



**THE COUNCIL
OF THE
CITY OF NEW YORK**

**DISSECTING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP:
RACIAL FAULT LINES IN NYC REGENTS DIPLOMA RATES**

May 26, 2005

New York has always prided itself as being a city of opportunity for all of its residents, particularly its immigrants who come here to make a better life. Yet nearly a decade after the “higher standards” movement sought to increase the level of academic preparedness in our schools, a comprehensive review of city high school graduation rates shows that the vast majority of our African American and Latino high school students continue to be relegated to the back of the educational and economic bus – with no strong signs of moving up.

The Education Committee has recently obtained a detailed breakdown of New York City public school graduation rates by race. The numbers should be a call to action for the entire city. They indicate that far from overcoming education segregation, the New York City school system is practicing it with a vengeance. The graduation data suggests our African American and Latino children get a separate and fundamentally unequal education.

Less than ten percent of African American and Latino children receive a Regents diploma. This means that 9 out of 10 African American and Latino children are utterly unprepared for college, and therefore condemned to a significantly inferior economic status.

While to his credit, City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein recognized the injustice these statistics reveal and made reference of them in various speeches, they have not been laid before the public in all their ugly detail. New Yorkers have not had the opportunity to explicitly confront the shame of these numbers and the moral obligations they entail. Even more troubling, the State Education Department is poised to roll back some of the standards intended to drive up student achievement, rather than lay all the cards on the table and launch a wholesale effort to eradicate the profound social injustice these Regents rates reveal.

This report is intended to arm New Yorkers with detailed information about the scope of educational inequity, so that the public may better determine whether the Department of Education’s solutions rise to the challenge presented by the data. The Education Committee believes that the two reforms most commonly proposed to combat this

appalling learning gap – 3rd and 5th grade retention, and smaller high schools – do not come close to dealing with the enormity of this scandal.

Background

Currently, there are two main routes to graduation in New York: the Regents diploma and the local diploma.¹ The Regents diploma is a statewide diploma that students earn by passing a number of Regents exams with a score of 65 or higher. In 1996, education officials began to change the requirements for both the Regents diploma and the local diploma, with the goal of eventually eliminating the local diploma because it does not adequately prepare students for college. Commissioner Mills referred to the local diploma as a “temporary minimum” that would eventually be fully replaced by the Regents diploma.²

Eight years ago, when the phase out of the local diploma began, Commissioner Mills explained: “All children need strong skills and knowledge... to give any student a watered-down education is not kindness, it’s wrong.”³ City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein has also described the local diploma as “watered down” and endorsed the higher standard: “I believe a Regents diploma is a meaningful diploma representing college preparedness.”⁴

Commissioner Mills’ 1996 plan required that by 2001 students score at least 65 on eight Regents exams in order to earn a Regents diploma. The plan also provided a timeline for phasing out the local diplomas. The local diploma was initially set to expire when the class of 2007 graduated. However, the Regents decided in 2003 to extend the local diploma option, and they will vote in June to extend it again.

To prepare for the phase out of the local diploma, the Board of Regents toughened its local diploma requirements. Students who entered ninth grade in 1995 could get a local diploma by earning 18.5 class credits and passing a relatively easy set of exams called Regents Competency Tests. In contrast, students who entered ninth grade in 2000 had to do more work to get a local diploma: earn 20.5 credits, take the more difficult Regents exams, and get scores of 55 or higher on 5 of them.⁵

Although the standards for local diplomas have risen, there remains a significant difference in the level of academic achievement required by a local versus Regents diploma. To get the more rigorous Regents diploma, students in the class of 2004 had to take 3 extra tests, for a total of 8 Regents exams, and get a higher score (65 as opposed to 55) on each.

