

STATEMENT ON GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS FOR THE BLUE RIBBON COMMISSION

July 2023

All students deserve to graduate from high school with a meaningful diploma that signifies their preparedness for postsecondary success in college, career, and life. But too many young people—disproportionately Black, Latinx, and American Indian students, and students from low-income backgrounds—are graduating without the foundational skills necessary for future success.

There are real life consequences for young graduates. Too many students enter college only to find they must take remedial coursework that is non-credit bearing, resulting in student debt and decreased odds of college completion. Recent graduates entering the workforce find they lack the literacy and numeracy skills necessary to secure and succeed in entry-level jobs.

Given this situation, it is understandable that the New York State Department of Education (NYSED) would undertake a review of graduation requirements. **Yet, current graduation requirements did not cause these challenges and proposed changes to provide additional**

pathways to a diploma will not fix the systemic issues facing our K-12 system. In many ways, it is the wrong conversation at the wrong time, with the potential to exacerbate the inequities that plague schools across New York.



The Perception Gap

Too many students are reaching high school without the foundational skills necessary to succeed in school and beyond and the pandemic has only exacerbated this trend. For example, only 24% of eighth graders across the state were proficient in math on the 2021-22 New York State math assessment. This is deeply troubling since research shows that eighth-grade math skills often determine access to future advanced math coursework, and test outcomes are closely correlated with future success indicators such as high school graduation, college enrollment, and job earnings, particularly in STEM careers.

Eighth-grade math performance stands in stark contrast to the state's most recent graduation rate of 87%. As the [New York Equity Coalition has shown](#), recent regulatory changes such as an amendment that allowed students to earn a diploma with a 50% score on Regents exams make it difficult for parents and employers to know whether graduates are truly prepared for postsecondary success. These actions contribute to what is becoming known as a perception gap — the distance between how a parent or student perceives their ability and the truth.

Although the temptation to loosen graduation requirements, particularly after a deadly and traumatic pandemic, is understandable, it only serves to limit students in the long run.



ALTHOUGH THE TEMPTATION TO LOOSEN GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS, PARTICULARLY AFTER A DEADLY AND TRAUMATIC PANDEMIC, IS UNDERSTANDABLE, IT ONLY SERVES TO LIMIT STUDENTS IN THE LONG RUN.

Performance Learning Assessments

NYSED is currently piloting a Performance-Based Learning and Assessment Network (PLAN) that would provide an additional pathway for students to earn a diploma. We support the state's efforts to explore multiple ways for students to demonstrate mastery, particularly for students with disabilities and multilingual students.

However, we are concerned about district capacity to implement new strategies such as performance-based learning, which will require a massive increase in funding and professional learning for overburdened educators still addressing the impact of the pandemic on students.

We are also concerned that a shift away from objective measures such as Regents exams may exacerbate longstanding inequities in postsecondary preparedness for students who have been historically underserved by our education system. As a result, **any shift toward a performance-based learning assessment system must be accompanied by significant safeguards that ensure all students, particularly those in chronically low-performing districts, are held to high standards that prepare them for success in college and careers.**

Finally, a shift toward more subjective graduation measures such as performance-based learning will make it even more difficult for parents and employers to know whether students are prepared for postsecondary success, further contributing to the perception gap. This is particularly problematic given recent national and state data showing that New York students are trailing their peers in math and reading and may give the impression that schools are hiding the truth about student academic skills.

Recommendations

Rather than tinkering with graduation requirements, now is the time for NYSED to embrace a bold and holistic P-20 approach to education that ensures all graduates can read, write, and have the skills necessary to succeed in college or careers. By doing so, students will reach their senior year with the ability to meet rigorous standards and succeed on multiple measures, including Regents exams and performance-based options.

To achieve this goal, we urge NYSED and the Blue Ribbon Commission to develop a comprehensive academic excellence agenda that maintains rigorous graduation requirements and the use of objective measures such as Regents exams, with additional flexibility and a menu of options for students that may struggle to meet this bar. Our recommendations include:



Birth-8th Grade

1

Early Childhood: Strong literacy and numeracy skills start at birth, with ample opportunities for social, emotional, and cognitive development between the ages of 0-5. The state can support this development through:

- 1) Increased collaboration between NYSED and The New York State Office of Children and Families (NYSOCFS) to develop a seamless system of support, care, and services from birth to third grade;
- 2) Increased funding and technical assistance to help communities screen children for developmental delays; and
- 3) Increased access for parents and childcare providers to tools that promote literacy and numeracy skills.

2

K-3 Literacy: Prioritize reading by third grade to ensure all students are prepared to enter fourth grade with foundational reading skills aligned with the science of reading.

3

High-Quality Instructional Materials in K-8 Math and Reading: Ensure that all districts are using evidence-based instructional materials with aligned professional learning for educators.

4

Progress Monitoring: Ensure that schools identify and support students that need extra help in math and reading throughout each grade.

- 5 **Increase access to rigorous coursework** such as Algebra 1 for eighth graders, which has been proven to increase success in high school and STEM courses.

High School

- 6 Use increased federal and state funding to provide more support for high school students at risk of not graduating, including **high-impact tutoring and postsecondary planning**.
- 7 Increase and improve the use of **Dual Enrollment programs** across the state to accelerate student learning, improve graduation rates, and reduce student debt.

Graduation Requirements

- 8 **End the current pandemic flexibility** that allows students to earn a diploma with Regents exam scores of 50% or less.
- 9 **Maintain an objective graduation measure**, such as the current Regents exams, to ensure rigor and accountability for all students, and particularly students of color and from low-income backgrounds. As an example, Massachusetts recently **raised their graduation requirements** to pass their state exit exam.
- 10 **Research barriers and performance data, including Regents exams and graduation rates, for Students with Disabilities and English Language Learners** to better determine what flexibility is needed for graduation requirements.
- 11 **Provide increased flexibility and a menu of options for Students with Disabilities and English Language Learners** to demonstrate mastery, with strong accountability safeguards to ensure all districts are providing appropriate support to these students.

Additional Recommendations

- 12 **Student and parent voice** needs to continue to be incorporated into all Blue Ribbon Commission recommendations.
- 13 **Highlight successful efforts** that have maintained rigor while increasing graduation rates such as Yonkers Public Schools and My Brother's Keeper.
- 14 **Engage colleges and workforce development** experts to better align graduation standards with college and career readiness.
- 15 Collect more and better data to track the postsecondary success of graduating students through a **P-20 longitudinal data system**.

