



RESPONDING TO THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC:

EQUITY-DRIVEN APPROACHES TO ASSESSMENT, GRADE-LEVEL PROMOTION, AND HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION

Indefinite school closures due to the coronavirus pandemic are a stark reminder of the unique and central role that schools play in the lives of children and young adults: a source of stability, a bastion of learning and development, a place where relationships are built and nurtured, even a source of daily food.

We also know that students who are low-income, students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities had less access to high-quality educational experiences before this pandemic and that the need to offer support and services is even more urgent now.

As state and district leaders and educators work tirelessly to meet the needs of students in the immediate term, the focus must remain on the circumstances that impact the most vulnerable students and their families. And we know that if school closures continue for much longer, our education system will face a series of policy choices that will also have significant equity implications for historically underserved groups of students.

In this policy brief, we identify several policy decisions that will require attention if schools remain closed for most or all of the remainder of the school year and offer a framework to guide state and district leaders in advancing equity in coronavirus response.

ASSESSMENT AND MEETING STUDENTS' LEARNING NEEDS



CONTEXT: Ed Trust—NY supported the Regents' and State Education Department's acknowledgement that state assessments in grades 3-8 are not viable for this school year. We expect that a similar decision may ultimately be necessary for traditional Regents exams if school closures continue.



CORE EQUITY PRINCIPLE: Parents and families deserve to know whether their children are meeting college- and career-ready expectations and how they are progressing each year, and educators need this information in order to provide all students with the appropriate instructional supports, remediation, and resources.

EQUITY ACTIONS FOR STATE POLICYMAKERS:



- **Adopt emergency regulations that describe how schools should measure student learning** during this crisis and how this information should be used to allocate district- and school-level resources and tailor supports to help students catch up on missed material.



- **Adopt emergency regulations that specify alternatives to Regents exams** if those exams need to be canceled, as described in greater detail below. It is the state's responsibility to ensure that the academic value of these options does not vary based on school district capacity.



- **Make consistent common rubrics for performance tasks and statewide diagnostic assessments available** for school and district use when schools reopen and create a framework for how school districts should support students based on the assessment results, including through extended learning time and other supports.



- **Create templates for school districts to communicate with parents and families in multiple languages** about how student learning will be assessed and how students will be supported academically and socio-emotionally when traditional instruction resumes, and how that information will be shared with students, families, and educators.

EQUITY ACTIONS FOR DISTRICT LEADERS:



- **Articulate how the learning needs of all students will be determined now and when schools reopen**, with specific attention to the needs of historically underserved groups of students including students who are low-income, students of color, multilingual learners, students with disabilities, and students in temporary housing.



- **Allocate resources—including staff, time, and materials—for extended learning time** during the summer (if possible due to the pandemic) and for the 2020-21 school year based on student need, ensuring that the most vulnerable students are prioritized for instructional and socio-emotional support and opportunities to catch up and advance academically.



- **Support students who are enrolled in Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses** by ensuring they have access to the technology and supports they need to continue to learn the material, prepare for exams, and take the exams.

GRADE-LEVEL PROMOTION



CONTEXT: School districts may not have enough information to determine whether students should progress to the next grade. Yet research shows that holding middle and high school students back can have negative long-term consequences, such as dramatically reducing the likelihood students graduate from high school.



CORE EQUITY PRINCIPLE: On balance, middle and high school students should be promoted to the next grade level in the fall if there is uncertainty about their level of readiness. Instead of retention, schools should be required to provide intensive support to students who are

not yet demonstrating that they meet grade-level standards through traditional, non-traditional, and emerging assessment methods. For students in earlier grades, any retention decisions must be paired with intensive support and extended learning opportunities.