Although overall graduation rates in the city are up (the graduation rate of 54.3% in 2004 was the highest recorded since 1986) progress towards awarding more Regents diplomas has stalled.⁶ Between 2001 and 2002, the share of students receiving a Regents diploma rose from 16.1% to 17.9%. The share of students getting a Regents diploma rose further to 18.1% in 2003, but stagnated at 18% in 2004. This plateau is especially troubling given

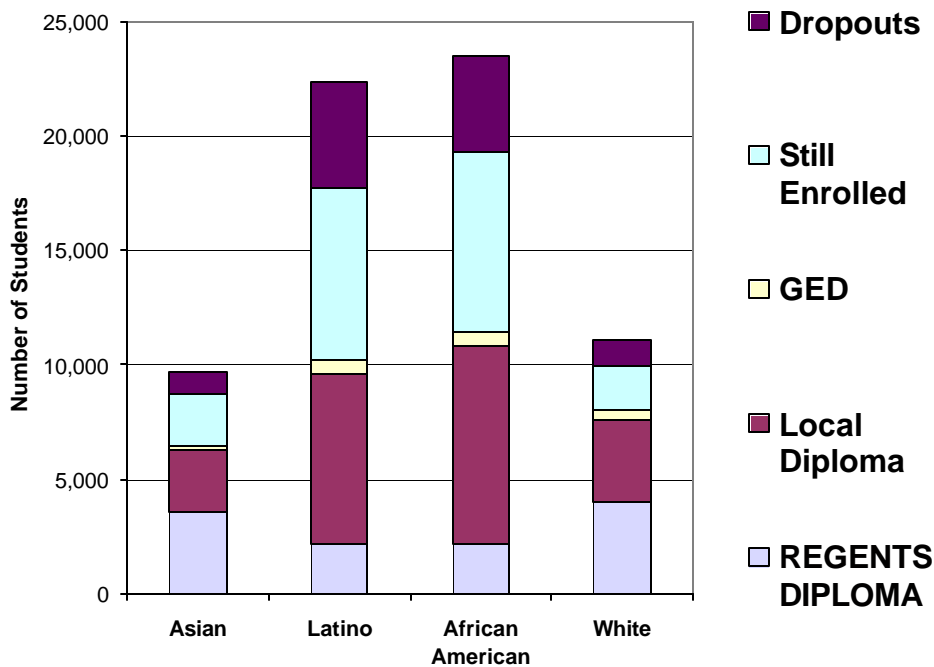
that the requirements to earn Regents diplomas have been delayed several times since the phase out of the local diplomas began in 1996.

Faced with stagnant Regents diploma rates and the approaching sunset of the local diploma, it seems that the Regents may be taking another step back. They will vote in June on a proposal to roll back the requirement that all students earn a Regents diploma to graduate. They will likely allow increasingly tougher versions of the local diploma to be awarded through 2011.

Fewer than 1 out of 10 African Americans and Latinos get Regents diplomas

While the overall number of students receiving Regents diplomas is troubling, the tiny percentage of African American and Latino students receiving Regents diplomas is especially alarming. In the class of 2001, only 8.5% of Latinos and 9.1% of African Americans earned a Regents diploma.⁷ The class of 2004 fared only slightly better: 9.8% of Latinos and 9.4% of African Americans graduated with Regents diplomas, compared to 37.5% of Asians and 36% of whites in the same cohort.⁸ Although African Americans and Latinos made up more than two-thirds of the student body, they received dramatically fewer Regents diplomas than other groups (see graph).

Class of 2004, by Race/Ethnicity



This data indicates that vast numbers of African American and Latino students are leaving school unprepared to support themselves. Among adults aged 25 and over in 2004, just 40% of those without high school diplomas had jobs. In contrast, 60% of those with high school diplomas, and 76% of those with bachelor's degrees were employed.⁹ The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics says college degrees are essential for the most lucrative jobs: "In fact, for all but 1 of the 50 highest paying occupations, a college degree or higher is the most significant source of education or training."¹⁰

Chancellor Klein has correctly described the small share of African America and Latino students receiving Regents diplomas as a crisis: "This is tragic. This is unjust. And this is a terrible waste of the young talent this country needs."¹¹ On the fiftieth anniversary of *Brown vs. Board of Education*, he said that the small number of Regents diplomas for these students means we are still far from reaching the promise of equal education.¹²

Unfortunately, despite the Chancellor's impassioned words, the Department of Education does not regularly release the citywide racial and ethnic breakdown of students who graduate with Regents diplomas, and not enough is being done to address this social injustice. The Education Committee only got this disaggregated data by making a special request. The school report cards published in March and two studies prepared by the Department of Education in February fail to acknowledge that 9 out of 10 African American and Latino students leave school without the Regents diploma that shows they are prepared for college.¹³

How will the New York City Department of Education improve the situation?

