

Recommendations for the Graduation Measures Blue Ribbon Commission

The Coalition for Multiple Pathways to a Diploma is very pleased that the New York State Education Department and the Board of Regents have launched a Blue Ribbon Commission to re-examine New York State's graduation requirements. Our coalition, which includes more than 80 members, advocates for multiple instructional and assessment pathways to a high school diploma, each of which holds all students to high expectations, provides them with meaningful instruction, and opens doors to career and post-secondary educational opportunities.

The recommendations of the Graduation Measures Blue Ribbon Commission should include plans to:

- 1. Build coherence and transparency into the multiple pathways system by engaging diverse stakeholders.** New York's current graduation requirements, evolving out of a series of emergency measures, has become too complex for most students, families, and even school professionals to navigate. The system is now unduly cumbersome and relies heavily on appeals and disability-only safety nets. Any new system must be thoughtful and coherent and must provide opportunities for stakeholder feedback and revision before it is brought to the Board of Regents for a vote. There should be meaningful opportunities for feedback from current or recent students, parents, educators, researchers, advocates and business leaders, including individuals with experience with students with disabilities, English Language Learners, and overage and under-credited students, as well as individuals with expertise in the development and implementation of work-based learning, career and technical education, and performance-based assessment systems.
- 2. Align graduation requirements with the real-world skills required for success in college and career.** The Commission should identify the skills, knowledge and experiences critical for college, career and civic readiness and should design a coherent system for all students to demonstrate that they have achieved such benchmarks. The group should review each of the State's current exit credentials and diplomas, including the coursework and exit exams required for each, and should identify the changes necessary to create a system of graduation options and pathways that are equitable and accessible and that communicate meaningful skills to colleges and employers.
- 3. Develop and support performance-based assessments.** In lieu of exit exams, all students should be given the option to demonstrate their knowledge and skills through State-approved, stakeholder-developed performance-based assessments or State-approved performance-based assessment systems, completing a series of tasks/projects in contexts that are familiar and relevant to their high school experiences. Schools with demonstrated capacity to develop and implement performance-based systems should continue to be supported. We recommend that the Commission consult with educators

in New York State already using performance-based assessments, review the experiences of other states that have provided students with performance-based options in lieu of standardized tests, and make recommendations that include procedures and funding for developing and approving performance-based assessments for all students.

4. **Decouple Regents exams from graduation requirements.** Although the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires states to assess high school students in language arts, math, and science for the purposes of state accountability, no federal law requires students to pass exit exams to graduate. In fact, only 11 states currently require students to pass exit exams to graduate from high school. Of these states, New York has some of the most onerous testing requirements. The Commission should examine the 39 states with no exit exam requirements and consider whether any exit exam is necessary for New York students who have otherwise demonstrated mastery of State standards. Regents exams and other standardized assessments could remain available for students who choose to take them to graduate with Honors or an advanced diploma and could be used for school accountability purposes, but should not serve as a barrier to graduation for any student.
5. **Make all pathways available to all students.** New York's current pathways system relies heavily on ELL- and disability-only exceptions and fails to acknowledge that all students need access to a variety of opportunities to demonstrate readiness to graduate. For example, students with IEPs can currently demonstrate readiness for graduation without passing any Regents exams, while students with 504 plans and those without disabilities must pass at least 4 Regents exams. The Commission's recommendations should break down these walls between student populations whenever possible by creating opportunities for all students to demonstrate their skills and knowledge without forcing them to pass high-stakes tests.
6. **Use the IEP process to ensure that students with disabilities get the supports and guidance they need to meet graduation requirements.** Rather than relying on disability-only pathways to address the significant gap in graduation rates between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers, the Commission should make recommendations to ensure that students with disabilities get the academic and transition supports they need to access each graduation pathway.
7. **Ensure access for all students to the instructional programming required for current and emerging graduation pathways.** As the State looks to expand pathways to graduation, it is critical that students at all schools have access to each graduation option and pathway, including those that require work-based learning, as well as instruction in Career and Technical Education, the arts, humanities, Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM), and other programs shown to promote student engagement and advancement towards college or career readiness. Such programs must be accessible to diverse student populations, including multilingual learners, students with disabilities, and students who are overage and under-credited. The State must provide families, students and educators with the information and resources they need to make all current and emerging pathways available to all eligible students.

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