



Rethinking Pathways to High School Graduation in New York State

Forging New Ways for Students to Show Their Achievement of Standards

**A Report Issued by the Coalition
for Multiple Pathways to a Diploma**

Prepared by Advocates for Children
of New York

DECEMBER 2013

This report is available in its entirety at:

[www.advocatesforchildren.org/sites/default/files/library/
rethinking_pathways_to_graduation.pdf](http://www.advocatesforchildren.org/sites/default/files/library/rethinking_pathways_to_graduation.pdf).

Executive Summary

TD was a 22-year-old living in New York City. While many students his age were contemplating college graduation and entering the workforce, TD was studying for his Regents exams. TD attended a comprehensive high school in New York City, finishing 12th grade on time with excellent attendance and passing grades in all of his classes. Interested in auto mechanics from his experiences in high school courses, TD planned on attending a technical college to study automotive sciences. However, preventing TD from graduating high school and pursuing additional education or workforce training were the five Regents exams required by the state of New York. During his high school career, TD attempted Regents exams a total of 37 times, having consistently struggled with three of the five required tests. He regularly attended New York City Department of Education Regents preparation classes, but upon turning 21, he was told he was too old to return to school. Lacking both school access and a high school diploma, TD continued to study independently for his three remaining exams.



In New York State, more than 25% of high school students fail to graduate from high school within four years. Risk factors such as English language learner status, disability, and economic disadvantage drive this figure even higher. Regardless of circumstance, students must attempt and pass five exams to graduate from a New York public high school: English, Math, Science, Global Studies, and United States History. Each of these standardized exams is required for graduation, leading to their label of “high-stakes.” While public consensus supports high standards for graduation, the assessment structure adopted by New York is more onerous than most other states. Of the 25 states that currently require exams for graduation, only one requires more than New York State’s five exams.

The Coalition for Multiple Pathways to a Diploma¹ strongly supports high standards of student achievement, ensuring that students are prepared to thrive upon graduation and entry into higher education or the workforce. However, we believe that the State’s focus on high-stakes

¹ The Coalition for Multiple Pathways to a Diploma (the Coalition) is a statewide coalition of educational and advocacy organizations and families who have come together to urge the creation in New York State of multiple pathways to a diploma, each of which holds all students to high expectations, provides them with quality instruction, and opens doors to career and post-secondary education opportunities. The members of the Coalition believe that measuring college and career readiness requires valuing several different and equally valid ways to evaluate students’ knowledge needed for success in the workplace and higher education. A list of Coalition members is provided in Appendix I. For more information about the Coalition, see: http://advocatesforchildren.org/policy_and_initiatives/pathways_to_a_diploma.

standardized exit exams creates unnecessary barriers to graduation for some students. As demonstrated nationwide, states requiring exit exams have lower 4-year graduation rates than those that do not.² For at-risk students, this gap is even higher. Research indicates that the negative effects of exit exams are actually underestimated, as students preemptively drop out of school before being exposed to all exams, perhaps acting as a tipping point against at-risk students. Each year, approximately 48,000 students in New York State are at risk of dropping out, representing a significant cost to individuals and the State.³ This number is only likely to increase as the State rolls out more rigorous Common Core standards. It is therefore time for the State to develop a plan that ensures students are not prevented from graduating because they cannot adequately convey their knowledge or abilities on high-stakes standardized assessments.

In this report, we examine some of the obstacles that high-stakes standardized exit exams pose for students and address the need for more flexible exit exam requirements and assessment-based pathways to a diploma that do not rely on high-stakes standardized testing. We highlight some of the assessment-based pathways to graduation available in other states, many of which utilize fewer exams, as well as alternate routes to fulfilling exit exam requirements, such as performance-based assessments, waivers, and substitute exams. Performance-based assessments take on many forms, ranging from the New Jersey model of short-answer, open-ended exams to a portfolio model as used by the state of Washington. Waivers, too, are various. Some waivers, as in Indiana, simply require students to show adequate classroom performance, while others, such as in Ohio, mandate students to meet additional requirements such as exceptional attendance or attending remedial classes. Substitute exams also offer flexibility to students nationwide. Some states offer students the opportunity to take the SAT or Advanced Placement (AP) exams in lieu of exit exams, while others offer third-party or locally developed assessments. Multiple pathways to graduation such as those addressed in this report encourage a high standard of student learning leading to a regular high school diploma, while allowing achievement of that standard to be demonstrated in a variety of ways.⁴

Based on our review of the obstacles facing students in New York State as well as our research on the benefits of alternative pathways offered by other states, we outline several recommendations for the State to improve access to a high school diploma without sacrificing high standards that ensure college or career readiness. These recommendations are intended to be viewed together, rather than as alternative options for reform. Specifically, our recommendations are as follows:⁵

² See Figure 3 in Section III of this report.

