

Equity Alert

GRADUATING INTO UNCERTAINTY:

The use of Regents exams exemptions during the COVID-19 pandemic

For over a year now, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted students' lives. In the Spring of 2020, as a response to the ongoing pandemic, the New York State Education Department (NYSED) cancelled the administration of June Regents examinations. NYSED also modified the graduation requirements students must meet to earn high school diplomas, credentials, and endorsements, effectively allowing students to matriculate into their postsecondary pathway without delay.

While we supported the additional flexibility granted to students, we also had concerns about it leading to uneven preparation for postsecondary success, especially for students who have been historically underserved by our education system. Even before the pandemic, students of color and students from low-income households were more likely to be tracked into less rigorous career-focused pathways rather than college-and-career focused pathways.¹ Earlier this year, NYSED released

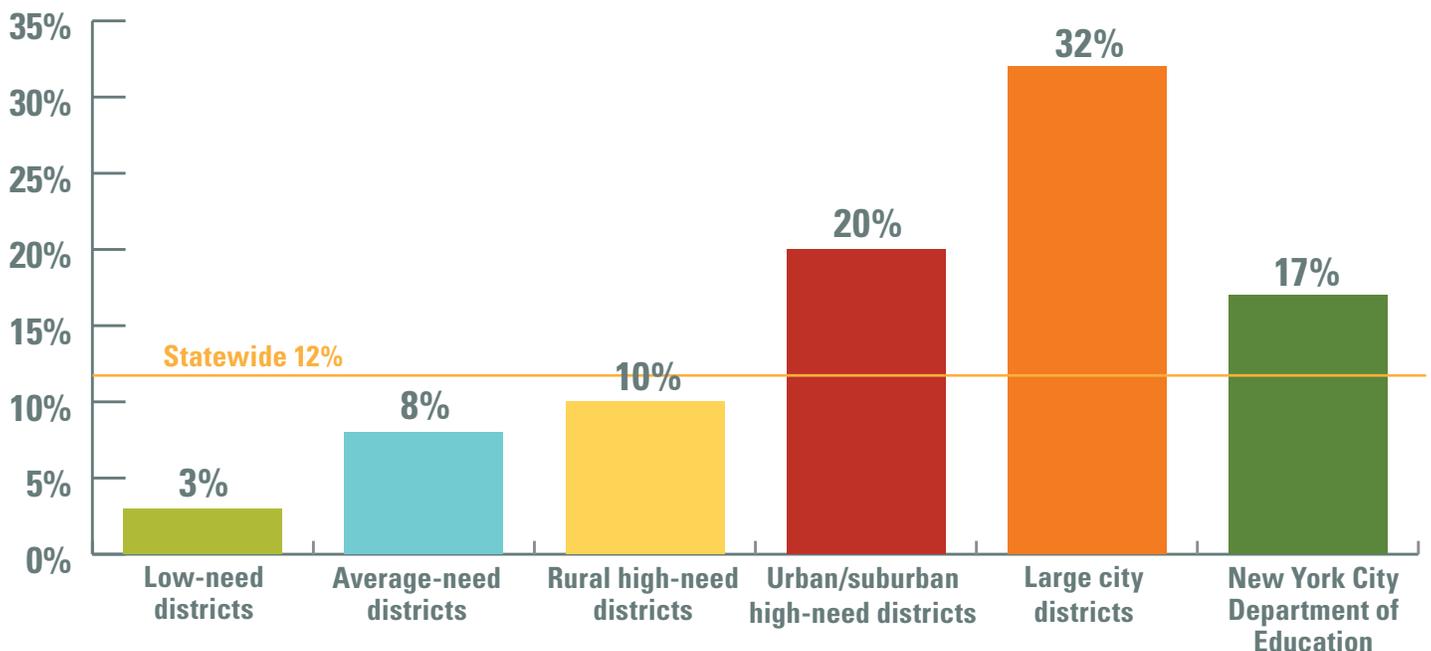
data on students who were granted a Regents exam exemption to graduate in 2019-20 and the data raises concerns that inequities are being exacerbated during the pandemic — as school districts that serve the largest shares of students of color and students from low-income households were more likely to graduate students with the use of a Regents exam exemption.

The disproportionate use of exemptions by high-need districts raise critical equity issues, especially as NYSED proceeds to cancel most Regents examinations and modify graduation requirements again this year. Specifically, the widespread use of Regents exemptions in high-need districts, including the Big 5, signals that there may be many students who are underprepared for college or workforce-bound postsecondary pathways. The data findings below underscore the need for greater support and resources for high school seniors to ensure that they are prepared for college, careers, and their desired future.

FINDING 1

High-need districts disproportionately used Regents exam exemptions to graduate students

Share of graduates who had 1 or more Regents exemptions



FINDING 2

Districts with the largest shares of low-income students and students of color were more likely to use an exemption to graduate students

NYCDOE was

1.8x

more likely to use a Regent exam exemption to graduate a student **than districts in the rest of state.**

Outside of New York City

Districts serving the largest shares of students from low-income households were

7.6x

more likely to use a Regent exam exemption to graduate a student **than districts with the smallest shares of students from low-income households.**

Districts serving the largest shares of students of color were

2.4x

more likely to use a Regent exam exemption to graduate a student **than districts with the smallest shares of students of color.**

FINDING 3

Exemptions data reveal alarming disparities across regions

Syracuse City School District was

8.4x

more likely use a Regent exam exemption to graduate a student **than districts in the rest of Onondaga County.**

Rochester City School District was

8.1x

more likely to use a Regent exam exemption to graduate a student **than districts in the rest of Monroe County.**

Albany City School District was

5.6x

more likely to use a Regent exam exemption to graduate a student **than districts in the rest of Albany County.**

Buffalo Public Schools were

4.3x

more likely to use a Regent exam exemption to graduate a student **than districts in the rest of Erie County.**

Urban/suburban high-need districts in Long Island were

3.8x

more likely to use a Regent exam exemption to graduate a student **than districts in the rest of Long Island.**

Yonkers Public Schools were

2.9x

more likely to use a Regent exam exemption to graduate a student **than districts in the rest of Westchester County.**

These data illuminate critical equity issues and can help inform policymakers and educators as the state continues to grapple with the challenges caused by the pandemic and considers how to best support young people who are being disproportionately disadvantaged by it. Here are our equity-driven policy recommendations:

Administer all Regents exams.



NYSED should use the full flexibility granted by the United States Department of Education — which includes options like extending the testing window or moving assessments to the summer or fall — to administer Regents exams to as many students who took a course aligned with a Regents exam as possible. The data collected from Regent exams should be disaggregated and made publicly available so that parents, families, community-based organizations, educators, and other stakeholders can understand how students are progressing academically. In addition, education and state leaders can use the data to target additional academic, social-emotional, and transitional support for students and young adults during this unprecedented crisis.

Provide resources and investments for students' academic, social-emotional, and transition support.



Earlier this year, NYSED released a memo, *Supporting the Graduating Class of 2021*.² The memo includes information on how school districts can meet the needs of high school seniors during the pandemic, including helping students create postsecondary transition plans, supporting students to complete financial aid applications, and supporting students' social and emotional well-being. NYSED should provide additional technical support to districts who need help implementing these policies and the state should use Rescue Act plan and other federal funding sources to support these efforts.

Use data to increase transparency and ensure student success.



We recommend that the state commit to publicly release disaggregated Regents exemption data for the years that Regents exemptions are made available at the school and district level. The state should require school districts with troubling trends of exemptions data for any group of students to establish action plans to ensure that all students are getting the proper support to pass Regent exams and are college and career ready. These plans should be crafted with educator, student, and parent engagement, and should be made publicly available on the NYSED website. In addition, the state should collect and publish annual “to and through” data on the postsecondary pathways of high school seniors, including college matriculation, persistence, and completion, and wage and employment data, in order to determine how graduates that have been impacted by the pandemic are faring compared to prior cohorts. The state should use this data to identify additional interventions for students still in high school and to provide more support at the college level if needed. In addition, the state should provide tools for school districts to use “on track to graduation” data for students in grades 9-11 as an early arning indicator to prevent students from dropping out.

Expand access to evidence-based programs for student postsecondary success.



Both the Assembly and Senate one-house budgets restore funding for CUNY's ASAP program and increases funding for similar programs at SUNY, as well as statewide Educational Opportunity Programs. It is critical for the state to invest additional Rescue Plan Act and other federal relief funding in these programs to acknowledge young people who have transitioned to a postsecondary education during this difficult time require additional structure and robust support to achieve on-time graduation.

Improve support and communication for incoming postsecondary students.



We recommend that colleges and universities use Rescue Plan Act and other federal relief funding to enroll all incoming first-year students from low-income households and first-generation college students in summer bridge programs that provide virtual or on-campus support — depending on the status of the pandemic — to help students transition successfully by addressing their academic and non-academic needs.

Address academic needs resulting from high school closures.



We recommend that colleges and universities commit that, to the greatest extent possible and drawing Rescue Plan Act and other federal relief resources, incoming first-year students will be placed in co-requisite, credit-bearing courses that provide innovative and supportive alternative to remediations when necessary, instead of being enrolled in traditional remediation.

Provide wraparound services to support postsecondary students.



We recommend that colleges and universities invest Rescue Plan Act and other federal relief funding to expand on-campus food support, child care, counseling services, and emergency grants to support and stabilize students during this time of immense financial insecurity. Students should also receive support accessing all available financial aid sources.

About this analysis

All data findings are based on the “district-by-district breakdown of exemptions needed to graduate” dataset made publicly available by the New York State Education Department here: <http://www.nysed.gov/news/2021/state-education-department-releases-2016-cohort-high-school-graduation-rates>. The data includes the number of graduates with one or more Regent exam exemptions at the district level and at charter schools for 2019-20. The analysis includes a total of 634 out of 640 (99%) districts.

Of the 640 districts, the following were excluded from the analysis: 1 Special Act district and 5 school districts with suppressed Regent exam exemptions data.

All 74 charter schools included in the data set were excluded from the analysis. The analysis also includes 171,654 (>99%) out of 171,672 graduates in district-run schools. 2019-20 data on district-level demographics, including shares of students from low-income backgrounds and students of color, are from NYSED’s “Enrollment Data Archive” found here: <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/statistics/enroll-n-staff/ArchiveEnrollmentData.html>.”

Endnotes

¹See, for example: The New York Equity Coalition, “The State of the Diploma” (March 2020). Available at: https://equityinedny.edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2020/03/Equity-Alert_Caution-Ahead.pdf

The Education Trust–New York, “Graduating to a Bright Future” (March 2018). Available at: <https://newyork.edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Graduating-to-a-Bright-Future.pdf>

²New York State Education Department, *Supporting the Graduating Class of 2021*. (January 13, 2021), available at: <http://www.nysed.gov/common/nysed/files/programs/reopening-schools/memo-high-school-seniors.pdf>

THE NEW YORK EQUITY COALITION

