

EQUITY ALERT

GRADUATING TO A BRIGHT FUTURE

Diplomas That Lead to Postsecondary Success



The Education Trust—New York

In 1996, New York State adopted a “Regents for all” agenda that aimed to eliminate a two-tier system of Regents and Local diplomas in order to ensure that schools prepare all of their students for a range of opportunities for postsecondary success.

The dramatic shift was a major equity achievement for New York’s students.

As Richard Mills, New York’s then-Education Commissioner, said at the time: “There is not going to be a second-class testing system anymore.”¹

More than two decades later, New York finds itself once again facing critical decisions about how to avoid a “second-class” diploma system, aiming to prepare all students for college and career readiness while recognizing that multiple pathways and multiple measures are essential.

In that context, the 2017 high school graduation results present an opportunity to examine two critical equity issues:

- **Local Diplomas:** Today’s Local diplomas are different than the Local diplomas of the 1990’s and early 2000’s. In general, they require students to take Regents exams but allow a lower passing score on appeal; students with disabilities also have additional options available to graduate with a Local diploma (*see sidebar*). While we do not oppose the Local diplomas—which can serve as a safety net for students who otherwise struggle on exit exams—disproportionate reliance by school districts on Local diplomas for historically under-served groups of students could signify problems with instructional rigor, inadequate support, and lack of equitable access to challenging coursework.
- **“4+1” Diploma Pathways:** The new high school graduation results enable us to take a first look at

implementation of the “4+1” diploma pathways, which provide students with a menu of options in a variety of subjects instead of having to pass a mandatory fifth Regents exam. Our analysis focuses on whether historically under-served groups of students have equitable access to college- and career-prep pathways or if their academic opportunities appear to be limited to career-prep options only.

This Equity Alert is intended to raise policy questions and is followed by a series of short-term recommendations for education leaders:

MAJOR FINDINGS

THE LATEST HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES PRESENT A MIXED PICTURE OF PROGRESS ON COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS

New York continues to face significant gaps in high school graduation rates for students in high-need school districts compared to their peers in low-need school districts, and for historically under-served groups of students across the state. In this Equity Alert, our analysis focuses primarily on whether the state is making progress closing these gaps and raising attainment for all students.

1

An increase in Local diplomas is responsible for almost the entire statewide graduation rate increase

This year’s 80.2 percent graduation rate for the 2013 cohort of entering 9th graders represents a nearly 0.5 percentage point increase from the 79.7 percent graduation rate for the 2012 cohort.²

The modest increase in New York’s graduation rate masks a more troubling development: nearly all of the gains—85 percent of the state’s graduation rate increase—

NEW YORK STATE HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS

In order to graduate from high school in New York State, students must fulfill specific credit and exam requirements. Students may graduate with a Regents, Advanced Regents, or Local diploma. The type of diploma a student receives largely depends on a student's scores on the Regents exams.

CREDIT REQUIREMENTS:

Students must earn 22 credits in specific courses.¹

EXAM REQUIREMENTS:²

Regents Diploma

- In general, in order to receive a Regents diploma, students must:
 - **Pass 5 Regents exams** (English Language Arts, Math, Global History, U.S. History, and Science) with a score of 65 or higher **-or-**
 - **Pass "4+1" assessments:**³ 4 Regents exams (English Language Arts, Math, Social Studies, and Science) with a score of 65 or higher **plus** 1 state-approved assessment in Math, Science, Social Studies, English Language Arts, Language Other Than English, Arts, or Career and Technical Education, or complete the requirements for a Career Development and Occupational Studies (CDOS) Commencement Credential.⁴

Advanced Regents Diploma

- In order to receive an Advanced Regents diploma, students must pass 7 or 8 assessments:
 - **8 Regents exams** (English Language Arts, Global History, U.S. History, 3 Math, and 2 Science) with a score of 65 or higher **-or-**
 - **7 Regents exams** (English Language Arts, Social Studies, 3 Math, and 2 Science) **plus** 1 state-approved assessment or complete the requirements for a CDOS Commencement Credential.
- Students must also pass a locally developed Language Other Than English exam or complete a 5-unit sequence in the Arts or Career and Technical Education.

Local Diploma

- The Local diploma is available to:
 - **Students with disabilities** who pass the 4 Regents exams using available "safety nets" **plus** 1 state-approved assessment or complete the requirements for a CDOS Commencement Credential.
 - **Students with disabilities** who qualify for a "Superintendent Determination."
 - **English Language Learners** who pass 4 Regents exams or 3 Regents exams **plus** 1 state-approved assessment or complete the requirements for a CDOS Commencement Credential, and successfully appeal a score of 55-59 on the English Language Arts Regents exam.
 - **Any student who passes** 3 Regents exams or 2 Regents exams **plus** 1 state-approved assessment or complete the requirements for a CDOS Commencement Credential, and successfully appeals a score of 60-64 on 2 Regents exams.

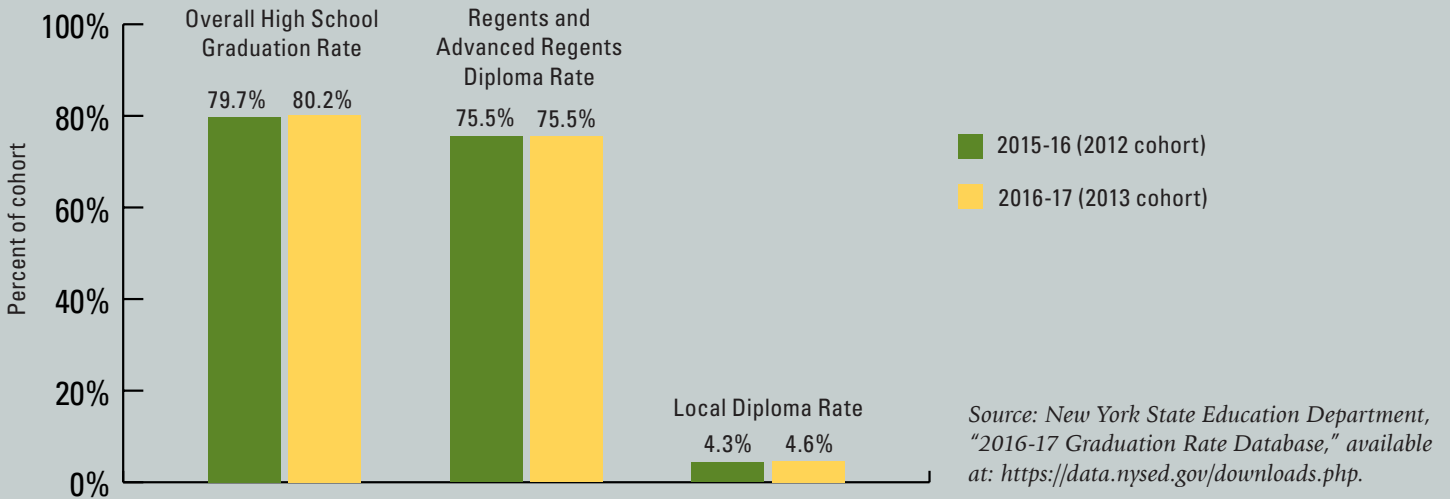
¹ More information about the specific courses required to meet graduation requirements can be found at: <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/ciai/gradreq/CurrentDiplomaRequirements.pdf>.

² More information about the exam requirements for each type of diploma can be found at: <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/ciai/gradreq/Documents/DiplomaandCredentialSummary1.18.pdf>.

³ More information about "+1" state approved assessments can be found at: <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/ciai/multiple-pathways/>.

⁴ Students who receive a score of 60-64 on one Regents exam may still receive a Regents diploma through an appeals process.

Figure 1: The increase in the statewide graduation rate from 2016 to 2017 is driven primarily by an increase in attainment of Local diplomas, not Regents and Advanced Regents diplomas



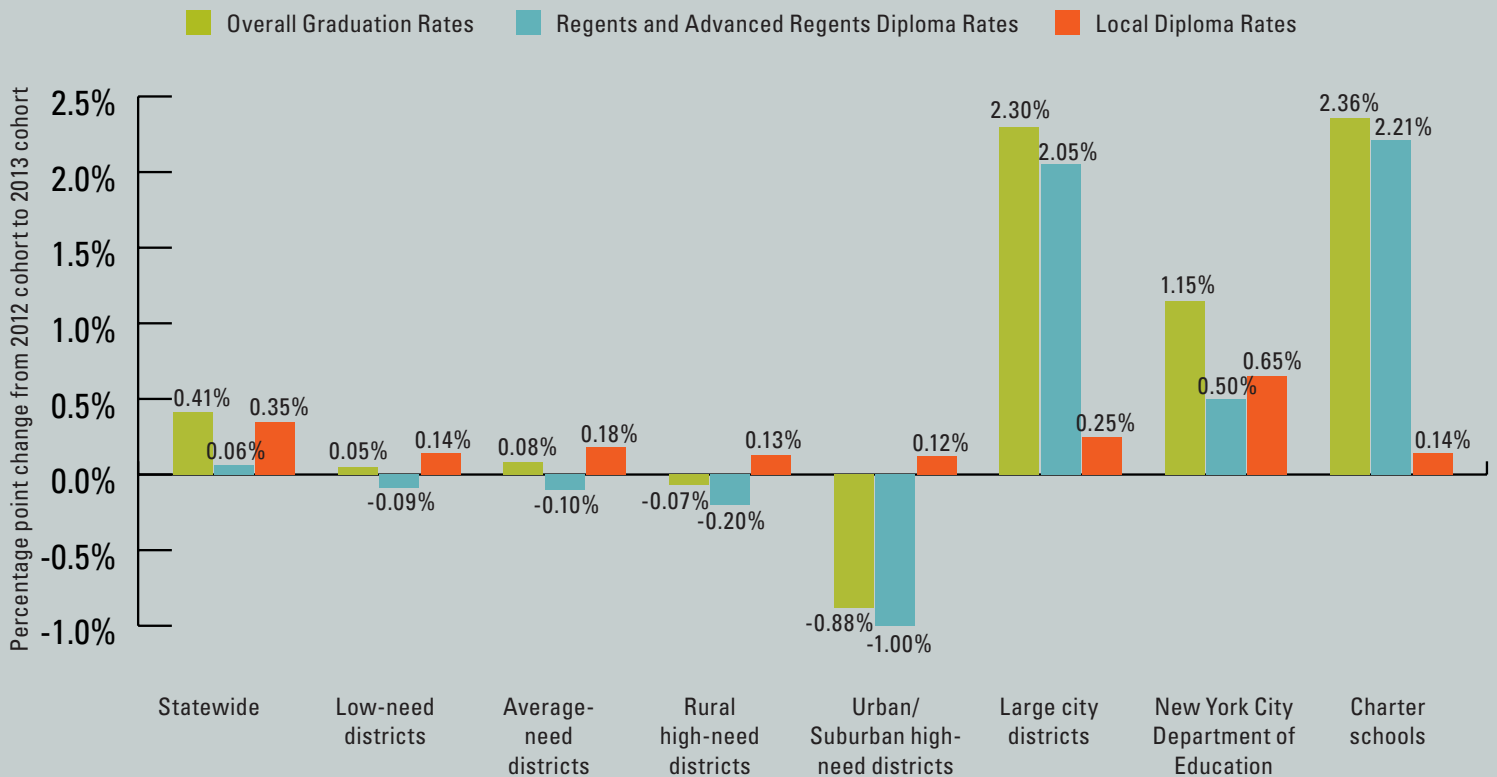
comes from an increase in Local diplomas rather than Regents and Advanced Regents diplomas (see Figure 1).

