

What Participants at the CPS New Bedford Forum Said About High School Graduation

Common themes emerge in the second of six grassroots forums on high school graduation readiness

In the second of a series of six People's Forums on graduation readiness, more than 30 educators, parents, students, and other community members, including two state legislators and a city councilor, got together in New Bedford on May 24 to discuss these questions about public education:

1. What should students know and be able to do by the time they graduate?
2. How should students demonstrate their readiness to graduate?
3. How can schools, pre-K to 12, support these goals?

Citizens for Public Schools (CPS) planned the forum with the New Bedford Coalition to Save Our Schools (NBCSOS) and other organizations to contribute to the important discussion of what should happen in the wake of the passage of Question 2 in November 2024. Statewide, the vote was 59 to 41 percent in favor of ending the requirement that high school students pass the MCAS to get their high school diplomas. New Bedford voters were even more solidly in favor, with 69.4 percent voting yes.

Governor Healey has established the Massachusetts K-12 Statewide Graduation Council to propose new requirements. CPS's goal for our forums is to help ensure any new statewide graduation requirements reflect the views of parents, students, educators and other community members concerned with public education. People of all races, incomes, disability statuses, and languages should be involved in these important decisions.

The first forum, for Cambridge and Somerville, was endorsed by nine local organizations and six state legislators representing the two cities. In addition to CPS and NBCSOS, the second forum was endorsed by Fall River Educators Association, New Bedford Educators Association, Greater New Bedford Educators Union, New Bedford Support Specialists Union, New Bedford Federation of Paraprofessionals Local 2378, Massachusetts Teachers Association, and AFT Massachusetts.

At the New Bedford forum, as in Cambridge, participants gathered in small groups to discuss the three questions. A note-taker at each table wrote down what was said.

Some New Bedford participants said they wanted students to know the "basics," i.e., academic subjects like English and math, yet similarly to Cambridge and Somerville, we heard a much broader and deeper vision for education. Yes, students should be able to read, write, and do arithmetic—but participants described a version of ELA that goes far beyond the basics. They

want students to understand their positionality (i.e., where they are located in relation to their various social identities) and the cultural lens through which they view the world, how to listen to learn, how to make strong arguments, how to evaluate information, and how to be flexible, curious, and creative in their thinking.

As in Cambridge, participants wanted students to gain practical knowledge and life skills like financial literacy, CPR and life-saving skills, effective communication and how to apply for a job.

In one group—which included two low-income immigrants—the conversation about financial literacy showed that basic math skills aren't enough. Knowing how to budget or open a bank account won't lift someone out of poverty. Students need to analyze the economic systems that structure our lives.

Participants also emphasized the need for interdisciplinary curriculum. Subjects don't exist in isolation, and every topic—whether it's science, math, or literature—has a sociopolitical context. There was a strong feeling that teaching that context is essential.

New Bedford participants also echoed Cambridge participants regarding the importance of civics education so that students gain a range of skills they will need to fully engage in democratic society.

One of the most powerful takeaways from New Bedford was the shift from wanting students to develop critical thinking to cultivating critical consciousness. Critical thinking helps students analyze and solve problems, like choosing the best credit card. But critical consciousness goes further. It helps students ask why predatory financial systems exist, who they harm, and how we might change them. It's not just about navigating the system—it's about understanding it and challenging it to transform it when necessary. That shift is what truly stood out in the New Bedford discussions.

How should student achievement in these areas be assessed? As in Cambridge, participants proposed a variety of approaches.

New Bedford participants prioritized a system where students demonstrate mastery of state learning standards by passing all required classes, using performance-based assessments, or using portfolios of their work over time.

Participants seemed to understand that passing a course involves completing a range of assignments and assessments, including performance-based tasks and varied assessment methods.

However, several people noted that capstone projects can become overwhelming when all students are expected to complete them at the same time, often at the end of a term or school year. (This was also raised in the Governor's Council's Taunton listening session.)

Participants emphasized the need for universally designed learning opportunities—where students have *choice* in how they demonstrate what they know and can do. One group also talked extensively about the importance of using Bloom's Taxonomy when designing assessments. They wanted to see students move beyond memorizing facts to evaluating information and creating new knowledge. We need assessments that assess higher order thinking.

Finally, participants highlighted the value of helping students learn how to *self-assess*. The ability to reflect on and evaluate their own growth was seen as a meaningful marker of learning.

Participants also had many proposals for how to improve schools to better support students in achieving their educational goals, such as ensuring fully staffed and funded schools, and matching school budgets with the community's educational vision. This could be done by using "participatory budgeting" involving educators, parents, and students.

There was also an emphasis on the need for greater autonomy and respect for both educators and students, a shift away from deficit-based thinking. Participants stressed that those most affected by policy—students, families, and educators—should play a central role in shaping it. Community input, especially in budgeting decisions, was seen as essential to building schools that truly reflect local needs and values. Finally, the importance of culturally responsive schools was a key theme and should be applied across Questions 1 through 3.

In summary, the New Bedford forum pushed us toward a vision of education that goes beyond the basics. Participants urged the use of diverse assessment methods that capture higher-order thinking and support student choice. They also emphasized the need for fully resourced schools that are responsive to the community, with those most impacted playing a central role in shaping policy and practice.

Spreadsheets showing how each group addressed each question are posted [here](https://shorturl.at/O3Rg4) (<https://shorturl.at/O3Rg4>).

More forums are planned across the state in the fall. Citizens for Public Schools will report the results of each forum.

We intend to present our findings from all six forums in the form of a final report to the governor's Graduation Council, the legislature, the state board of education, and to the public. CPS will press state authorities to adopt requirements supported by a wide range of diverse public school stakeholders, not just policymakers and legislators.

Lisa Guisbond, Citizens for Public Schools

Dr. Cynthia Roy, New Bedford Coalition to Save our Schools