



June 27, 2022

Dear Honorable Elected Official:

The [New York Equity Coalition](#) understands the past three school years have been exceptionally challenging for New York students and educators — with the ongoing effects of the pandemic, ever-evolving adjustments to teaching and learning, and the continued national reckoning with the impact of systemic racism. Now more than ever, it is critical that students leave high school with a competitive diploma that not only equips them to thrive in college and the workforce, but also to become community leaders. In this crucial moment, we need to maintain high expectations for ALL students – not lower them.

Unfortunately, recently, the New York State Board of Regents announced a [proposed amendment](#) that would weaken graduation requirements and allow more New York students to earn a local diploma, discouraging many from pursuing the more rigorous Regents diploma, which has long been a hallmark of the state’s education system. The proposed amendment would allow students who are unable to pass a Regents exam with more than a 50% score to earn a local diploma through a new “special determination” process.

The New York Equity Coalition is deeply concerned about this proposed amendment because it will exacerbate systemic inequities and lead to more students graduating high school unprepared for college, the workforce, and civic life. Even before the pandemic, too many students graduated from New York high schools requiring remedial coursework in college, wasting both time and valuable financial aid dollars and making them less likely to ultimately graduate from college. For example, students in the class of 2014 who received financial aid through the Tuition Assistance Program and went on to attend college in New York State had an on time college graduation rate of [29% and only 60%](#) of the same class graduated in six years. And 2018 data showed that less than 40 percent of New York students were considered college-ready when they graduate high school. As a result, community colleges at the State University of New York spent more than \$70 million on remediation, and 20 percent — \$93 million — of financial aid awarded to community college students paid for remedial classes.

Moreover, the Regents’ proposal is part of a troubling trend that has occurred throughout the pandemic to devalue statewide assessments and weaken graduation measures including:

- **On March 20 2020**, the State Education Department announced the [suspension](#) of NYS 3rd-8th grade statewide exams, the New York State Grade 8 intermediate-level science test, and the New York State Alternate Assessment for students with cognitive disabilities in grades 3-8 and high school, due to the pandemic.
- **On April 7, 2020**, the State Education Department announced the [cancellation](#) of the June 2020 Regents Exams and issued guidance that allowed for students who would have taken one or more Regents examinations in June 2020, to be exempted from passing the assessments to graduate. These exemptions were disproportionately granted to schools serving the most students from [low-income](#) backgrounds.
- **On November 5, 2020**, the State Education Department announced the [cancellation](#) of the January 2021 Regents.
- **On January 25, 2021**, the State began accepting public comments for [proposed](#) federal waivers for state assessments and accountability requirements and on **February 12, 2021**, the State Education Department [submitted](#) two federal waiver requests related to state assessment and accountability requirements.
 - The coalition sent a [letter](#) in February 2021, to acknowledge that we supported NYSED’s decision given the unprecedented pandemic. And, we offered them recommendations to help ensure that educational stakeholders understood what students knew, whether or not students were prepared for the next grade level, and equipped educators with data that would help support students' academic success.
- **On December 1, 2021**, the State began accepting public comment on a [proposed](#) waiver request to the U.S. Department of Education related to state accountability requirements under the Every Student Succeeds Act and Title I School Improvement Funding. **On January 31, 2022**, NYSED released a memo highlighting that the Federal Education Department denied their waiver request.
 - During the public comment period, we sent a [letter](#) to highlight the negative implications of this accountability waiver including that not identifying schools in the bottom 5-10%, ensuring that families know of such schools, and supporting the schools on a guided improvement path is to deny students of a fair and adequate education — seemingly counter to any work that centers diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- **On May 5, 2022**, the State [passed](#) an amendment allowing for students that receive between a 50 and 64% on a Regents exam to use a “special appeal” that would allow them to still receive either a Regents or Local Diploma.
- **On May 24, 2022**, the State [announced](#) the cancellation of the United States History and Government Exams citing that the exam included content that "has the potential to compound student trauma caused by the recent violence in Buffalo.”
 - Immediately after, the coalition raised concerns to NYSED [about](#) the impact this cancellation will have on the academic future of New York State students. Although the content of the language on the exam was not revealed, we do

believe that other measures, such as modifying the exam, should have been used to help provide critical information regarding student learning.

- **On June 13, 2022**, the State announced that it would allow additional “flexibility” in granting a local diploma to a June 2022 graduating student who either missed the Regents exam due to illness or took the Regents and did not earn a passing score.
 - The coalition expressed our concerns in a [letter](#) which highlights that the recent special appeal process approved by the Regents provides more than enough flexibility for students affected by the pandemic to earn a local diploma. Expanding these loopholes only widens the rigor gap between a Regents and local diploma and makes the local diploma less attractive to colleges and employers.

Rather than lowering graduation requirements and devaluing the role of assessments, now is the time to increase rigor and support by helping more students access advanced coursework and earn college credit through dual enrollment programs, providing them with both a strong foundation and head start in completing their postsecondary degree.

To that end, we encourage you to consider the following actions to ensure the Board of Regents do not continue to weaken graduation and assessment requirements:

1. Send the Board of Regents and Commissioner Rosa the attached letter to express your concerns regarding the state’s consistent divestment from assessments and lowering graduation measures.
2. Highlight the importance of assessments in your communities and inform your constituents about the significant role assessments have in educating students and allocating resources.
3. Contact your local Regent to urge them to **vote no** on the proposed amendments to weaken graduation and assessment requirements.

We also welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss this critical issue. Please contact Kalima Johnson, associate director of advocacy and partners, The Education Trust–New York, at kjohnson@edtrustny.org if you have any questions or would like to schedule a meeting.

We are looking forward to your continued partnership to make New York State’s education system more equitable for all students.

Sincerely,
Better Schools Better Neighborhoods
Brooklyn YWCA
Buffalo Urban League
The Business Council of New York State
Business Council of Westchester

Capital Region Chamber
Committee for Hispanic Children and Families
Democrats for Education Reform-NY
District-Parent Coordinating Council of Buffalo
Educators for Excellence
EPIC-Every Person Influences Children
Hispanic Federation
INCLUDEnyc
National Center for Learning Disabilities
New York State School Counselor Association
New York Urban League
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