

The Diploma Committee shall be responsible for reviewing and discussing the current diploma procedure and potential amendments thereto, and for presenting its findings and any proposed amendments to the School Assembly, no later than May of any given year.

# The Philadelphia Free School Diploma Process

The Philadelphia Free School shall grant a diploma to students who have, in the judgment of the School community, demonstrated their readiness to be responsible members of the community at large, independent of the support of the School, and who have demonstrated the ability to convey their preparedness for success.

## **Students Eligible for a Diploma**

Students must be enrolled for more than two full years before they may be eligible for a Diploma. Students enrolled for less than three (3) full years may not seek a diploma unless they earn a two thirds ( $\frac{2}{3}$ ) majority vote by School Meeting at the first step of the process.

## **The Diploma Procedure**

The Assembly votes to grant diplomas at the May Assembly meeting of each school year. Only one thesis defense panel will occur per school year, and this will occur in late Spring, unless School Meeting says otherwise. No later than the last School Meeting in October of any given school year, the prospective diplomate must convey his or her intent to begin the Diploma Procedure, by a Motion properly presented to School Meeting, as follows:

### *School Meeting Motion*

1. The student candidate presents a motion to the School Meeting, asking that it acknowledge her/his readiness to be independent of the support of the School and a responsible member of the community at large.
  - o At the Meeting after this motion has been published, School Meeting debates and votes on the motion in a closed session, in such manner as it determines.
  - o If the motion passes, the Secretary of the School Meeting promptly notifies the Registrar that the candidate may continue with the Diploma Procedure.
2. Subsequent to the passage of such a Motion, the School Meeting shall establish a Thesis Defense Panel, consisting of at least three members, all volunteers. In order to be eligible to serve on the Thesis Defense Panel, an individual must: 1) be a current or former staff member with at least two years' experience at the Philadelphia Free School, or any other school modelled on the Sudbury Valley School, and 2) must have had candidates graduate from their school during the time of their tenure. Up to two fifths ( $\frac{2}{5}$ ) of each Thesis Defense Panel may be considered eligible to serve if School Meeting deems they have similar qualifications and life experience to be a substantial contributor.
3. Within 3 weeks of the passage of the Motion, the candidate must select an Advisory Committee to assist the candidate with the completion of the Thesis Defense process. The Advisory Committee must consist of at least two (2) people, one of whom is a School Meeting Member, another of whom is an Assembly Member.

### *Written Statement*

1. In consultation with this Advisory Committee, the candidate prepares a written statement (thesis) articulating his/her readiness to be a responsible member of the community at large, independent of the support of the School.
2. The first draft of the thesis must be presented to the Advisory Committee no later than eight (8) weeks prior to the Thesis Defense.
3. Each member of the Advisory Committee will have seven (7) business days to submit, to the Candidate, written (including electronically) critiques, comments, and/or questions on the candidate's statement.
4. If the Candidate so chooses, steps 4 and 5 may be repeated by providing additional drafts for further critique.
5. The Candidate may revise his/her first draft using the feedback provided by the Advisory Committee. No later than four (4) weeks prior to the Thesis Defense, on a day when school is open, the candidate must submit a final version of his/her thesis to the Registrar, in both paper and electronic format.
6. Upon receiving the statement, the Registrar has two (2) business days to send copies of the final version of the statement to the members of the Thesis Defense Panel.

### *School Records*

1. The Registrar also prepares a report of the Candidate's JC record and Attendance record for the current school year, and verifies its accuracy with the Law Clerk, Attendance Clerk, and the candidate. The JC record will be redacted for the privacy of those other than the Candidate. The Registrar then sends this report to the Thesis Defense Panel in advance of the thesis defense.

#### *Thesis Defense Practice Session*

1. In consultation with the Advisory Committee, the candidate shall invite interested members of the Assembly to participate in a Thesis Defense Practice Session. The Practice Session will enable the candidate to practice their defense in front of a live audience and receive feedback. The Practice Session will occur after the diploma candidate has submitted their written thesis to the Registrar, but before the thesis panel meets, to help the candidate prepare to defend. Any number of Assembly Members may attend this session; no quorum is required.
2. The candidate shall decide which aspects of the thesis defense they wish to share with the Assembly members in the Practice Session, including the thesis itself and the presentation they have prepared. The candidate shall also decide the format in which feedback shall be given. The candidate shall provide any written materials they choose to share to Practice Session participants at least 48 hours in advance.
3. At the Thesis Defense Practice Session, the candidate is open to questions, comments, and challenges from the members of the Assembly. Assembly members who choose to participate in the Thesis Defense Practice Session shall do so in a spirit of constructive criticism and support.

#### *Presentation*

1. In addition to the thesis, the candidate shall prepare a presentation to demonstrate his/her readiness to become an independent and responsible member of the larger community. The format and/or medium of the presentation is to be determined by the candidate, under the guidance of the Advisory Committee, unless the Thesis Defense Panel deems such format and/or medium to be inappropriate for presentation to the Thesis Defense Panel.
2. The Registrar, in consultation with the candidate, schedules a date and time for the candidate to make the presentation. The presentation shall take place on a day that School is not otherwise in session (weekend or holiday). Written notice of the candidate's presentation shall be provided, as arranged by the Registrar, to all members of the Thesis Defense Panel. The presentation is open only to members of the Thesis Defense Panel.
3. Additional copies of the candidate's written statement, JC record, and Attendance record for the current school year shall be made available to each Thesis Defense Panelist at the presentation. The candidate's written statement is not read aloud.
4. At the presentation, the candidate is open to questions, comments, and challenges from the members of the Panel. The entire thesis defense, including presentation, questions, and answers, should last approximately one (1) hour.

