

For Immediate Release

Contact: Isabella Rieke, *Communications Manager, Advocates for Children of New York*
646-871-6739 | irieke@afcny.org

Over 100 Organizations Call on New York State to Allow All 12th Graders Who Age Out in 2021 to Return to School Next Year

March 9, 2021 (NEW YORK CITY) – Today, more than 100 education and advocacy organizations and over 150 parents, educators, and other individuals from across New York State sent a [letter](#) to the New York State Board of Regents and the State Education Department (NYSED), urging them to give students aging out of school this year the opportunity to return to high school for the 2021-22 school year, rather than lose their chance to earn a high school diploma because of COVID-19.

New Yorkers have the right to attend school to work toward a high school diploma until the end of the school year in which they turn 21. Although most students who graduate do so in four years, a small subset of young people – disproportionately students of color, English Language Learners (ELLs), and students with disabilities – need five, six, or even seven years to finish high school. Each year, roughly 2,000-3,000 students across New York State graduate after their sixth year of high school.

Given the massive educational disruptions caused by COVID-19, NYSED and the Board of Regents issued [guidance](#) last June strongly encouraging schools to allow 21-year-olds who would otherwise be aging out of school in 2020 to return for the summer and, if necessary, attend high school this year to complete their education. As the pandemic continues, it is critical that the State immediately extend this guidance so that students who turn 21 during this school year can return for the 2021-22 school year to complete coursework or meet special education transition goals.

One young person who benefited from the extra time in school this year is Kenny Abraham, a 21-year-old who graduated in January 2021. Kenny, an English Language Learner from Haiti, worked multiple jobs throughout high school to help support his mother and two younger siblings, which made it difficult to keep up with his education. Kenny had fallen further behind due to the stress of the pandemic – at one point working three jobs to help his family. He would have aged out of school without a diploma in June 2020, but the State’s policy allowed him to reenroll and finish his diploma requirements at the Downtown Brooklyn Young Adult Borough Center (YABC).

“When the pandemic started, I was about to turn 21, so I thought my chance for a high school diploma was over,” Kenny Abraham said. “When I found out I was allowed to stay in high school, I was so excited that I could finish with help from teachers and school staff who knew me. Other students deserve to get the same chance I did.”

The letter also urges NYSED to, once again, extend eligibility to students with disabilities who need more time to work toward their postsecondary transition goals. Shari DiStefano's daughter Brianna turned 21 in December and will age out of her District 75 high school program in June. Before the pandemic, Brianna was preparing for life after high school by working in the school store, participating in a cooking program, and learning to use a calculator and cash register. When her school went remote in March 2020, Brianna, who has autism, could no longer participate in these programs.

"Schools are doing their best. But without in-person, hands-on supports, I've watched Brianna's skills regress significantly," said Ms. DiStefano. "Students like Brianna have already missed out on a critical year of transition supports that simply cannot be provided remotely. We're just asking for her to have the opportunity to make up those experiences so she can be ready for life after high school."

"With so many students falling behind this year, the State should extend the age students can stay in school and give young people the last chance they need to earn a high school diploma," said Ashley Grant, Director of the Postsecondary Readiness Project at Advocates for Children of New York and Coordinator of the statewide Coalition for Multiple Pathways to a Diploma.

The letter to the Board of Regents is available at https://www.advocatesforchildren.org/sites/default/files/on_page/sign-on_letter_extended_eligibility_3921.pdf