If our state and city policy makers are serious about raising the graduation standard and seeing that all students graduate with a Regents diploma, they must address the fact that African American and Latino students are least ready to meet this standard. It is imperative that state and local education officials get a handle on why the achievement gap exists, and then take aggressive steps to close it.

Education officials in New York seem to believe that they will be able to close the achievement gap by holding back more children in the third and fifth grades and shrinking the size of schools, on the theory that smaller is better. When the State Education Department released graduation data in March, it said that school districts with achievement gaps should "Break large high schools into smaller schools...." Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein have embraced this idea, and expect to have 157 small schools operating by next September.¹⁴ Whatever one thinks of the details of the retention policy and small school reforms, it is quite clear that neither is sufficient to bridge this vast educational divide. The Department is simply tinkering around the edges.

Unfortunately, we are not able to measure whether policy changes such as smaller schools are better at narrowing the Regents diploma gap between students of different races. Why not? We don't have the statistics. Just as the Department of Education does not report the citywide racial and ethnic breakdown of students receiving Regents diplomas, it does not calculate those numbers at each school.

Conclusion

The share of African America and Latino students who graduate from New York City public high schools with a State-approved diploma signifying college readiness is disproportionately and disturbingly low. Less than 10% get the college preparation they need to succeed in our economy. This is an absolutely abominable civil rights transgression. The Department of Education must make closing this achievement gap a top priority.

A first step is to measure and report the problem. For this reason, we ask the Department to make disaggregated graduation data available to the public each year, in both school report cards and annual graduation reports.

The Education Committee is concerned that state and city officials will try to close the achievement gap by lowering standards, rather than improving our schools. The State already plans to lower the requirements for Regents diplomas. Starting this year, students will need to pass only 5 tests to get a Regents diploma, rather than the 8 that are now required.¹⁵ This change will artificially boost the number of students receiving Regents diplomas. If that standard had been applied to the class of 2004, then the share of students with a Regents diploma would have jumped from 18% to 35.5%.¹⁶

The State also appears to be pushing back the date by which students must start earning Regents diplomas to graduate. In February, Commissioner Mills said that children entering the ninth grade in the fall of 2005 would have to graduate by earning a Regents diploma.¹⁷ However, it now looks likely that the Board of Regents will decide next month to allow students entering ninth grade in the fall of 2005 to graduate with a local diploma, albeit a more rigorous one that will require 2 scores at or above 65, and none below 55, on the 5 required Regents exams.¹⁸

We urge state and city officials to disclose these policy changes when they report Regents diploma rates. We must be able to make legitimate comparisons to track yearly progress in addressing this gross inequity and closing the achievement gap.

Parents, advocates and the media must remain vigilant and hold the Department of Education accountable for better preparing Latino and African American children to earn Regents diplomas. This civil rights crisis will not be remedied until Latino and African American students are earning Regents diplomas on par with their white and Asian counterparts, and all students are earning them at much higher rates.

Appendix: New York's Changing Graduation Standards

The New York State Board of Regents has changed the standards for both Regents and local diplomas on multiple occasions. The graduating classes of 1988, 1992, 2000, and 2004 each had to meet a different set of requirements.

Highlights of Board of Regents decisions on graduation requirements:

- 1996:** Local diplomas will be phased out over several years, so that by 2001, students entering ninth grade will be required to get a Regents diploma to graduate.
- 2003:** The local diploma option is extended. The Regents diploma will not be required of students entering ninth grade prior to 2005. Students entering ninth grade in 2005 will be required to get a Regents diploma to graduate.
- 2003:** The requirements for the Regents diploma are lowered. Students who entered ninth grade in 2000 and before will need scores of at least 65 on 8 Regents tests to get a Regents diploma. However, students who entered ninth grade in 2001 and afterwards will be able to get a Regents diploma by getting scores of 65 or higher on only 5 Regents tests. (Students who pass 8 tests with a 65 or higher will get an "Advanced Regents" diploma.)
- 2005:** The local diploma option will likely be extended through the graduating class of 2011 when the Board of Regents meets June 20-21. The proposal they will vote on says that between 2005 and 2007, students entering the ninth grade will be able to graduate with increasingly tougher versions of a local diploma.