#### *Voting by Panelists*

1. At the end of the presentation, the members of the Thesis Defense Panel convene privately to discuss the question of whether the candidate has shown the ability to articulate why she/he is ready to be a responsible adult in the community at large. The Panel may choose to reconvene with the Candidate to ask further questions before voting. The entire session, including questions, comments, and responses thereto, shall not last longer than two hours.
2. The members of the Thesis Defense Panel who have been present throughout the session reconvene privately to vote by secret ballot on whether the candidate has shown the ability to articulate why she/he is ready to be a responsible adult in the community at large. Panelists are welcome, but not required, to provide feedback, written or verbal, on any aspect of the Defense (thesis, presentation, or school records) to the candidate and/or the Assembly. Panelists are also invited to share feedback on the Thesis Defense process with the Diploma Committee.
3. The Registrar arranges a tally of the vote and notifies the candidate and the School Meeting Secretary of the result.

#### *Granting a Diploma*

1. In order to receive a diploma, a candidate who has received a positive vote from a majority of the Thesis Defense Panel, must submit a motion asking the School Meeting to approve sending a motion to the assembly to grant him/her a diploma no later than 11 days before the May Assembly Meeting. This motion is of lasting import, and must pass in a first and second reading to be considered valid.
2. The candidate's motion may be considered at the next scheduled School Meeting, or at a special meeting called for this purpose. At the Meeting, the members of the School Meeting shall vote by secret ballot whether to approve sending a motion to the assembly to grant a diploma to the candidate. The Registrar arranges a tally of the vote and notifies the candidate of the result. If a majority of the votes cast by the School Meeting are in the affirmative, the Registrar send a motion to the assembly to grant a diploma to the candidate provided the candidate is also in good standing and has no outstanding debts to the school.

3. If the candidate does not receive a majority of positive votes by the panel or the School Meeting for reasons other than procedural ones, s/he may submit a request to School Meeting to begin the Diploma Process anew, but no less than three months after the prior presentation.
4. If the candidate does not receive a majority of positive votes by the panel or the School Meeting and feels the procedures followed were not in accordance with the process outlined herein, s/he may request an appeal on procedural grounds. This appeal shall be heard by School Meeting.

## **Guidelines Regarding the Diploma Procedure**

### *General Guidelines*

- For the candidate, the diploma process should be challenging, engaging, and personally rewarding.
- For the candidate, the diploma process should not be trivial, threatening, formulaic, or humiliating.
- For the School, the diploma process should be stimulating and a source of pride.
- For the School, the diploma process should not be disruptive, unduly demanding on the time of School Meeting members, or embarrassing.

### *Guidelines for School Meeting*

- In its debate and consideration of each candidate, School Meeting should, at minimum, consider the candidate's behavior, character, and use of the school. Candidates should be able to explain why they feel ready to leave, and be able to demonstrate this readiness by citing specific events and/or actions from their past experiences in the school and/or in the world in general.

### *Guidelines for the Assembly*

- For the Assembly, consideration should be given to all components that the candidate chooses to submit for the Thesis Defense Practice Session: written statement, school records, and/or presentation.
- For the Assembly, the process should be one of evaluation and constructive critique. No questions shall be asked of the candidate that are excessively personal in nature or irrelevant to the question at hand.

### *Guidelines for Thesis Defense Panelists, Assembly and Potential Candidates*

- These Guidelines are not meant to cause all presentations to adhere to the same structure, plan or format. Each candidate is free to construct a presentation along whatever plan and/or format she/he feels is appropriate. The purpose of these Guidelines is to provide candidates with some ideas of potential approaches to their preparation of their written statements and to their development of their presentations.
- In their written statements, candidates are expected to discuss their experiences at and surrounding the School, their personal involvement with the School and its members, and their use of the School to further their plans for the next phase/ activity/ endeavor/ project in their lives. Candidates should be able to explain the ways they took responsibility for their education during their time at the School, and, in combination with that, their understanding of what their education at the Philadelphia Free School consisted of. Time and again, young people from a variety of educational experiences have shown that the ability to explain these kinds of ideas and subjects will serve them well in any endeavor they choose to undertake.

### *Guidelines for Thesis Defense Panelists*

- For the panelist, the process should not be unduly demanding on the time of the Panelists.
- For the panelist, consideration should be given to all components of the candidate's submission: written statement, school records, and presentation.
- For the panelist, the process should be one of evaluation and constructive critique. No questions shall be asked of the candidate that are excessively personal in nature or irrelevant to the question at hand.

### *Guidelines for the Advisory Committee*

- For the Advisory Committee, the process should not be unduly demanding on the time of the Committee.
- For the Advisory Committee, guidance should be given on all components of the candidate's submission: written statement, school records, and presentation.
- For the Advisory Committee, the process should be one of constructive critique and support.