
- D. ***Verification Matrix for an Individual High School's Implementation of a Graduation Project That Meets the North Carolina State Board of Education's Standards of Quality***

## Appendix A

### Research Abstracts: Senior Projects/Graduation Projects

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Tillery, C. & Brown, E. (2012). *North Carolina Graduation Project: Pilot Study Evaluation*. A paper presented at the North Carolina Association for Research in Education. Winston-Salem, NC.

#### **Abstract**

North Carolina has a vested interest in college access and success as demonstrated through many statewide initiatives. One example is the North Carolina Graduation Project, a multi-year, multi-faceted, multi-disciplinary performance assessment students complete throughout the course of high school. The North Carolina Graduation Project provides students the opportunity to connect content knowledge, acquired skills, and work habits to real world situations and issues allowing for emergence and acquisition of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. North Carolina Session law 2009-60, House Bill 223 was passed in 2009, removing the requirement as an exit standard for students to complete the North Carolina Graduation Project and leaving the decision to local education agencies. Through this pilot study, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction and the University of North Carolina General Administration, through the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) state grant, have collaborated to assess the correlation of the North Carolina Graduation project to postsecondary enrollment. The North Carolina State Board of Education will be presented data on student outcomes on postsecondary enrollment from two local education agencies including one local education agency which continued to require the North Carolina Graduation Project, and one local education agency which did not continue to offer the North Carolina Graduation Project.

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Carolan, N. (2008). *Student Perceptions of the Senior Project Graduation Requirement*.

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of North Carolina State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

#### **Abstract**

The purpose of this research was to understand what high school seniors perceive as essential for the senior project experience to be a worthwhile graduation requirement. The qualitative tradition of phenomenology was used to guide this study. Interviews were conducted with ten high school seniors who had completed a senior project. The interview data were supplemented by analysis of each student's personal documents related to the senior project.

The study examines what the students perceive as essential for making the senior project experience worthwhile. It looks at what is difficult and/or easy about the project and investigates what the high school seniors believe the graduation project does or does not do for students. The study affirms the benefits of project-based learning, while stressing the importance for policy and practice to include a combination of factors for successful senior project programs.

Findings of this phenomenological study based on student perceptions suggest (1) high school senior project programs should include highly qualified English teachers, mentors, peer assistants,

and Graduation Project Committees who have a vested interest in the program; (2) senior project programs should have clear and concise guidelines that provide focus and direction for students to follow; (3) physical and human resources, such as computers, printers, craft supplies, and supplemental classes in writing and public speaking, should be available at the school for students who may need them to successfully complete the graduation project; and (4) programs should be largely an independent effort that allows students autonomy to make decisions about their projects.

The implications of these findings and suggestions for future studies are discussed.

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Shaunessy, E. (2004). *The Senior Project and Gifted Education*. Gifted Child Today, v27 n3 p38-51.

**Abstract**

In 1999-2000, a field study of eight North Carolina schools was conducted; four senior project schools and four control schools were selected. Researchers identified four treatment schools that had institutionalized senior projects for at least 4 years, with all seniors participating in senior projects and with all the program components (research paper, product, portfolio, presentation) in place. Control schools were selected to match each senior project school based on staff size, size of student body, percent of students in the federal free lunch program, percent of minority students enrolled at the school, overall performance in the state testing program, and urbanicity. A variety of measures, including focus groups, writing assessments, achievement test scores, and surveys, were used to examine possible differences between senior project and control schools.

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Egelson, P., Roberston, C., Smith, S., & Hood, Art (2003). *Results of a State-Wide Secondary Culminating Assessment Survey*. A research paper produced by SERVE.

**Abstract**

Senior Project is a culminating assessment for 12th graders that determines what they know and can do as they prepare to graduate from high school in North Carolina. It consists of a research paper on an approved topic of the student's choice, a product and portfolio related to the paper, and a presentation before a review panel of community members. The North Carolina State Board of Education and the North Carolina State Department of Public Education wanted to determine how many high schools were either implementing or considering implementing Senior Project, so a survey was developed by staff at SERVE and sent to the principal of every public high school, including charter schools and alternative high schools, in the state. Responses were received from 330 schools (response rate of 81%). Nearly half of North Carolina high schools are either implementing Senior Project (32%) or considering implementation (14%). Most implementing schools expect all seniors to participate, with accommodations for special needs students. Schools that did not implement Senior Project cited school focus, lack of support, lack of time and resources, and previous implementation issues as the usual reasons. Schools implementing Senior Project tended to be small to medium sized. Schools implementing Senior Project and those planning to

implement the project do so for the same reasons: to teach and reinforce skills, to serve as a transition from high school to work or college, to raise school standards, and to motivate students.

## **Appendix B**

### **Example of an LEA High School Graduation Project Policy**

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Students must successfully complete a North Carolina Graduation Project (NCGP) as a condition of high school graduation from \_\_\_\_\_ (name of LEA). All high schools will follow the Standards of Quality for Graduation Projects as approved by the State Board of Education. The principal of each high school shall monitor the implementation of the NCGP and compliance with regard to the Standards of Quality. The superintendent will certify compliance to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction of each high school as outlined by the Department.

## Appendix C

### LEA Verification Form for Districtwide Implementation of a Graduation Project That Meets the North Carolina State Board of Education's Standards of Quality

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The purpose of this form is to verify the LEA has a policy in place requiring all of its high schools to implement a Graduation Project program that meets the Standards of Quality necessary to receive recognition as a part of North Carolina's READY Accountability System. The form is to be completed by the LEA Accountability Director and signed by the Superintendent. The LEA Accountability Director will forward the document to the LEA's Regional Accountability Coordinator (RAC) by October 15. Final verification that the graduation project was implemented and met the Standards of Quality will occur as a part of the annual READY accountability report process at the end of the school year.