In New York City, other large city districts, and charter schools, the percent of Regents or Advanced Regents

diplomas increased. However, the average percent of students earning a Regents or Advanced Regents diploma actually declined in high-need, average-need, and low-need school districts (see Figure 2). In urban/suburban high-need districts, the Regents and

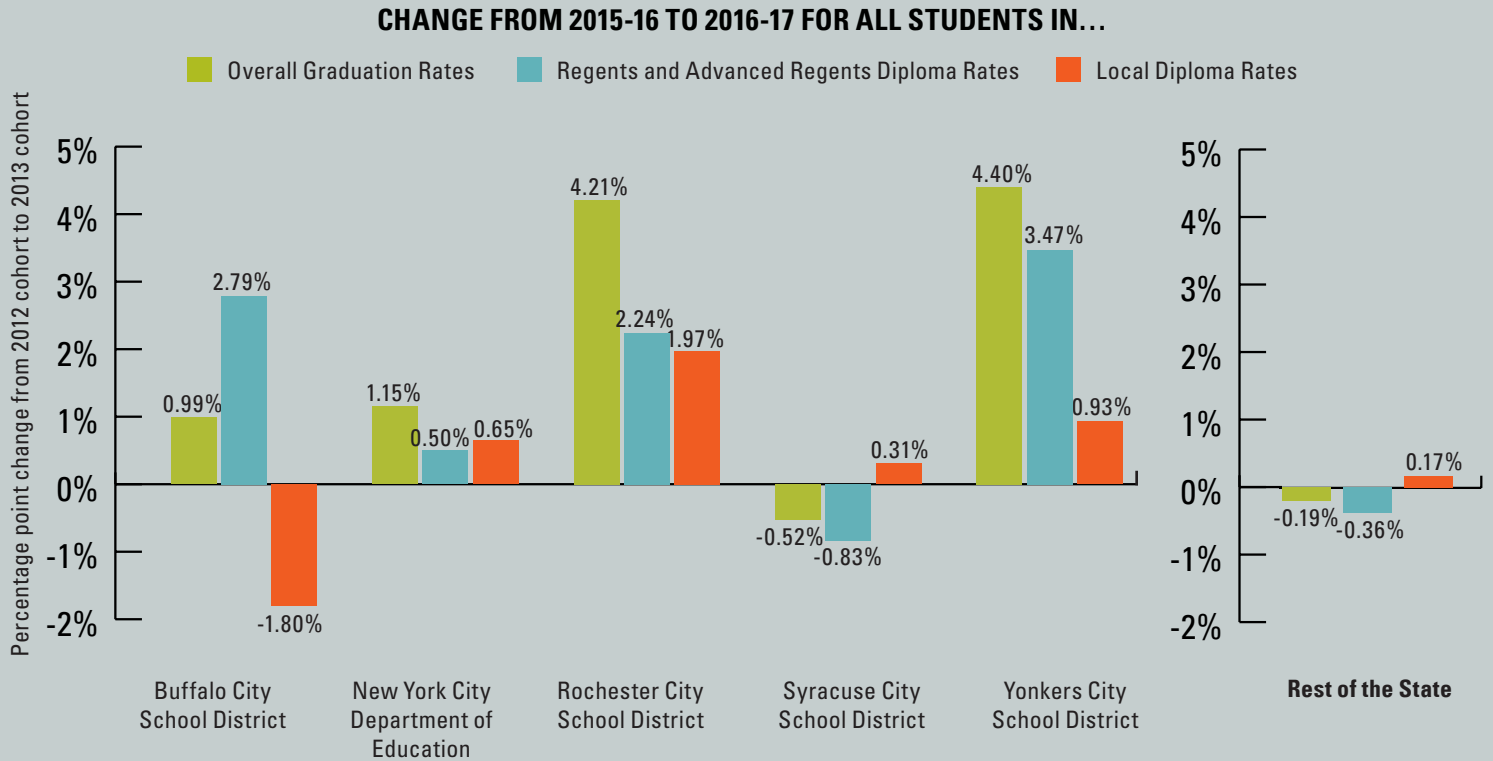
Figure 2: Regents and Advanced Regents diploma rates increased in New York City, the Big 4 school districts, and charter schools – and declined for all other types of school districts

CHANGE FROM 2015-16 TO 2016-17 FOR ALL STUDENTS IN...



Source: New York State Education Department, "2016-17 Graduation Rate Database," available at: <https://data.nysed.gov/downloads.php>.

Figure 3: The overall graduation rate and Regents diploma rate increased in New York City and several other large city districts, and decreased on average in the rest of the state



Source: New York State Education Department, "2016-17 Graduation Rate Database," available at: <https://data.nysed.gov/downloads.php>.

Advanced Regents diploma rate dropped by 1 full percentage point.

2 The statewide graduation rate would have decreased without the gains made in New York City, several other large city districts, and charter schools

With the exception of Syracuse, all of the other Big 5 school districts—New York City, Buffalo, Rochester, and Yonkers—increased both their Regents and Advanced Regents diploma rate and their overall high school graduation rate, as did the state’s charter schools.

In the rest of the state—which represents nearly 60 percent of New York’s graduating cohort—the overall average high school graduation rate decreased slightly compared to the prior year (see Figure 3).

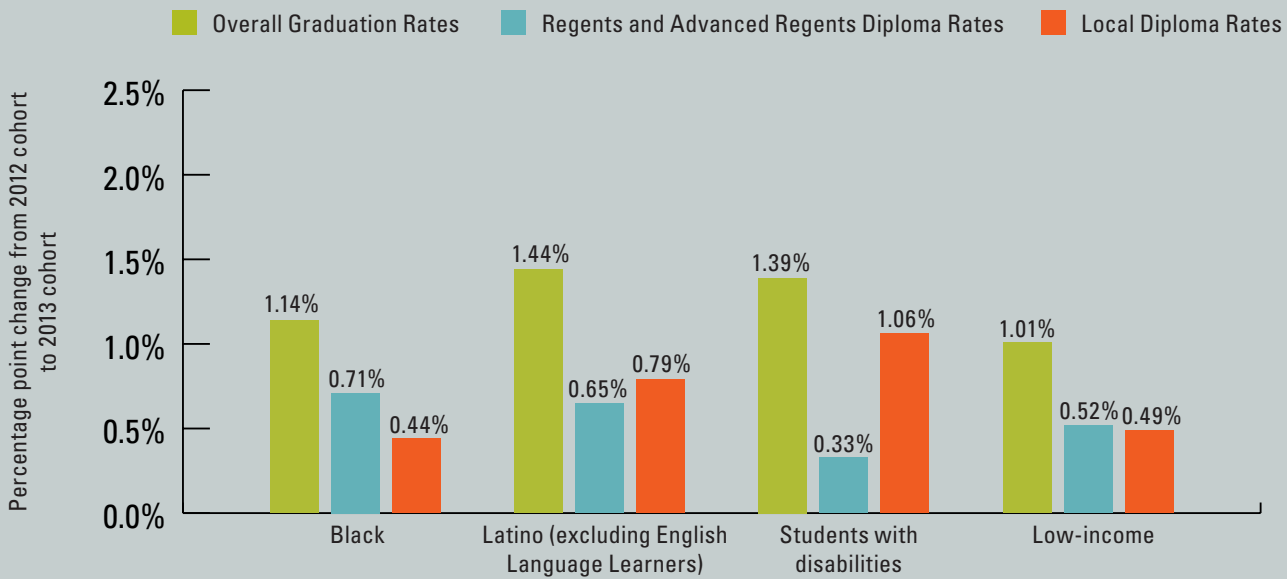
As was the case with Regents diplomas, the decline in overall high school graduation rate was most severe in urban/suburban high-need school districts. Half of the school districts in this category experienced a drop in their high school graduation rate.

3 Graduation rates for English Language Learners require urgent attention

This year’s high school graduation rate data include generally good news for many groups of historically under-served students: for Black students, Latino students who are *not* English Language Learners (ELLs), and students with disabilities, the statewide data indicate an increase in both Regents diplomas and overall high school graduation rates (though graduation rates for students with disabilities in particular remain strikingly low in absolute terms) (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Graduation rates and Regents diploma rates increased for Black students, Latino students who are not English Language Learners, students with disabilities, and low-income students

CHANGE FROM 2015-16 TO 2016-17 FOR STUDENT SUBGROUPS IN...



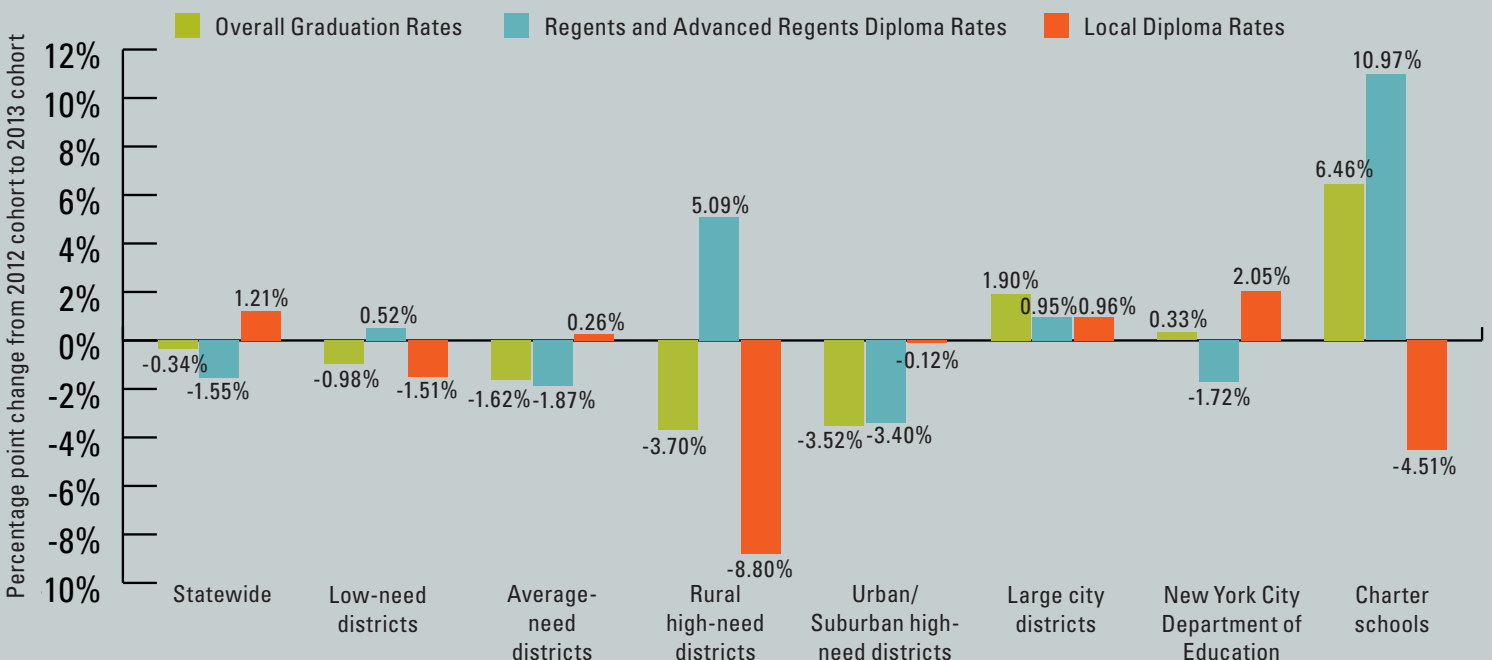
Source: New York State Education Department, "2016-17 Graduation Rate Database," available at: <https://data.nysed.gov/downloads.php>. Latino (excluding English Language Learners) data from: New York State Education Department, unpublished 2013 cohort data. Analysis conducted by The Education Trust—New York.

However, for ELLs across New York State—nearly 10,000 of whom are in the 2013 cohort—the story is reversed. The statewide ELL high school graduation rate dropped by 0.3 percentage points, and the Regents

and Advanced Regents diploma rate declined by 1.6 percentage points (see Figure 5). Most alarmingly, the dropout rate for ELL students (29.7 percent) is higher than the graduation rate for ELL students (26.6 percent).

Figure 5: The overall statewide graduation rate and the Regents diploma rate declined for English Language Learners

CHANGE FROM 2015-16 TO 2016-17 FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN...



Source: New York State Education Department, "2016-17 Graduation Rate Database," available at: <https://data.nysed.gov/downloads.php>.

In New York City's district-run schools—which enroll 64 percent of all ELL students in the 2013 cohort—the Regents and Advanced Regents diploma rate for ELL students dropped by 1.7 percentage points, while the overall graduation rate for ELL students rose slightly.

The decline for ELL students in urban/suburban high-need school districts—which enroll 14 percent of the 2013 ELL cohort—was even more pronounced, with a 3.5 percentage point decline in the graduation rate and a 3.4 percentage point decline in Regents and Advanced Regents diplomas.

While we recognize that ELL students' lack of English proficiency presents unique obstacles, with the proper supports and instruction they, too, can meet high expectations.

EARLY LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION OF THE REGENTS DIPLOMA "4+1" PATHWAY OPTIONS IS UNEVEN ACROSS SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Any student eligible to graduate in June 2015 or later has been able to earn a Regents, Advanced Regents, or Local diploma by passing Regents exams in English Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies, plus

passing one state-approved assessment in a subject chosen by the student or completing the requirements for a Career Development and Occupational Studies (CDOS) Commencement Credential (which was initially only available to students with disabilities).

Data on the use of these "+1" pathways was released for the first time for the 2013 cohort, providing a valuable window into early implementation of the new graduation pathways. Because this was the first time the data were reported and districts may still be in the process of implementing the new pathways, caution should be attached to any conclusions drawn from this data.

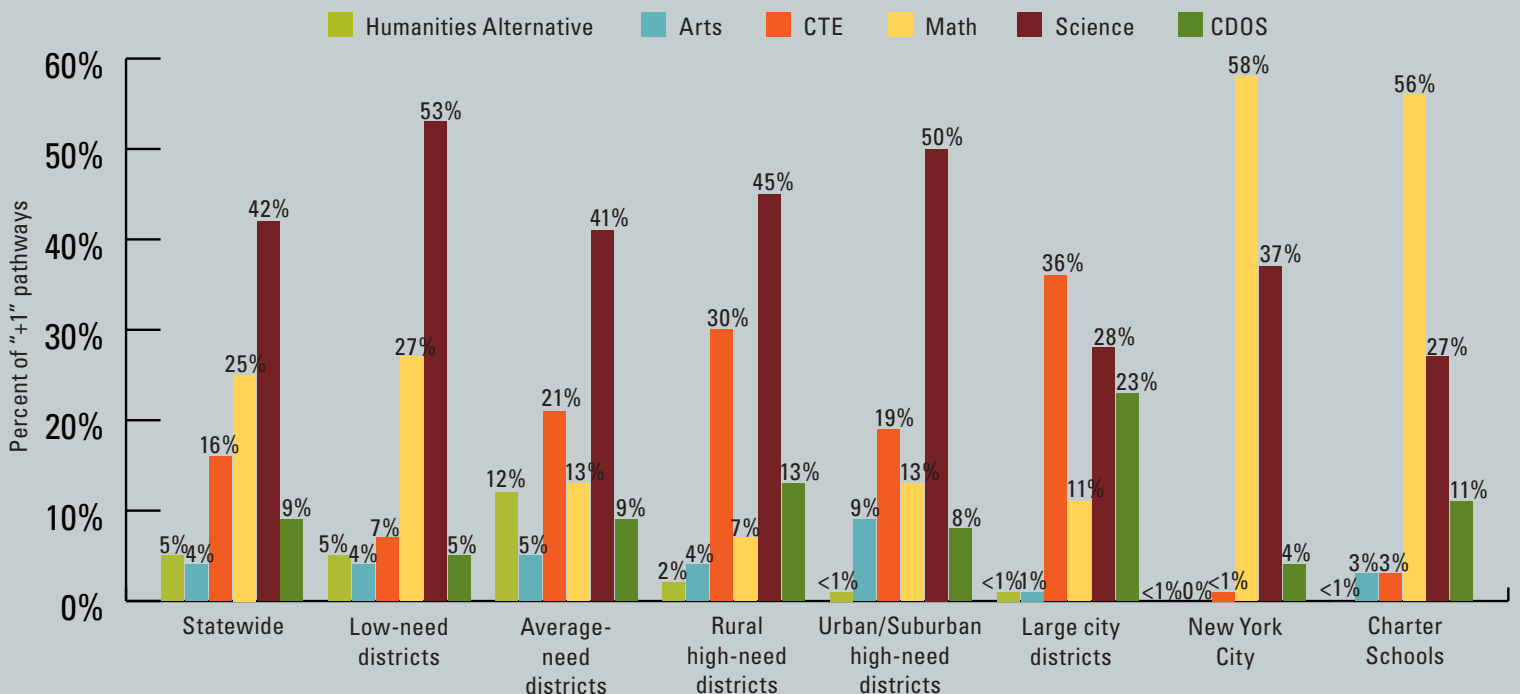
1 School districts appear to be implementing "+1" pathway options with different strategies

In the 2013 cohort, 9,992 students—or 6 percent of all graduates—earned a high school diploma through one of the "+1" pathway options.³

While the science and math pathways were most popular statewide—representing two-thirds of all "+1" diplomas—different types of school districts demonstrated strikingly divergent patterns (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: The use of "+1" pathways varies considerably among different types of school districts

SHARE OF "+1" PATHWAY COMPLETERS BY PATHWAY TYPE...



Source: New York State Education Department, "NY State Graduation Pathways Data," available at: <http://data.nysed.gov>.

For example, the Career and Technical Education (CTE) pathway represented 36 percent of all “+1” diplomas in the Big 4 school districts (Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, and Yonkers), more than double the statewide average of 16 percent. Likewise, Big 4 and rural high-need school districts together represented 34 percent of all CDOS “+1” pathways, while only enrolling 9 percent of graduates in the cohort.⁴

The “+1” pathway options also resulted in different types of diplomas in different school districts. Overall, “+1” pathway completers were more likely than all graduates statewide to receive either a Regents or Local diploma rather than an Advanced Regents diploma. This finding appears to be driven by:

- Fewer than 5 total Advanced Regents diplomas were awarded in New York City district-run schools through a “+1” pathway—while Advanced Regents diploma recipients represent 28 percent of all New York City graduates.
- In low- and average-need school districts, the average proportion of “+1” pathway completers who received a Local diploma was at least double the overall share of Local diplomas in those school districts.⁵

Statewide, approximately one in four “+1” pathway completers received an Advanced Regents diploma, but in low-need districts 58 percent of “+1” pathway completers received an Advanced Regents diploma and in average-need districts the share of “+1” pathway completers receiving an Advanced Regents diploma was 35 percent.⁶ While these higher proportions are consistent with greater use of Advanced Regents diplomas in these school districts in general, the data points reinforce the idea that “+1” pathways can be effectively leveraged for Advanced Regents opportunities—not just Regents and Local diplomas.

These findings represent early warning signs about the need to implement the “+1” pathways in a

manner that expands college- *and* career-ready academic opportunities.

2

Early use of “+1” pathways is highly concentrated in a small number of school districts

Twenty-five percent of all “+1” diplomas statewide and at least half of all “+1” pathways that resulted in Advanced Regents diplomas were awarded in just 22 school districts outside of the Big 5. These school districts together represent just 4 percent of high school graduates.⁷

Sixteen of the 22 high-utilization districts outside of the Big 5 are low- or average-need school districts. These school districts tend to have robust curricular offerings, often including college-prep coursework like Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate classes.

Three of the Big 4 school districts—Buffalo, Rochester, and Yonkers—round out the top 25 “+1” pathway school districts outside of New York City. Together, these districts represent 7 percent of “+1” completers and less than 3 percent of graduates.

Finally, New York City district-run schools awarded 21 percent of all “+1” diplomas statewide. Even within New York City, the use of “+1” pathways is relatively concentrated: just four New York City districts—districts 3 and 2 in Manhattan, district 10 in the Bronx, and district 25 in Queens—represent one-third of all “+1” diplomas awarded in the city, while enrolling fewer than one-quarter of the city’s graduates.

While it should be expected that some school districts will move faster on implementation in the early years of a significant policy change like the “+1” pathways, these patterns should draw attention to the need to ensure the capacity, coursework, and support that will enable more students and schools to take advantage of high-quality pathways (*see sidebar*).

EXAMPLES OF HOW SEVERAL HIGH-UTILIZATION DISTRICTS ARE IMPLEMENTING “+1” PATHWAYS

Briarcliff Manor School District

- In Briarcliff Manor, a low-need school district in Westchester County, at least 57 percent of the 2017 graduating class earned a Regents or Advanced Regents diploma using a “+1” pathway.⁸ Seventy-two percent of “+1” pathway completers pursued a science or math pathway, and 19 percent pursued an arts pathway. With a robust offering of Advanced Placement (AP) courses and college-accredited courses, and a goal of ensuring that all high school graduates complete at least one college-level experience, the district was well-positioned to implement “+1” pathways. Given the large number of AP courses offered, in some instances Briarcliff Manor students may be eligible for a diploma through more than one “+1” pathway. In those cases, students are able to choose which type of “+1” diploma they would like to earn, in consultation with their guidance counselors and parents.

Buffalo Public Schools

- In Buffalo, the most common “+1” pathways are in science and are nearly entirely concentrated in three schools – Leonardo Da Vinci High School, Bennett High School, and City Honors School. Those three schools account for 82 of the 85 “+1” science diplomas. City Honors also accounts for 28 of 37 “+1” diplomas in math. The other highly utilized “+1” pathways are in Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs (75 “+1” diplomas). The district works with schools to identify students who are at risk of not graduating and/or will need to be removed from their 12th grade CTE program of study because they have fallen behind in their Regents coursework and enrolls them in CTE courses that could qualify them for a “+1” diploma. The district also has a large number (62) of CDOS “+1” diplomas, which the district treats as a safety net for students who fall short of requirements to earn a CTE “+1” diploma.

Kenmore-Town of Tonawanda UFSD

- In Kenmore-Town of Tonawanda UFSD, an average-need district in Western New York, the

most common “+1” pathways are in science, accounting for 49 of the 96 “+1” diplomas awarded to students. This is largely due to the district offering several popular STEM programs. Graduates also received “+1” diplomas in Career and Technical Education (23) and the arts (24). The district built on existing STEM and CTE programs to offer new diploma options to students. The most popular program students choose is pre-engineering, followed by virtual enterprise and finance, computer networking, and information technology. Through its Project Lead the Way initiative, the district begins exposing students to its STEM and CTE options in middle school.

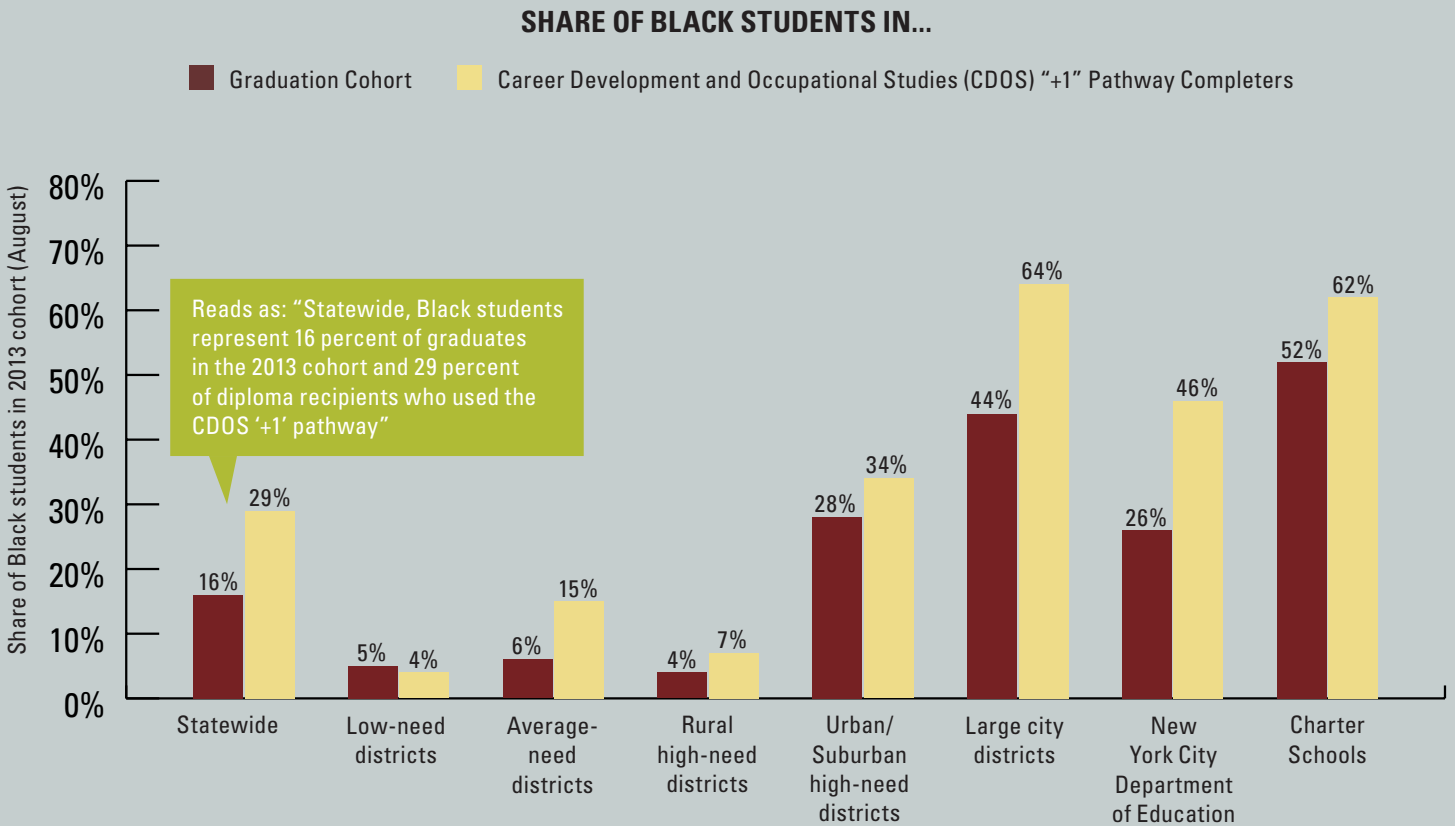
New York City Department of Education

- In New York City, the district has aimed to provide information and training to schools to help them develop “+1” pathways that support the needs of their students. Many schools opted to build on existing programs to offer new diploma options. For example, 58 percent of New York City’s “+1” pathway recipients used the math pathway and an additional 37 percent used the science pathway, which the district attributes to the fact that many schools were already offering math and science courses aligned with the state’s approved “+1” pathway opportunities.

Rochester City School District

- In Rochester, more than half of the “+1” diplomas (99 out of 186) are awarded in CDOS pathways. Another 77 were in science and math pathways. The district attributes those figures to student interest in those areas. Rochester reported that they provide ongoing professional development to make sure that school principals and counselors understand the new options, as well as the needs of each student. District officials also have monthly meetings with principals to monitor student placements in pathways programs.

Figure 7: Across nearly all types of school districts, Black students are over-represented among CDOS “+1” pathway completers



Source: New York State Education Department, “NY State Graduation Pathways Data,” available at: <http://data.nysed.gov>.

