

October 30, 2020

New York State Education Department
89 Washington Avenue
Albany, NY 12234

Dear Interim Commissioner Rosa, Vice Chancellor Brown, and Members of the Board of Regents:

On behalf of the Coalition for Multiple Pathways to a Diploma, thank you for your response to our August 2020 letter urging the New York State Education Department (SED) and the Board of Regents to extend COVID-19 exemptions to graduation requirements through August 2021 and to apply for assessment waivers from the U.S. Department of Education. While we understand that the State needs federal approval to cancel all standardized exams and is continuing to monitor the feasibility of administering the tests safely and fairly in light of current circumstances, **we urge you to move forward quickly to extend last spring's COVID-19 exemption that decoupled Regents exams from diploma requirements**—a step that you can take now. This action does not require federal approval and would allow educators and young people to plan for the year ahead knowing students will be able to graduate if they meet credit requirements, regardless of whether Regents exams are ultimately administered this year.

The Board of Regents and SED do not need federal approval to take this critical action. As SED noted in its [presentation at the March 2020 Regents meeting](#), the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) does not require states to use accountability assessments for graduation purposes. While the law requires students to be assessed at least once in reading, math, and science while in high school, most states comply with this mandate “by giving all students in a particular high school grade a statewide assessment, the results of which are *not consequential for high school graduation*” [emphasis added]. Regardless of whether New York ultimately applies for a federal testing waiver and cancels standardized assessments altogether, nothing prevents SED and the Board of Regents from taking immediate action to exempt students from the requirement to pass Regents exams during the 2020-21 school year to earn a high school diploma. This policy is entirely within the State's control.

Your action is urgently needed. During these challenging and unprecedented times, schools and students need to know as soon as possible what will be required to graduate from high school this year. Teachers are already stretched thin as they rework lesson plans for remote and hybrid settings; what works in person may not be effective online, and educators should be free to explore new ways of teaching and assessing students in the coming year. Teachers' focus should be on creating the most engaging learning environments possible under the circumstances and on supporting their students' social-emotional wellbeing—not on preparing them to pass a high-stakes standardized test needed for graduation. Likewise, many students—especially those who have disabilities, are learning English as a new language, are experiencing homelessness, or are still waiting on devices—are struggling tremendously in the absence of full-time in-person schooling. Instructional supports for these populations do not always translate to a remote setting, and students should not have to worry that their future will be derailed because of the pandemic.

Finally, students need assurances that they will not need to compromise their health or the health of their families to meet graduation requirements. Families and educators across the state are concerned about how Regents exams will be administered safely as soon as January, particularly in light of the announcement at this month's Regents meeting that it will not be possible to administer State assessments remotely during the 2020-21 school year. Even in districts offering hybrid instruction, some students, including large percentages of low-income students of color, have opted to continue with fully remote instruction because they or a member of their household have an underlying health condition that makes them especially vulnerable to complications of COVID-19. Students

who have completed all other graduation requirements should not be forced to choose between risking their health and safety to sit for an exam, and putting their postsecondary plans on hold.

Given the extraordinary circumstances, we again urge you to take immediate action to extend COVID-19 exemptions to graduation requirements through August 2021. The January administration of the Regents exams is less than three months away, and students and schools need to be able to plan for the year ahead.

Please contact me with any questions. We would be happy to discuss this recommendation further.

Respectfully,



Ashley Grant

Advocates for Children of New York • Alliance for Quality Education • ARISE Coalition • Asperger Syndrome & High Functioning Autism Association • Big Picture Learning • David C. Bloomfield, Esq., Professor of Educational Leadership, Law & Policy, Brooklyn College and The CUNY Graduate Center • Bronx Independent Living Services • Bronx Defenders • Brooklyn Defender Services • Brooklyn Center for the Disabled • Bonnie Buckley, Founder Multiple Pathways to a Diploma For All • Business Teachers Association of New York State • Campaign for Tomorrow's Workforce • Capital Region Refugee Roundtable • CareerWise New York • Center for Independence of the Disabled, New York • Citizens' Committee for Children of New York • Citywide Council on Special Education, NYC • Lisa Finnerty Coggi, Parent/Advocate • Community Service Society • Catherine Costa, EdD, Parent/Principal • Council for a Strong America • Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies • Valerie DeClara, Parent • Amber Decker, Family Peer Advocate, Special Support Services • Della DeKay JD, EdD • Max Donatelli, Family Advocate • Eskolta School Research and Design • Irja Estrella, Parent • ExpandedED Schools • 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 • HERE to HERE • Rochelle Hoot, Special Education Administrator • Shelley Hubal, Parent • INCLUDEnyc • Muronji Inman-McCraw • Internationals Network for Public Schools • Lawyers for Children, Inc. • Learning Disabilities Association of New York State • April Leong, Founding Principal, Liberation High School • Jill Lewis-Flood, Parent/PIP Member • JobsFirst NYC • Long Island Advocacy Center • Long Island Communities of Practice • 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 • New York Immigration Coalition • 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) • New Visions for Public Schools • 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 • South Bronx Rising Together • Starbridge • Katherine Teasdale-Edwards, School Counselor • Amy Ming Tsai, Parent/Advocate for Special Education • United We Stand • Unity Preparatory Charter School of Brooklyn • Christian Villenas, PhD • YOUTH POWER!