Please attach to this form the district's graduation policy requiring all high schools to implement a graduation project in accordance with the North Carolina State Board of Education's Standards of Quality. List below the school name and number of each high school affected by the policy. The Superintendent must sign and date the form to verify all high schools listed are in compliance with the Standards of Quality.

Forward the completed form to the Regional Accountability Coordinator by October 15.

School Number	High School

This is to verify all high schools listed above have Graduation Project programs that meet the State Board of Education's Standards of Quality, and the attached policy has been approved by the local Board of Education on \_\_\_\_\_ (date).

School District (LEA)	
Superintendent	Date

## Appendix D

### Verification Matrix for an Individual High School's Implementation of a Graduation Project That Meets the North Carolina State Board of Education's Standards of Quality

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The purpose of this matrix is to verify that an individual high school has implemented a graduation project that meets the Standards of Quality necessary to receive recognition as a part of North Carolina's READY Accountability Program. Only schools not in a district implementing the graduation project districtwide are required to complete and submit the matrix. The matrix is to be completed by the high school principal and forwarded to the LEA Accountability Director who will confirm the information. The LEA Accountability Director will obtain the Superintendent's signature and forward the document by October 15 to the LEA's Regional Accountability Coordinator (RAC), who will complete the verification. Final verification that the graduation project was implemented as outlined will occur as a part of the READY accountability report process at the end of the school year.

Listed in Part I of the matrix are the nine Standards of Quality required to meet the expectations for high school accountability. This section of the form should be completed if the high school has not been verified previously or if the Graduation Project Handbook has been changed since the last verification. A copy of the high school's Graduation Project Handbook must be attached to the matrix. In the "Reference" column, the principal is to identify which page within the high school's Graduation Project Handbook addresses the stated Standard of Quality. All pertinent passages on the cited page or pages must be highlighted in the handbook. Upon completion, the high school principal will submit this form to the LEA Accountability director who will check for completion and obtain the Superintendent's signature as the final local authority. Then, the document will be forwarded to the RAC, who will verify (right-hand column) that the standards of quality and their references have been cited and met.

**If the high school has been validated in a previous year and the Graduation Project Handbook has not changed since the validation, complete the verification in Part II. If the Graduation Project Handbook has been verified previously, it is not necessary to attach a copy of the handbook.**

## School Verification Form for Implementation of a Graduation Project That Meets the North Carolina State Board of Education’s Standards of Quality

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**Part I – To be completed if the high school has not been verified previously or if the Graduation Project Handbook has been changed since the last verification.**

Standard of Quality	Reference	RAC Verification (initial & date)
<p>1. The high school shall provide a Graduation Project Handbook that outlines all of the processes and requirements of the school's Graduation Project program and is available to teachers, students, parents, and the public. The Graduation Project Handbook shall clearly address each of the State Board of Education's Standards of Quality for Graduation Projects.</p>	<p>Attaching a copy of the high school's Graduation Project Handbook meets this Standard of Quality. No other citation is necessary.</p>	
<p>2. The Graduation Project shall consist of the following four components on a common topic:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. A research paper in a standard format to be selected by the school</li> <li>b. A juried presentation to a panel whose composition is to be defined by the school</li> <li>c. A research-based product that may be a physical or nonphysical product</li> <li>d. A portfolio documenting the activities associated with the project to the extent defined by the school</li> </ul>		
<p>3. The topic for the Graduation Project shall emanate from a student's interest and demonstrate global readiness including 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills (e.g., entrepreneurship, self-enrichment, job shadowing/ career explorations, volunteerism, physical product, etc.).</p>		
<p>4. The high school shall clearly define the roles and responsibilities of the members of the school's infrastructure for supporting the student's completion of the Graduation Project (e.g., graduation project committee, mentor, academic advisor, graduation project coordinator, project review panel member, etc.— this list is illustrative only).</p>		
<p>5. The high school shall define a systematic evaluation process for the Graduation Project (e.g., rubrics, grading criteria, etc.).</p>		



Standard of Quality	Reference	RAC Verification (initial & date)
6. The high school shall clearly define how the evaluation of the Project will significantly affect a student's grade in a course or courses required for graduation or how it will otherwise affect his or her opportunity to graduate from high school (a district policy may be required to permit graduation to be contingent on successful completion of a Graduation Project as a stand-alone graduation requirement).		
7. The high school shall require all students to participate in the Graduation Project with clearly defined guidelines for giving consideration to Exceptional Children, Limited English Proficient students, and Section 504 students, as needed.		
8. The high school shall require some stated level of collaboration with an approved school or a community-based mentor having knowledge of the subject of the Graduation Project. The collaboration may be face-to-face, but may also be virtual or via phone, e-mail, standard mail, etc.		
9. The high school shall define modifications for transfer students when the circumstances of their transfer clearly affect their ability to complete a part of or all of the Graduation Project as defined by the high school.		

School Name:	School Number:	LEA Name:
Principal's Signature:		Date:
LEA Testing Coordinator:		Date:
Superintendent:		Date:
Regional Accountability Coordinator:		Date:

**Part II – To be completed if the high school has been validated in a previous year and the Graduation Project Handbook has not changed since the validation.**

The signatures below indicate the high school's Graduation Project Handbook has been validated in the indicated year and no changes have been made to the handbook since that validation.

School Year of Initial Validation:	
School Name:	LEA Name:
Principal's Signature:	Date:
LEA Testing Coordinator:	Date:
Superintendent:	Date: