

# It's Time to #RethinkRegents Exams.

## Exit exams do not result in greater student learning.

In the 1990s, New York—along with many other states—began increasing high school graduation requirements, based on a theory that exit exams would increase access to rigorous coursework, improve teaching and learning, and ensure young people left high school prepared for college and careers. Unfortunately, this theory has not borne out in practice: **exit exams do not provide any clear benefits for students who pass them.**<sup>1</sup>

- **There is no evidence to support the idea that high school exit exams increase achievement** in reading or math, either on average or for lower-performing students—whom such policies typically aim to help.<sup>2</sup> Nor have researchers found that exit exams raise the value of a diploma in the labor market or improve employment outcomes and earnings for young adults who do not go on to post-secondary education.<sup>3</sup>
- There is evidence, however, that **exit exams increase high school dropout rates, particularly for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds.** For example, an analysis of graduation data from 11,000 public school districts over a 10-year period found that dropout rates for 12th graders were 23% higher in states that required students to pass exit exams without offering alternate pathways to a diploma.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, an evaluation of the impact of an exit exam requirement in California estimated that the test prevented between 3.6 and 4.5% of high schoolers—about 18,000–22,500 students per year—from graduating, while doing nothing to raise overall academic achievement.<sup>5</sup>
- **Rather than increasing access to rigorous coursework, research suggests that high-stakes exams can push students on the margin away from such classes.** A comparison of 9th graders who scored just above or just below the pass/fail cutoff score on North Carolina's algebra exit exam—students who likely had very similar math abilities—found that students who barely failed the exam were less likely to take college-preparatory math classes as 10th graders than students who barely passed. This sorting effect was *not* present during prior school years, when students took the exam but were not required to earn a particular score to graduate.<sup>6</sup>

## Standardized tests are an unreliable gauge of graduation-readiness.

- Exit exam policies assume that the tests in question are an accurate measure of student learning, yet there is evidence that **factors outside of any student's control—like the weather on the day of the exam—can significantly affect their performance.** An analysis of the June Regents exam scores of nearly one million New York City students between 1999 and 2011 found that, for the average student, having to take a Regents exam on a day when it is 90°F outside reduces the chances of passing that subject by roughly 10%, relative to taking the exam on a 75°F day.<sup>7</sup>
- **GPA is more strongly correlated with success in college than is performance on the SAT or ACT.** Supporters of exit exams argue that tests are neutral indicators of college-readiness, while

report card grades can be subjective and vary in meaning from school to school. The research base, however, supports the opposite conclusion. For example, for a national sample of 47,000 students who started college in 2009–10, high school grades were a better predictor of on-time graduation than were standardized test scores.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, a study of students who graduated from the Chicago Public Schools between 2006 and 2009 and immediately enrolled in a 4-year college found that the strong association between high school GPA and college completion was consistent across high schools, whereas the predictive power of ACT scores was weak and varied by school.<sup>9</sup>

## Decoupling exams from diploma requirements does not mean lowering standards or abandoning assessment.

- The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires states to test high schoolers in English language arts, math, and science for accountability purposes; **it does not require tying these exams to graduation**. Some states that use exams similar to the Regents to meet ESSA's mandates factor a student's score into their overall grade in the class, much like any other final exam, rather than making the test a stand-alone graduation requirement.
- **New York State already has experience with alternative and rigorous methods of assessing student learning**. At a small number of high schools—those in the New York Performance Standards Consortium—students complete performance-based assessments and only have to pass one Regents exam, in English language arts, in order to earn a diploma. Black, Hispanic, and Native American students who graduated from Consortium schools in New York City and enrolled in full-time, 4-year CUNY programs between 2015 and 2017 had first-semester GPAs comparable to those of their peers who attended non-Consortium public schools requiring five Regents exams and were similarly likely to remain enrolled in college beyond freshman year.<sup>10</sup>

## New York is out of step with the rest of the nation.

At the height of the test-based accountability era, more than half the states required students to pass exit exams to earn a diploma. Today, **New York is one of only eight states** to do so.<sup>11</sup> The 8 exit-exam states lack a consistent profile, providing further evidence that **tests do not improve the quality of education or leave students better-prepared for life after high school**. The list includes high-achieving states such as Massachusetts—whose 8th graders have some of the highest scores in the country on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)—as well as states like Louisiana that are consistently towards the bottom of national rankings with respect to NAEP performance and college persistence.<sup>12,13</sup>

