

Coalition for Multiple Pathways to a Diploma

Coordinator: Ashley Grant • agrant@advocatesforchildren.org • 212-822-9548

Testimony to be delivered to the New York City Council Committee on Education

RE: Breaking Testing Culture: Evaluating multiple pathways to determine student mastery

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My name is Ashley Grant. I am an attorney at Advocates for Children of New York. I also coordinate the statewide Coalition for Multiple Pathways to a Diploma. On behalf of the Coalition, thank you for the opportunity to speak about high-stakes tests and the need for more ways to determine that students have mastered high school graduation standards.

Our coalition of more than 70 members includes advocates, educators, parents and youth, representing a broad cross-section of students, including students with disabilities, multilingual learners, and economically disadvantaged young people. For more than 12 years, we have come together to urge New York State to create multiple instructional and assessment pathways to a high school diploma, each of which holds all students to high expectations, provides them with quality instruction, and opens doors to career and post-secondary opportunities. We are also united by the concern that access to existing graduation pathways, such as Career and Technical Education (CTE) and work-based learning—opportunities which have been shown to improve student engagement, reduce dropout rates, and improve college completion rates—have been limited for many students. I am attaching a copy of the coalition’s policy agenda.

New York Students Need Pathways to a Diploma that Do Not Rely on High-Stakes Exams

To earn a diploma in our State, students must generally pass five Regents exams or must substitute other high-stakes tests in the same subject area. Research shows that high-stakes tests are poor indicators of post-secondary readiness and that locally-determined measures like GPA better predict how students will do in college. High-stakes tests create disproportionate barriers for students with disabilities, multilingual learners, and students of color. For these reasons, most states have rolled back or eliminated these graduation requirements. Today, New York is one of only 11 states that maintain exit exams. What is more, New York’s requirement that students pass *five* exams is among the most burdensome in the country. It is time for New York to catch up with the rest of the country and to find ways for students to demonstrate that they are ready for college and career without forcing them to pass high-stakes exams.

The State’s current graduation requirements create a barrier to post-secondary opportunity for students who are otherwise ready to graduate and move on to the next phase of their lives. Take for example, an English Language Learner in foster care whom Advocates for Children assisted and I will call Myra. Myra is very bright, and earned more than 50 credits, far exceeding the coursework required for a Regents diploma. Myra did well in her classes and maintained a B average, but struggled to pass the Regents exam in English Language Arts. After completing all of her other graduation requirements at age 19, rather than going on to college, Myra had to spend two years studying for and re-taking the English Language Arts (ELA) exam. Eventually, after taking the exam *7 times*, she finally passed it at the

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age of 21. Eventually, Myra went on to attend college, where she did well. But, if she had been able to show her mastery of ELA standards another way – through a performance-based assessment, her coursework, or a capstone project – Myra could have spent those two years working toward her college degree rather than retaking a single test.

Research shows that high-stakes tests present a disproportionate barrier to students with disabilities, ELLs and students of color. Although exit exams are not solely responsible for disparate outcomes among these student groups, these requirements certainly affect NYC's graduation rates. For example, the City's most recent four-year graduation rate was 85.4% for Asian students, 82.3% for white students, 68.5% for Black students, and 66.2% for Latinx students; only 50% of students with disabilities and 29% of ELLs graduated in four years. A small handful of schools in NYC have waivers that allow students to substitute performance-based assessments for Regents exams. In these schools, graduation rates among students with disabilities and ELLs all exceed the citywide average, as do graduation rates of these schools' Black and Latinx students.

Our Coalition is very pleased that the New York City Council, the New York State Board of Regents, and the New York State Education Department are all considering other ways in which students like Myra could show that they are ready to graduate. We strongly urge New York to create pathways to graduation that do not rely on high-stakes tests.

