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To: Mayor E. Denise Simmons & the Cambridge School Committee

Fr: David Murphy

Date: 12-12-25

Re: Graduation Requirements and Competency Determination

Included in next week's school committee agenda is consideration of the second reading of the proposed amendments to School Committee Policies IKF and IKF-1. I wanted to briefly clarify some points that I believe became (understandably and perhaps expectedly) conflated during our December 2, 2025 discussion on these matters.

The ballot question that passed in the fall of 2024 eliminated the "graduation requirement" of the high school MCAS exam across Massachusetts. That former graduation requirement (one of only two state sanctioned graduation requirements for high schools in the Commonwealth) served as a competency determination imposed on all would-be high school graduates beginning with graduating classes of 2003 through 2024. Other than the statutory requirement that students complete physical education, all other graduation requirements have been (and currently, from a legal perspective, are) determined at the local level by school district policy.

While the initial guidance issued by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education in July of 2025 directed districts to formulate a competency determination policy by December 31, 2025, the preliminary guidelines issued by the Governor's task force contemplated the more expansive scope of graduation requirements, rather than the more narrowly tailored question around the specific basis for determining competency in absence of graduation eligibility being determined by a satisfactory completion of the MCAS. What makes this even more confusing, in my view at least, is the fact that the administration of the MCAS is still legally required despite DESE issuing non-compulsory guidance that districts should not use it as an instrument to assess students competency. At this point I am unable to explain why an exam normed against the state's curriculum frameworks would not be advisable as but one permissible option to demonstrate competency, and my efforts to elicit a response from DESE on this front have been unsuccessful.

As a result of this evolving guidance from the state and our efforts to adhere to the December 31, 2025 deadline communicated to us are two policies that were introduced for a first reading on December 2, 2025. Policy IKF contemplates the CRLS graduation requirements, including the amendments reflective of both the additional health course that was mandated by the school committee starting with the class of 2028 as well as the credit increase determined to be necessary by the CRLS team to avoid the phenomenon of CRLS students prematurely accumulating sufficient credit graduate. It also incorporates by reference the competency determination policy (codified as IKF-1) that

was developed consistent with the state's guidance and after ample consultation with how neighboring districts are endeavoring to comply with the December 31, 2025 deadline.

To summarize, graduation requirements are and have always been more comprehensive than the mere competency determination. The competency determination policy amounts to the completion of end of year assessments that for now will be developed at the local level pending the presumed establishment of the state-sanctioned version the Governor's task force has indicated will be coming (some day). The suggestions that committee members made about additional more comprehensive graduation requirements (i.e. a robust civics component, RSTA and HSEP-specific provisions, community service, etc.) are worthwhile suggestions the administration is genuinely eager to explore and report back on in the coming months. But our pursuit of these options should not interfere with our adoption of the competency determination provision at this time.

Finally, I would just note the concerns echoed by the committee about how we can establish consistent and rigorous assessments at the local level that ensure we maintain the high standards that were a bedrock expectation of the Education Reform Act of 1993 that brought MCAS into existence are well-taken. Our team will be working closely with the CRLS staff and connecting with peer administrators in other districts and partners alike to ensure the instruments adopted serve to accurately gauge students' readiness while reducing the very legitimate risk of regression of standards that these changes represent.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out. Thank you.