The proposed timeline: Students entering ninth grade in 2005 will be able to get a local diploma if they have at least 2 scores of 65 or above on 5 Regents exams, and all scores above 55. Students entering ninth grade in 2006 will be able to get a local diploma with 3 scores at 65. And students entering ninth grade in 2007 will be able to graduate with 4 scores at 65. In 2008, entering ninth graders will finally be required to pass all 5 Regents exams with a score of 65 or above.

Class of 2004 Four-Year School Completion Outcomes by Race/Ethnicity

	Asian		Latino		African American		White		Total ^a	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Graduates	6,462	66.9%	10,310	46.0%	11,482	48.8%	8,008	71.9%	36,339	54.3%
Local High School Diploma ^b	2,701	28.0%	7,398	33.0%	8,580	36.5%	3,586	32.2%	22,322	33.3%
Regents-Endorsed Diplomas (Including Honors) ^b	3,617	37.5%	2,206	9.8%	2,206	9.4%	4,013	36.0%	12,057	18.0%
Special Education Diploma or Certificate ^b	8	0.1%	56	0.2%	71	0.3%	13	0.1%	148	0.2%
GED ^b	136	1.4%	650	2.9%	625	2.7%	396	3.6%	1,812	2.7%
Still Enrolled	2,284	23.6%	7,491	33.4%	7,878	33.5%	1,955	17.5%	19,701	29.4%
Dropouts^c	917	9.5%	4,618	20.6%	4,163	17.7%	1,181	10.6%	10,927	16.3%
Total^a	9,663	100.0%	22,419	100.0%	23,523	100.0%	11,144	100.0%	66,947	100.0%

^a Total includes 198 Native American students in Class of 2004.

^b Percentages are of the total number in the cohort rather than the total number of graduates as is reported in "The Class of 2004 Four-Year Longitudinal Report and 2003-2004 Event Dropout Rates" report on the DOE website.

^c The Class of 2004 dropout statistics reflect students who dropped out by June 30th of their 4th year. The reduction in dropout rates is substantially due to a new DOE policy requiring interviews for students above compulsory school age before schools are permitted to discharge them to dropout status. The interview process may delay many students from dropping out until their 5th, 6th, or 7th years, and those students will be captured when the DOE calculates final 7-year statistics for the Class of 2004; however, many students may remain enrolled in high school and graduate. As with prior classes, the final determination of the Class of 2004 dropout and graduation rates will not be known for an additional 3 years.

SOURCE: Data received from New York City Department of Education, May 6, 2005

Class of 2001 Final Three Year Follow-Up School Completion Outcomes by Race/Ethnicity

	Asian		Latino		African American		White		Total ^a	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Graduates	6,871	82.0%	12,504	59.9%	13,585	62.7%	8,818	83.4%	41,881	68.0%
Local High School Diploma ^b	3,360	40.1%	9,015	43.2%	10,018	46.3%	3,971	37.6%	26,420	42.9%
Regents-Endorsed Diplomas (Including Honors) ^b	3,169	37.8%	1,770	8.5%	1,972	9.1%	3,866	36.6%	10,800	17.5%
Special Education Diploma or Certificate ^b	18	0.2%	137	0.7%	130	0.6%	37	0.3%	322	0.5%
GED ^b	324	3.9%	1,582	7.6%	1,465	6.8%	944	8.9%	4,339	7.0%
Dropouts	1,506	18.0%	8,374	40.1%	8,068	37.3%	1,756	16.6%	19,748	32.0%
Total^a	8,377	100.0%	20,878	100.0%	21,653	100.0%	10,574	100.0%	61,629	100.0%

^a Total includes 147 Native American students in Class of 2001 final follow-up.

^b Percentages are of the total number in the cohort rather than the total number of graduates as is reported in *"The Class of 2001 Final Longitudinal Report: A Three-Year Follow-Up Study"* report on the DOE website.

SOURCE: Data received from NYC Department of Education, May 6, 2005

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