New York City Must Ensure Access to All Students to Existing Pathways to A Diploma

In the meantime, we urge New York City to make changes to ensure that all students have access to *existing* pathways that do not rely solely on high-stakes tests. For example, state law allows *all students* to earn a Regents diploma by replacing one of the five required Regents exams with a credential known as the Career Development and Occupational Skills (CDOS). *Students with disabilities* who earn a CDOS may also request superintendent approval for a diploma if they have passed all of their classes and demonstrated through course grades, projects, assignments or in-class exams that they have mastered state standards in subjects in which they have not been able to pass a required Regents exam.

To earn a CDOS, all students must complete 216 hours of Career and Technical Education courses, work-based learning, and other career-development activities. However, all too frequently, members of our coalition hear from parents and families that the work-based learning experiences required for a CDOS are not available at their DOE high school. Research shows that students who participate in work-based learning experiences are more likely to attend and finish college. We urge the DOE to make changes to ensure that these school-connected, work-based learning opportunities are available to all NYC students who want them.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today, and thank you for bringing attention to the critical need for pathways to a diploma that do not rely on high-stakes tests. I would be happy to answer any questions.

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Advocates for Children of New York • Alliance for Quality Education • ARISE Coalition • Asperger Syndrome & High Functioning Autism Association • David C. Bloomfield, Esq., Professor of Educational Leadership, Law & Policy, Brooklyn College and The CUNY Graduate Center • Bronx Independent Living Services • Brooklyn Defender Services • Brooklyn Center for the Disabled • Business Teachers Association of New York State • Campaign for Tomorrow's Workforce • Capital Region Refugee Roundtable • Center for Independence of the Disabled, New York • Citizens' Committee for Children of New York • Lisa Finnerty Coggi, Parent/Advocate • Community Service Society • Council for a Strong America • Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies • Valerie DeClara, Parent • Della DeKay JD, EdD • Max Donatelli, Family Advocate • Eskolta School Research and Design • Irja Estrella, Parent • Families Together in New York State • Ann Marie Fitzpatrick, Parent • Flanbwayan Haitian Literacy Project • Jennifer Ghidui, Parent/Advocate • Michael Godino, Advocate • Good Shepherd Services • Roberta Grogan, Parent/Advocate • Lorri Gumanow, Parent/Special Educator • Meghan Healy • Shelley Hubal, Parent • INCLUDEnyc • Muronji Inman-McCraw • Internationals Network for Public Schools • Lawyers for Children, Inc. • Learning Disabilities Association of New York State • Jill Lewis-Flood, Parent/PIP Member • Long Island Advocacy Center • Chris McNell, Special Education Supervisor/Principal • Diana Medina Mendez, Parent • Mark Anthony Mendez • Mental Health Association of New York City • Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools • Namita Modasra New York Council of Administrators of Special Education • New York Immigration Coalition • New York Alliance for Inclusion and Innovation • New York Performance Standards Consortium • New York State Association for Bilingual Education • New York State Coalition of 853 Schools • New York State Community of Practice on Family, School and Community Collaboration • New York State Disabilities Advocacy Association and Network • New York State Independent Living Council, Inc. (NYSILC) • New York State Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (NYTESOL) • NY Stop Grad HST • NYU Metro Center • Regina Paleau, Parent • Parent to Parent New York, Inc. • Evelyn Perez, Parent • Catherine Phillips-Russ, Baker Victory Services • Sharon Poole, Education for Everyone Consultant • Queens Community House • Lynn Russo, Parent • SCO Family of Services • Tracey Shannon, Parent • Bruce A. Shields, PhD, Associate Professor of Education, Daemen College • Sinergia Metropolitan Parent Center • Starbridge • Amy Ming Tsai, Parent/Advocate for Special Education • United We Stand • Unity Preparatory Charter School of Brooklyn • Christian Villenas, PhD • Marcia Vogel, Parent/Advocate • Randy K. Young, Long Island Communities of Practice/Partners in Inclusivity, Inc. • YOUTH POWER!