



# Advocates for Children of New York

Protecting every child's right to learn

## PROTECT GRADUATION OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS AGING OUT DURING COVID-19

While more than 95% of students who graduate high school in New York State do so in four years, a small subset of students need five, six, or even seven years to complete the requirements for a diploma. New York students have the right to continue working towards a diploma until the end of the school year in which they turn 21, and those who take this extra time to graduate often overcome remarkable odds. Examples include recently arrived immigrant youth who were learning English in addition to completing graduation requirements, students who were held back multiple times due to unaddressed learning disabilities, or students who spent time in foster care and changed schools frequently.

This year, the COVID-19 pandemic has thrown their hard work into jeopardy. **Many high school students—through no fault of their own—have struggled to access remote learning in the months since school buildings closed and will not receive full course credit this semester.** For example, some students do not have access to high-speed internet or computers; students living in homeless shelters or overcrowded apartments may lack a quiet spot to study; and older youth may be working to help support their families or spending their days caring for younger siblings, leaving them little time to focus on schoolwork.

The majority of high school seniors who have been unable to participate in remote instruction will be able to return for the 2020-21 school year to finish their remaining graduation requirements. However, there are approximately 3,700 students in New York State for whom the pandemic hit at an especially critical time: the spring 2020 semester was their last chance to earn a high school diploma before aging out of the system. Many of these students will graduate later this month, but **those who have been unable to complete their coursework—a number we estimate to be between 1,000 and 2,500 students statewide—will lose their chance to earn a diploma, making it far more difficult for them to access post-secondary opportunities and find well-paying jobs in a shaky economy.**

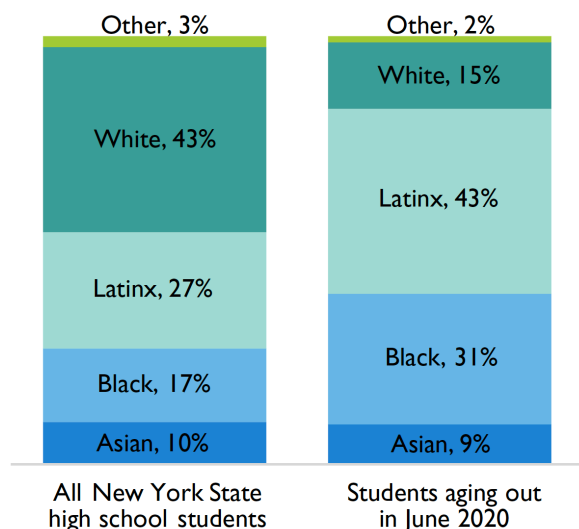
*Students of color, students with disabilities, and English Language Learners (ELLs) are disproportionately likely to need six years to graduate.*

- » Black students who graduate high school in New York State are seven times as likely as White students to need six years to do so; Latinx students who graduate are 7.3 times as likely as White students to need a sixth year.
- » Statewide, ELLs who earn a diploma are more than six times as likely as non-ELL graduates to finish in their sixth year of high school.
- » New York State graduates with disabilities are more than three times as likely as those without disabilities to need a sixth year.

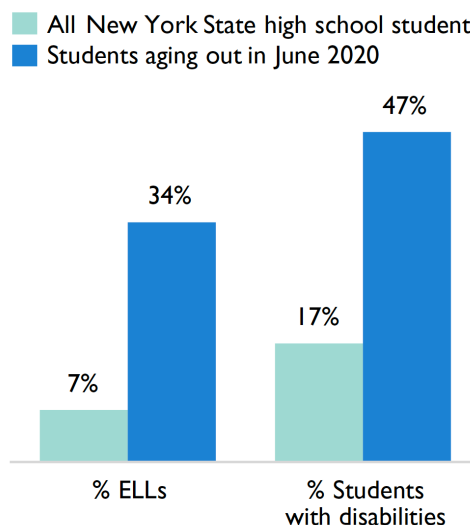
SOURCE: AFC analysis of State Education Department high school graduation data for the cohort of students who entered 9<sup>th</sup> grade in 2013.

The students aging out in June 2020 are **disproportionately students of color, students with disabilities, and English Language Learners**—the same populations that have been hardest hit by the pandemic itself and by the challenges of online learning.

*74% of students aging out in June 2020 are Black or Latinx, though Black and Latinx students comprise only 44% of the total high school population.*



*Nearly half of New York State students aging out have disabilities; one in three is learning English as a new language.*



SOURCE: Data on students aging out received pursuant to an April 2020 Freedom of Information Law request; on file at AFC. Comparison statistics for the overall high school population estimated using New York State Education Department preliminary enrollment data for 2019-20 (available at [www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/statistics/enroll-n-staff/home.html](http://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/statistics/enroll-n-staff/home.html)).

Young people who age out of school without a diploma will enter a labor market in which **nearly one in five Americans without a high school degree is unemployed**.<sup>1</sup> Even in a strong economy, the failure to graduate high school can have devastating consequences. For example:

- » In 2019, the unemployment rate for Americans without a high school diploma was about 1.5 times higher than the rate for high school graduates without a college degree.<sup>2</sup>
- » Working adults without a diploma earned a median \$8,000 less per year than their peers who finished high school but had no postsecondary education.<sup>3</sup>
- » Adults without a high school degree have lower life expectancies and higher rates of heart disease, diabetes, depression, and other chronic conditions.<sup>4</sup>

While New York cannot give these students back the senior year they may have imagined, the State Education Department (SED) and the Board of Regents *do* have the power to prevent their lives from being thrown entirely off course by the pandemic. **With the school year ending in just two weeks, SED must immediately issue guidance directing school districts to allow all students aging out of school without a diploma to return to high school next year.**

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment status of the civilian noninstitutional population 25 years and over by educational attainment, seasonally adjusted (May 2020). Retrieved from: <https://www.bls.gov/web/empsit/cpseea05.htm>

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Learn more, earn more: Education leads to higher wages, lower unemployment" (May 2020). Retrieved from: <https://www.bls.gov/careeroutlook/2020/data-on-display/education-pays.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Virginia Commonwealth University Center on Society and Health, "Education: It matters more to health than ever before" (February 2015). Retrieved from: <https://societyhealth.vcu.edu/work/the-projects/education-it-matters-more-to-health-than-ever-before.html>