³ See Figure 6 and Table 2 in Section IV of this report.

⁴ As discussed in further detail in Section V of the report, the term “multiple pathways” has taken on a variety of meanings within the context of high school graduation. In this report, we address multiple pathways in terms of the different ways of allowing students to show that they meet standards without relying on traditional exit exams.

⁵ Further details pertaining to each recommendation are offered in Section VI of the report.

Recommendation A

Reduce the Number of Exit Exams Required to Graduate with a High School Diploma from 5 to 3.

The English Regents, one Math Regents, and one Science Regents would still be required for graduation. This recommendation is in line with states such as New Jersey, Maryland, Florida, and Indiana. Maintaining exam requirements in these subjects would give New York State the flexibility to use these assessments to comply with federal testing requirements.

All other Regents exams would remain optional and available for students who choose to take them in order to graduate with a Regents Diploma with Honors or Advanced Regents Diploma. The number, types, and sequence of credits required to graduate would not be affected. Students still would have to fulfill the same course requirements to receive a high school diploma.

Recommendation B

Develop a Pathway to Graduation That Allows All Students to Demonstrate Their Knowledge and Skills through State-Developed and/or Approved Performance-Based Assessments.

In lieu of each Regents exam requirement, New York State should offer performance-based options, developed by the State in conjunction with schools and local school districts, which allow students to show their attainment of standards by completing a series of tasks/projects in contexts that are familiar and relevant to their high school experiences.

Recommendation C

Build More Flexibility and Support into the Current System to Make it More Accessible to Students.

While more flexibility will not on its own be sufficient to address low graduation rates, the State's current set of graduation requirements should be made accessible to more students. Specifically, we ask that the State:

- ▶ Expand the Regents exam appeal process.
- ▶ Provide alternative options for assessing students in Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs.

- ▶ Provide an array of programmatic options and supports, using evidence-based interventions, for students who have difficulties moving through a given pathway.
- ▶ Ensure that the appropriate accommodations and supports are provided to students with disabilities and English language learners (ELLs).

Recommendation D

Ensure Transparency in Communications and Monitoring of all Aspects of the Multiple Pathways System.

Communication is vital for ensuring student access to the various pathways recommended. Monitoring student outcomes with respect to each pathway is also crucial to guarantee that they are being implemented correctly and as intended. In order to ensure transparency:

- ▶ New York State must provide and communicate to students, families, and school professionals clear, concise, and easy-to-follow information on all of the alternative pathways that are available to students to receive a high school diploma.
- ▶ New York State must collect and disclose detailed outcomes data, including usage data on the specific diplomas and the pathways that students have taken to earn a high school diploma, as well as data that allow for comparison of outcomes across multiple student groups.

The recommendations herein do not seek to dilute standards or remove rigor from the high school experience. Introducing additional flexibility to the high school assessment structure simply recognizes that some students may better demonstrate their knowledge outside of a standardized exam setting. For these students, non-standardized assessment approaches may allow them to showcase skills previously unable to be measured in standardized form. New York State's heavy reliance on standardized exams does not affirm the wide variety of student needs and modes in which a student's true potential can be uncovered. We ask the State to allow all students to exhibit their knowledge in a manner that levels the playing field for students of all learning modes and enhances their opportunities for success.

It is important to note that the Coalition for Multiple Pathways to a Diploma also supports expanding instructional pathways to a diploma, such as CTE programs, provided that they are made accessible to diverse student populations, including ELLs and students with disabilities. In addition, the Coalition for Multiple Pathways to a Diploma believes the State must ensure continued access to the high school equivalency diploma for all students, a critical

pathway for older students who for whatever reason leave school without a diploma. However, for purposes of this paper, we have chosen to focus on the critical need for providing high school students with opportunities to demonstrate their attainment of college or career readiness standards without relying on high-stakes standardized exit exams.

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