



Advocates for Children of New York

Protecting every child's right to learn

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

Re: Portrait of a Graduate

September 22, 2026

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about Portrait of a Graduate and the changes coming to New York's high school graduation requirements. My name is Randi Levine, and I am the Policy Director at Advocates for Children of New York. For more than 50 years, AFC has worked to ensure a high-quality education for New York students who face barriers to academic success, focusing on students from low-income backgrounds. Every year, we help thousands of families navigate the New York City school system. AFC also served on New York State's Blue Ribbon Commission on Graduation Measures and has long coordinated the statewide Coalition for Multiple Pathways to a Diploma, which advocates for the 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 pleased to see the New York State Education Department move forward with its proposal to decouple Regents exams from graduation requirements. AFC has long advocated for multiple pathways to a high school diploma—for a system that provides students with multiple ways to demonstrate what they know and are able to do, rather than relying on the outdated idea that all young people must pass a set of high-stakes standardized tests in order to demonstrate their readiness for post-secondary life.

There is no evidence that exit exams increase student achievement, raise the value of a high school diploma in the labor market, or convey other benefits to students who pass them. Exit exam policies like New York's have caused significant harm to young people while failing to achieve their intended aim of improving the quality of teaching and learning. At AFC, we have worked with students—many of whom have disabilities or are still learning English—who have completed their coursework but are unable to earn a high school diploma because they struggle with standardized



assessments, sometimes sitting for a single exam a half-dozen times to try to raise their score by just a few points.

As New York City Public Schools (NYCPS) moves forward with the critical work of developing new graduation measures, there are many steps that need to be taken. With our limited time today, we will highlight a couple of key recommendations. First, there must be extensive stakeholder engagement with meaningful opportunities for feedback from current and recent students, parents, educators, researchers, advocates, and employers. Such engagement should include 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. NYCPS should draw on the expertise of schools and educators across NYC that have already transitioned from exit exams to performance-based assessments.

NYCPS should also start developing a comprehensive communications plan now to ensure students and families understand what they need to do to graduate. As an organization that helps families navigate the NYC school system, we want to ensure that students, parents, and educators have clear, accessible information about the changes ahead and what students need to do to stay on track for graduation.

There must also be an intentional and targeted focus on the needs of students with disabilities and English Language Learners (ELLs). Too often, in our work, we see barriers to access and meaningful participation, such as limited supports and accommodations for students with disabilities in certain work-based learning programs. We want to ensure that students with disabilities and ELLs get the academic and transition supports they need to graduate and to have full access to the range of graduation pathways being developed.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.