### New York State should decouple Regents exams from high school graduation requirements.

Requiring all students to pass five exams as a condition of earning a diploma is a policy that is not grounded in research and that has not benefited New York's students; as a report commissioned by the State Education Department noted in 2022, exit exams are "not positively associated with any college or career outcomes."<sup>14</sup> And while Regents exams have existed *in some form* since the 19th century, the number, content, and role of these tests has continually evolved and changed. Many of the earliest Regents exams—such as those that tested students in bookkeeping, philosophy, and Greek—have long since been eliminated in light of changing curricula and changing beliefs about the purpose of a high school education. New York should once again rethink Regents exams and revise its graduation framework to meet the needs of the current era.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a more comprehensive review of the association between high school graduation measures and indicators of college, career, and civic readiness, see Region 2 Comprehensive Center at WestEd, *Graduation Measures and Requirements: A review conducted for the New York State Board of Regents and the New York State Education Department* (November 2022), [www.nysed.gov/sites/default/files/programs/grad-measures/graduation-requirements-and-measures-review.pdf](http://www.nysed.gov/sites/default/files/programs/grad-measures/graduation-requirements-and-measures-review.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> As measured by performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in grades 8 and 12. Eric Grodsky, John Robert Warren, and Demetra Kalogrides, "State high school exit examinations and NAEP long-term trends in reading and mathematics, 1971-2004," *Educational Policy* 23, no. 4 (July 2009): 589–614, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904808320678>.

<sup>3</sup> John Robert Warren, Eric Grodsky, and Jennifer C. Lee, "State high school exit examinations and postsecondary labor market outcomes," *Sociology of Education* 81, no. 1 (January 2008): 77–107, <https://doi.org/10.1177/003804070808100104>.

<sup>4</sup> Steven W. Hemelt and Dave E. Marcotte, "High school exit exams and dropout in an era of increased accountability," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 32, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 323–349, <https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.21688>. See also Dongshu Ou, "To leave or not to leave? A regression discontinuity analysis of the impact of failing the high school exit exam," *Economics of Education Review* 29, no. 2 (April 2010): 171–186, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2009.06.002> (finding that students in New Jersey who barely failed an exit exam were more likely to drop out of high school than their peers who barely passed).

<sup>5</sup> California has since abolished its exit exams and retroactively awarded diplomas to students who met all other graduation requirements during the years the policy was in effect. Sean F. Reardon and Michal Kurlaender, *Effects of the California High School Exit Exam on Student Persistence, Achievement, and Graduation*, Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), Policy Brief 09-3 (August 2009), [www.edpolicyinca.org/sites/default/files/PB.09-3.pdf](http://www.edpolicyinca.org/sites/default/files/PB.09-3.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Tom Ahn, "A regression discontinuity analysis of graduation standards and their impact on students' academic trajectories," *Economics of Education Review* 38 (February 2014): 64–75, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2013.11.005>.

<sup>7</sup> This study estimates that during the 1998–99 through 2010–11 school years, at least 90,000 New York City students who would have otherwise passed a Regents exam received a failing score because of hot temperature on the day of the test. R. Jisung Park, "Hot Temperature and High-Stakes Performance," *Journal of Human Resources* 57, no. 2 (March 2022): 400–434, <https://doi.org/10.3368/jhr.57.2.0618-9535R3>.

<sup>8</sup> After controlling for factors like parental education that are correlated with both performance on standardized tests and likelihood of college completion. Brian M. Galla et al., "Why high school grades are better predictors of on-time college graduation than are admissions test scores: The roles of self-regulation and cognitive ability," *American Educational Research Journal* 56, no. 6 (December 2019): 2077–2115, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831219843292>.

<sup>9</sup> Elaine M. Allensworth and Kallie Clark, "High School GPAs and ACT Scores as Predictors of College Completion: Examining Assumptions About Consistency Across High Schools," *Educational Researcher* 49, no. 3 (April 2020), <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X20902110>.

<sup>10</sup> Michelle Fine and Karyna Pryiomka, *Assessing College Readiness Through Authentic Student Work: How the City University of New York and the New York Performance Standards Consortium are Collaborating Toward Equity* (Learning Policy Institute, July 2020), <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/assessing-college-readiness-authentic-student-work-report>.

<sup>11</sup> FairTest, "Number of States Requiring Tests for High School Graduation Plunges to EIGHT – Lowest Count Since Mid-1990s" (January 5, 2023), <https://fairtest.org/8093-2/>.

<sup>12</sup> Louisiana's 8th grade NAEP scores ranked among the bottom 15 states in both reading and math in 2022, while Massachusetts had the highest average math score and second-highest reading score of any state. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 2022 Reading and Math Assessments, State Profiles, [www.nationsreportcard.gov/profiles/stateprofile/](http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/profiles/stateprofile/).

<sup>13</sup> 57% of Louisiana students who enrolled in a 2- or 4-year college in 2016 earned a degree within six years, compared to 62% of students nationally and 74% in Massachusetts. National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, *Completing College: National and State Reports* (November 2022), <https://nscresearchcenter.org/completing-college/>.

<sup>14</sup> Region 2 Comprehensive Center at WestEd, *supra* note 1, p. 26.