

THE NEW YORK EQUITY COALITION



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: March 24, 2021

CONTACT: Tiffany Lankes, communications director for The Education Trust–New York

716-225-1961, tlankes@edtrustny.org

New analysis finds high-need districts in regions across the state disproportionately relied on Regents exemptions to graduate students

Civil rights, education, parent, and business groups say exemptions data highlight the need for greater support and resources for high school seniors

NEW YORK – An analysis released today found that across New York State, school districts serving the largest shares of students of color and students from low-income backgrounds were more likely to rely on exemptions from Regents exams to graduate students, highlighting the critical need for state and education leaders to take steps to ensure that high school seniors from the classes of 2020 and 2021 are supported in their postsecondary transition.

Among the Big 4 large urban districts, schools relied on exemptions to graduate 32% of seniors, a rate that is more than 10 times larger than the rate at low-need districts, where schools relied on exemptions to graduate just 3% of seniors.

The analysis raises significant equity concerns about whether students of color and students from low-income households – who are often tracked into less rigorous graduation pathways before the pandemic – are graduating from high school with the skills they need to succeed in college and the workforce.

Those concerns are heightened as the New York State Education Department moves forward with plans to cancel most Regents exams again this year and grant exemptions for graduating seniors, underscoring the critical need for greater support and resources for high school seniors to ensure that they are prepared their desired future.

“We share NYSED’s concerns about state assessments being administered in a way that is safe and equitable, and believe that by providing school districts flexibility such as giving shortened versions of the tests, offering remote administration, and extending the testing window that can be done,” **said Dia Bryant, interim executive director for The Education Trust–New York.** “While NYSED’s approach meets the basic requirements of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act, it misses the mark for students who have worked hard in their coursework to earn a diploma that truly demonstrates they are prepared for their postsecondary ambitions. Last year’s cancellations led to high-need school districts disproportionately relying on exemptions to graduate students, which raises broader concerns around whether or not our education system is providing all students the supports they need to pursue their desired future, whether that be college or the workplace.”

Among the findings:

- **High-need districts disproportionately used Regents exam exemptions to graduate students.**
 - The New York City Department of Education, schools relied on exemptions to graduate 17% of students.
 - In the Big 4 districts, schools relied on exemptions to graduate 32% of students.
 - In Urban/suburban high-need districts, schools relied on exemptions to graduate 20% of students.
 - In Rural high-need districts, schools relied on exemptions to graduate 10% of students.
 - In Average-need districts, schools relied on exemptions to graduate 8% of students.
 - In Low-need districts, schools relied on exemptions to graduate 3% of students.
- **Districts with the largest shares of students from low-income backgrounds and students of color were more likely to use an exemption to graduate students.**
 - NYCDOE was 1.8X more likely to use an 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 backgrounds were 7.6X more likely to use an exemption to graduate a student than districts with the smallest shares of students from low-income backgrounds.
 - Districts serving the largest shares of students of color were 2.4X more likely to use an exemption to graduate a student than districts with the smallest shares of students of color.
- **Exemptions data reveals alarming regional disparities.**
 - The Syracuse City School District was 8.4X more likely to graduate a student using an exemption than districts in the rest of Onondaga County.
 - The Rochester City School District was 8.1X more likely to graduate a student using an exemption than districts in the rest of Monroe County.
 - The Albany City School District was 5.6 times more likely to graduate a student using an exemption than districts in the rest of Albany County.
 - Buffalo Public Schools were 4.3X more likely to graduate a student using an exemption than districts in the rest of Erie County.
 - Urban/suburban high-need districts in Long Island were 3.8X more likely to graduate a student using an exemption than districts in the rest of Long Island.
 - Yonkers Public Schools was 2.9X more likely to graduate a student using an exemption 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 use resources from the American Rescue Plan and other federal relief funding to support young people who are being disproportionately disadvantaged by it.

The New York Equity Coalition calls on state leaders to take the following steps to ensure that all high school seniors are supported in their postsecondary transition:

- Administer all Regents exams, using the full flexibility granted by the United States Department of Education – which included 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.
- Provide resources and investments for students’ academic, social-emotional, and transition support, drawing on the NYSED’s “Supporting the Graduating Class of 2021” memo released earlier this year on how 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.
- Use data to increase transparency and ensure student success, committing to publicly release disaggregated Regents exemption data for the years that Regents exemptions have been made available at the school and district level broken down by student group.
- Expand access to evidence-based programs for student success. Both the Assembly and Senate one-house budgets restore funding for CUNY’s ASAP program and increase funding for similar programs at SUNY, as well as statewide Educational Opportunity Programs. It is critical for the state to invest 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 students, including enrolling 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, including committing to the greatest extent possible that incoming first-year students will be placed in co-requisite, credit-bearing courses that provide innovative and supportive alternatives to remediations when necessary, instead of being enrolled in traditional remediation.
- Provide wraparound services to support students, including 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.

“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. “Last year’s high school graduating class missed out on many of the experiences of previous classes, including the opportunity to demonstrate mastery of the skills they worked hard to develop in their courses by taking Regents exams. We as a state must do whatever it takes to ensure that both last year’s

graduating class and this year's seniors have the support they need to transition to the next phase of their lives."

"New York's leaders must act now to ensure that students graduating from high school during the pandemic are leaving with a diploma that demonstrates they are prepared for the next phase of their lives," **said Arva Rice, president and CEO of New York Urban League.** "We cannot risk having another class of high school seniors graduating without the skills they need to be successful in college, the workforce and life. The future of our communities and our state depend on it."

###

About The New York Equity Coalition

The New York Equity Coalition includes Better Schools Better Neighborhoods, Brooklyn YWCA, the 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, The Education Trust–New York, Educators for Excellence, EPIC-Every Person Influences Children, Hispanic Federation, ImmSchools, INCLUDEnyc, National Center for Learning Disabilities, New York Urban League, Open Buffalo, Otsego County Chamber of Commerce, Public Policy Institute of New York State, Read Alliance, Turnaround for Children, UnidosUS, United Way of New York City, the Urban League of Long Island, the Urban League of Rochester, and the Urban League of Westchester County.