3

Students of color, low-income students, English Language Learners, and students with disabilities may be tracked into career-focused pathways rather than college- and career- focused pathways

As the “+1” pathway options take hold, a critical equity question will be whether historically underserved groups of students have the opportunity to pursue the more advanced and rigorous pathways that are more likely to lead to college matriculation and success, as well as career opportunity. The early data suggest cause for concern:

- Statewide, Black students represent 29 percent of CDOS “+1” pathway completers but only 16 percent of graduates in the 2013 cohort (see figure 7). Black students who are *not* students with disabilities were especially disproportionately likely to have pursued a CDOS “+1” pathway. In

fact, nearly 1 percent of all Black students who are not students with disabilities used the CDOS pathway to graduate.

- Latino students represent 75 percent of CTE “+1” pathway completers in New York City, and 43 percent of CTE “+1” pathway completers in the Big 4 school districts—far above their respective share of overall “+1” completers or graduates in either district type.
- Black and Latino students make up 30 percent of CDOS “+1” completers in average-need school districts, but only 16 percent of graduates.
- Students with disabilities also appear to be concentrated in the CDOS and CTE “+1” pathways. Approximately one in four CTE “+1” pathway completers are students with disabilities, and more than one in three CDOS “+1” pathway

completers are students with disabilities. While we recognize that the higher percentage of students with disabilities completing a CDOS “+1” pathway is likely due to the fact that the CDOS Commencement Credential was originally designed for students with disabilities, students with disabilities must also be given access to the same rigorous coursework as their general education peers that would allow them to take advantage of college- and career-prep pathways.

- Low-income students are twice as likely to use a “+1” pathway to earn a Local diploma compared to their non low-income peers. Non low-income students are more than three times more likely to use a “+1” pathway to earn an Advanced Regents diploma than their low-income peers.⁹

SHORT-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

These data can help inform policy-makers during the current budget process and in the coming months. Recommendations include:

1 *Require school districts with troubling trends for any group of students to establish action plans to improve their Regents diploma and overall graduation rates.*

These plans should be crafted with educator, student, and parent engagement, and should be presented to the public. Where possible, the plans should be included in school improvement or other existing plans so that they do not represent a new requirement for school districts or for State Education Department review.

2 *Increase investment in support for English Language Learners in this year's state budget.*

The Regents State Aid Proposal includes an \$85 million set-aside for English Language Learners within Foundation Aid, along with provisions to ensure that these resources are invested consistent with Part 154 of the Commissioner's regulations and guidelines published by the State Education Department.

3 *Expand access to Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses.* More school districts will be able to utilize meaningful “+1” pathways if they offer quality instruction and robust college-prep course offerings. The Executive Budget includes \$4 million for AP and IB fee waivers and, just as importantly, \$500,000 for technical assistance so school districts with no or few advanced courses are able to offer them. The Regents State Budget Priorities include \$3 million in new investment to expand access to quality high-level coursework.

4 *Include college-ready scores on the SAT and ACT as allowable “+1” pathways.* In order to expand the number of students who are able to demonstrate college readiness using multiple measures, the state should allow college-ready scores on the English language arts and math sections of the SAT and ACT to count as “+1” options in those subjects. The qualifying scores should be set in coordination with the higher education sector at a level that ensures students will not need to enroll in remedial college courses—consistent with the “remediation-free” score concept that Ohio has adopted as part of its high school diploma requirements.

5 *Establish an inclusive and deliberative process for adopting other changes in high school graduation requirements and pathways.*

The State Education Department created a robust process to solicit feedback for its new accountability system under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and has wisely signaled plans to do the same on the future of teacher evaluations. Before making additional revisions to high school graduation diploma requirements and pathways, the Regents and State Education Department should similarly establish a stakeholder process that includes civil rights, English Language Learner, students with disabilities, educator, parent, student, postsecondary, business, and other stakeholders. ■

ENDNOTES

¹ James Dao. "Passing of Regents' Exams to be Required for Diploma." (The New York Times; April 24, 1996). Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/04/24/nyregion/passing-of-regents-exams-to-be-required-for-diploma.html>.

² Unless otherwise noted, graduation rates are based on 4-year June graduation data from the New York State Education Department, "2016-17 Graduation Rate Database," available at: <https://data.nysed.gov/downloads.php>.

³ New York State Education Department. Unpublished 2013 cohort data (June graduates). Analysis conducted by The Education Trust–New York. Pathway data for the 2013 cohort does not include the Language Other Than English (LOTE) pathway.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, graduation pathways data for the 2013 cohort include both June and August graduates and are from the New York State Education Department, "NY State Graduation Pathways Data," available at the statewide level at: <https://data.nysed.gov/pathways.php?year=2017&state=yes>.

⁵ New York State Education Department. Unpublished 2013 cohort data (June graduates). Analysis conducted by The Education Trust–New York.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ School districts were initially identified from the unpublished 2013 cohort data (June graduates). However, because this dataset includes significant suppression, pathways and graduation cohort size data for the analysis in this section was drawn from the New York State Education Department, "NY State Graduation Pathways Data," available at <http://data.nysed.gov> and includes both June and August graduates. The Advanced Regents analysis is based on the unpublished dataset.

⁸ New York State Education Department. Unpublished 2013 cohort data (June graduates). Analysis conducted by The Education Trust–New York.

⁹ Except for the final bullet, data is from the New York State Education Department, "NY State Graduation Pathways Data," available at the statewide level at: <https://data.nysed.gov/pathways.php?year=2017&state=yes>. Data in the final bullet is from the New York State Education Department, unpublished 2013 cohort data (June graduates). Analysis conducted by The Education Trust–New York.



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