



The Education Trust–New York

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Ed Trust–NY calls for ‘Excelsior Promise’ to support graduating high school seniors during coronavirus pandemic

Students of color and students from low-income backgrounds among groups of students left even more vulnerable as a result of school closings

Alongside recommendations, Ed Trust–NY spotlights growing gap in college financial aid application completion and releases tools to support students

NEW YORK – With school closures interrupting the senior year of roughly 190,000 high school seniors across New York State, The Education Trust–New York is calling on state leaders to make a government-wide [commitment](#) to supporting the Class of 2020 as they transition to college and the workforce in the midst of the pandemic.

“High school seniors have had their last year of high school interrupted by the coronavirus, but we cannot allow the pandemic to derail the aspirations and achievements of this next generation of New Yorkers,” **said Ian Rosenblum, executive director of The Education Trust–New York.** “The pandemic is making the existing inequities in our education system even worse, and graduating seniors – many of whom are from low-income backgrounds or students of color – need the full support of our education system behind them now more than ever.”

School and district leaders, teachers, and other school personnel are working incredibly hard in these challenging times, from addressing critical food access and other basic needs for students to distributing technology so more students can participate in distance learning.

The [Excelsior Promise](#) outlines how New York can leverage federal relief funding and the state’s regulatory power to build on these efforts and fulfill its commitment to the Class of 2020.

The recommendations are focused on:

- **Commitments from the state**, including issuing guidance setting clear expectations for how high schools will support graduating seniors for the remainder of the school year, as well as a commitment to publicly release annual “to and through” data showing how graduates are doing in college and the workforce so that state, school, and college leaders can identify where additional support is needed over time.
- **Commitments from school districts**, including working with all seniors to create a plan for their next steps after high school graduation, supporting all seniors in completing financial aid applications like the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and providing more personalized support to students and families to help them transition successfully.
- **Commitments from higher education**, including investing federal relief and stimulus funds to enroll more students from low-income backgrounds and first-generation college students in summer bridge programs (virtually if necessary), enroll students who need greater academic support in co-requisite, credit-bearing courses instead of traditional remediation, and provide more food support and other wraparound services.

“The *Excelsior Promise* must not only be viewed as a commitment to the Class of 2020. These recommendations can serve as a road map to design an ongoing plan of actions to be masterfully integrated with our work and commitment to all high school students across the state,” **said Dr. Edwin M. Quezada, superintendent of Yonkers Public Schools**. “To provide the knowledge, skills, and tools that every high school graduate and their families need requires a coalition among the state, school districts and higher education. The key is continuity of data-driven strategies, as noted in the *Excelsior Promise*, that address the unique personalized support to students and families. Success can only occur when we educate the whole family.”

“All parents want to see our children on the path to a bright future,” **said Samuel L. Radford III, past president of the District-Parent Coordinating Council of Buffalo and co-chairperson of We the Parents**. “The 2020 high school graduating class has already missed out on many of the opportunities and experiences of previous classes. They also face a significant risk of learning loss because of the prolonged school closures during the COVID19 pandemic. We as a state must provide them with the support they will need to get back on track, and successfully transition to the next phase of their lives. New York’s high school seniors have already paid a high price. It would be irresponsible to put them at a further disadvantage because of this pandemic.”

“This pandemic has placed the disparities in our community at the forefront, and this is a great beginning to addressing the needs of our students,” **said Angelica Perez-Delgado, president and chief executive officer of Ibero-American Action League in Rochester**. “Here in the Rochester City School District we know that our English Language Learners are lagging behind compared to other students. It’s really unfortunate that now our students are facing this pandemic and this state of unknown. We’re fully committed to supporting these commitments and ensuring those students are successful in college.”

“The Education Trust–New York’s *Excelsior Promise* brings to the forefront the critical issue of educational equity amidst coronavirus,” **said Judith Lorimer, director of #DegreesNYC and the Goddard Riverside Community Center**. “While it may seem counter-intuitive in a moment of crisis to elevate a ‘non-immediate’ need, education is the most promising pathway to upward economic mobility. The very

reason that this pandemic is falling so heavily on low-income communities of color is because education equity has not been prioritized in the past. Now, in this moment of vast change, we find a shining opportunity to address a root cause of the disproportionality in death and devastation that our city has been experiencing. The city and state should take these recommendations very seriously.”

“The structure of our learning vanished with the blink of an eye,” **Nana Fofana, a senior at Hostos Lincoln Academy of Science in New York City, wrote in a [blog post](#)**. “Classes became virtual, and in-person classes became unknown to mankind. I’ve faced technical challenges, limitations in feedback, and disconnection – with no engagement or interaction. The biggest obstacle was becoming used to the isolation. At least I can continue my education. I fear that the recent changes will be a roadblock in my preparedness for my freshman year of college, yet I believe it will become a motivation to see things through to the end.”

Along with the framework for supporting graduates transitioning to college, The Education Trust–New York also released a [new resource](#) designed to aid students in completing the FAFSA while schools are closed.

Completing the FAFSA is the path to college financial aid eligibility for many high school students, and students who complete the FAFSA are far more likely than their peers to attend college immediately after graduating from high school. So far this school year, FAFSA completion is down nearly 2.4 percentage points from the same period last year, with roughly 5,000 fewer New York students completing the financial aid form. Even more troubling, FAFSA completion rates are 20% higher in the high schools that serve the *fewest* students from low-income backgrounds compared to the schools that serve the *greatest* share of students from low-income backgrounds.

“Completing the FAFSA is essential to help make college a reality for students from low-income backgrounds,” **said Rosenblum**. “High schools have a more important role than ever in helping guide students and families through this process.”

Ed Trust–NY is releasing a 1-page toolkit in [English](#) and [Spanish](#) to remind high school seniors to complete the FAFSA and other financial aid forms and to share quick steps to get started. Ed Trust–NY has also relaunched its online [FAFSA completion tracker](#) to provide educators, administrators, and the public with up-to-date information on local and statewide FAFSA completion rates and high schools with the highest completion rates.

Read the policy brief and explore additional resources at EdTrustNY.org/Coronavirus.

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About The Education Trust–New York:

The Education Trust–New York works to eliminate the gaps in equity, opportunity and achievement that hold back too many students from reaching their full potential, especially those who are low-income or students of color, in order to enable all students in New York State to achieve at high levels — from early childhood through college. Learn more at EdTrustNY.org.