



Advocates for Children of New York
Protecting every child's right to learn

Testimony to be delivered to the Assembly Committee on Education

Re: Graduation Pathways and Career and Technical Education

By: Christian Villenas, Advocates for Children of New York

Wednesday, July 16, 2014

10:30 A.M.

Utica, New York

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Good morning. My name is Christian Villenas, and I am a policy analyst at Advocates for Children of New York. For over four decades, Advocates for Children has worked to promote educational access in New York for students who have traditionally been marginalized by the education system, including students that are economically disadvantaged, English Language Learners, students with disabilities, and students of color. As part of our work, Advocates for Children coordinates the Coalition for Multiple Pathways to a Diploma, a statewide coalition of more than 65 education and advocacy organizations and families who have united to push for the creation of multiple pathways to a high school diploma in New York State (NYS), each of which should hold all students to similarly high expectations, offer them quality instruction, and open doors to career and post-secondary education opportunities.



Earlier this year, the Coalition released a report entitled *Rethinking Pathways to Graduation in New York State*¹. This report detailed the current graduation crisis in New York State where one in four students fails to graduate high school within four years². The odds are even worse for students that are English Language Learners, are economically disadvantaged, are of color, or who have disabilities. Students who fail to graduate from high school face a very bleak future. Individuals without a high school diploma and limited work experience are among those who have the most difficult time finding work. In NYS, these individuals face unemployment rates that are 50% higher than the overall state unemployment rate³. Students who do not receive a diploma are also more likely to experience significantly reduced earnings. Individuals in NYS age 25 and over who have not earned a high school diploma earn approximately \$400 less per week for full-time work than the median earnings per week for a full-time worker⁴. The costs of failing to graduate from high school are not limited to dropouts themselves, but there are community costs as well. These social costs include greater spending on public assistance and health care, in addition to crime and reduced tax revenues. In NYS, the societal costs of a class of high school

¹ Advocates for Children of New York, *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 (2013), Available at: http://www.advocatesforchildren.org/sites/default/files/library/rethinking_pathways_to_graduation.pdf?pt=1

² New York State Education Department, Graduation Rates (2012)

³ Current Population Survey (2011)

⁴ Current Population Survey (2011)



dropouts are considerable. Each class of dropouts costs the state at least \$1.3B⁵. We must end this crisis before we marginalize more students and further erode our communities.

So, how do we address the issue? We must create both instructional and assessment pathways that take into account the postsecondary aspirations and learning styles of all students. We believe Career and Technical Education (CTE) can play a major role in this endeavor, especially as part of a broader system of multiple pathways to graduation. Research has consistently shown that the more students participate in CTE programs, the higher their academic motivation, academic engagement, achievement, career self-efficacy, college aspirations and employability skills⁶. Thus, CTE is a key way to ensure that students graduate better prepared for college and career, and that NYS has a sufficient and productive workforce.

Unfortunately, many students have been limited in gaining access to CTE programs, particularly students with disabilities and English Language Learners. It is our hope that A.8189A/S.5966A begins to open doors to quality CTE programs for all students. To be successful, however, this legislation must lay out more details in terms of how these programs will be structured, what assessment and diploma options will be

⁵ Belfield (2007); Muennig (2005); Unpublished Advocates for Children Analysis (2013)

⁶ Lekes et al., (2007) *Career and Technical Education Pathway Programs, Academic Performance, and the Transition to College and Career*



available, and how NYS will ensure access to these programs for our most academically vulnerable students. As you flesh out these details, we ask that you consider the following:

1. *Ensure that any exit exam requirements mandated by the CTE pathway be in lieu of (instead of in addition to) current Regents testing requirements.* Many students fail to graduate high school in NYS each year because of the number of high-stakes standardized tests that are required for graduation. New York already requires that students pass more tests than all but one state. Adding more standardized testing requirements for students will ensure continued low rates of graduation for the state without necessarily producing citizens who are better prepared for the workforce.
2. *Allow alternate means for students to show proficiency of standards.* Many students struggle to demonstrate their proficiency on standardized tests, often times despite good performance in the classroom. Any CTE pathway should provide students with the option to demonstrate their attainment of high school standards and industry-based standards in ways other than written, standardized assessments, specifically, performance-based options, developed by the State in conjunction with schools, local school districts, and where appropriate, experts from business and industry. These assessments will allow students to show their attainment of standards



by completing a series of tasks/projects in contexts that are familiar and relevant to the CTE trade.

3. *Ensure access to CTE programs for students with disabilities and English Language Learners (ELLs).* Currently, four-year graduation rates for students with disabilities and ELLs are below 50 percent, and over thirty percentage points lower than the rate for the entire state⁷. Yet, quality CTE programs that lead to a credential that is attractive to employers and indicates college readiness can provide significant benefits to students with disabilities and ELLs. For example, research shows that students with disabilities in secondary CTE programs are less likely to drop out and more likely to be employed, to have paid competitive jobs, and to work full time after high school⁸. Given the potential benefit CTE programs offer to students with disabilities and ELLs, it is important that a CTE diploma pathway be made accessible to these student populations. While we commend A.8189A/S.5966A for recognizing that students with disabilities and ELLs should also have access to quality CTE programs, concrete measures must be taken to ensure access. We recommend the legislature consider the following based on our own research and work with these populations⁹:

⁷ New York State Education Department, Graduation Rates (2013)

⁸ Cobb et al. (1999); Colley and Jamison (1998)

⁹ Coalition for Multiple Pathways to a Diploma, Recommendations for Creating CTE Programs that Benefit Students with Disabilities and English Language Learners (2013), Available at:



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- Make sure that admission practices do not prevent or deter students with disabilities and ELLs from accessing quality CTE programs.
 - Develop programs that take into account the workforce needs and strengths of people with disabilities and ELLs.
 - Mandate and increase opportunities for special education instructors and ELL staff to collaborate with CTE instructors on issues related to students with disabilities and ELLs.
 - Ensure that all CTE spaces and activities are ADA, IDEA, and Section 504 compliant, as well as safe.
 - Ensure that CTE programs provide the opportunity for students with disabilities to master the general education curriculum to the maximum extent appropriate.
 - Makes sure schools provide ELLs and their families with interpretation and translation services, as needed, with respect to the CTE curriculum and safety protocols.
 - Develop CTE programs that incorporate the learning of English language skills into the CTE curriculum.



- Develop bilingual CTE programs in areas of linguistic concentration to broaden access.

Each of these considerations noted above would place New York State at the forefront of Career and Technical Education and increase graduation rates and postsecondary opportunities for all students.

Thank you for your attention on this very crucial issue.