EQUITY ACTIONS FOR STATE POLICYMAKERS:



- **Adopt emergency regulations that establish the presumption that school districts will not retain students**, especially students in middle and high school, who could have been on track for promotion prior to the pandemic and—crucially—requiring the creation of intensive personalized academic and non-academic support plans to enable students who are not yet demonstrating readiness for the next grade to receive the support necessary to succeed through extended learning time during the summer (if possible due to the pandemic) and when schools reopen.



- **Commit to publicly release annual disaggregated “on track to graduation” data** for current students, in order to determine how students impacted by the pandemic fare compared to prior cohorts and to identify additional interventions and supports if needed.



- **Create templates for school districts to communicate with parents and families in multiple languages** about how students will be supported academically and socio-emotionally.

EQUITY ACTIONS FOR DISTRICT LEADERS:



- **Allocate resources—including staff, time, and materials—for extended learning time** during the summer (if possible due to the pandemic) and for the 2020-21 school year based on student need, ensuring that the most vulnerable students are prioritized for instructional and socio-emotional support and opportunities to catch up and advance academically.



- **Communicate each student’s plan**—and the resources that will be provided to meet it—to their families using the home language.



- **Provide intensive training to teachers and other school personnel and revisit curriculum** before the 2020-21 school year in order to address learning gaps resulting from school closures while helping all students meet grade-level academic expectations. This must recognize the trauma that students have experienced and address their socio-emotional needs.

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION AND POSTSECONDARY TRANSITION



CONTEXT: High school seniors will not have the opportunity to complete all required course credits and demonstrate college and career readiness by taking Regents exams if school closures continue for an extended period.



CORE EQUITY PRINCIPLE: All high school graduates should be ready for college, careers, and active citizenship and should be given more flexibility to demonstrate their readiness so that they can graduate on-time.

EQUITY ACTIONS FOR STATE POLICYMAKERS:



- **Enact emergency regulations to provide more flexibility for students in the Class of 2020 to graduate on-time with necessary ongoing support.** This year's high school seniors should be able to earn their diploma by demonstrating readiness through multiple flexible measures that ensure equity and do not solely rely on distance learning. This should incorporate clear direction, criteria, and resources for students to meet credit requirements—and demonstrate readiness if the Regents exams cannot be given—including through written work packets, project-based learning, nationally recognized assessments like the SAT, ACT, and Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate exams, and industry-recognized credentials. To the extent work packets, project-based learning, and portfolios are used, the state must establish clear and consistent criteria for their content and rubrics for their review in order to ensure equity in the expectations that are set for students. The state should also waive some course credit and assessment requirements for students who were on track for graduation before the pandemic as long as these other criteria are met.



- **Commit to publicly release annual disaggregated “to and through” data on the postsecondary pathways of current students,** including college matriculation, persistence, and completion, and wage and employment data, in order to determine how students impacted by the pandemic fare compared to prior cohorts and to identify additional interventions and supports if needed.



- **Hold high schools accountable** for providing specific outreach, resources, and support to students who cannot participate in distance learning, students with disabilities, English learners, and students in temporary housing.



- **Convene K-12 and higher education leaders, educators, civil rights organizations, business leaders, and parent- and student-serving organizations** to ensure that all graduating high school students will be fully supported in the transition to college. This should include a commitment that, to the greatest extent possible and with appropriate resources, incoming college students are placed in co-requisite, credit-bearing courses that provide innovative and supportive alternatives to remediation when necessary, instead of being enrolled in traditional remediation.

EQUITY ACTIONS FOR DISTRICT LEADERS:



- **Provide one-to-one instructional support** for all high school seniors from their core subject teachers in lieu of the 180-day instruction requirement, using written communication, telephone, video chat, and distance learning when available. This should include extended learning time in the summer if schools are able to reopen.



- **Support all students to develop a postsecondary transition plan** that identifies the student's aspirations, postsecondary plans, and the resources the high school and school district will provide the student to assist with the transition in these unique circumstances.



- **Provide personalized virtual support from school counselors** and other school staff, including to complete the FAFSA and other college and career plans.



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