

RCSD graduation rate rises to 58%; East hits 65%

Justin Murphy

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

The June 2019 graduation rate in the Rochester City School District was about 58%, according to unofficial figures provided by the district, the highest mark in more than a decade after several years of

small gains.

East High School, meanwhile, gained an eye-popping 13 points from last year, reaching 65%. This year's graduating seniors were the first who had spent their entire four-year high school career at East during the University of Rochester partnership.

School Board President Van White trumpeted the graduation rates as evidence of the district's continuing improvement, even as it attempts to fend off Mayor Lovely Warren's call for a state takeover.

Local graduation rate increases

The main driver behind the RCSD increases over the last several years has been students earning local diplomas instead of dropping out. Since 2013 the percentage of students getting local diplomas has risen by 8 points and the dropout rate has fallen even more than that.

In fact, Rochester has made the greatest progress in New York over the last seven years in terms of preventing dropouts. In 2013 it had the highest rate in the state, at 28.3%. By 2018 it was 10 points fewer, at 18%.

The Regents graduation rate, meanwhile, saw a more modest increase of 3 points from 2013 to 2018. The district did not provide a breakdown of local and Regents diplomas in announcing the June 2019 rate.

New York state mostly phased out local diplomas in 2012, explaining it sought to hold students to a higher standard to prepare them for college or a career. There is a "safety net," however, for students who pass at least two Regents exams and nearly pass two others, missing by only a few points.

In those cases, the student can appeal to the district. If the student meets certain requirements — having sat for the exams in question more than once, and having sought out extra help in those content areas — the district can approve a local diploma.

at East High School. There instead, many more students are receiving Regents diplomas than were five years ago, before UR became involved.

Its June 2019 graduation rate of 65% is 13 points higher than last year and more than double the June 2015 rate of 30%. That level of failure helped trigger a state intervention that ultimately resulted in the UR partnership.

East officials have attributed those gains to a number of things, including intensive math and reading instruction, coaxing long-absent students back to school and removing dropouts from the books.

"Our students have been able to experience what it really looks like to be successful and achieve what they're able to achieve with the proper supports in place," East Assistant Superintendent Lorna Washington said.

The school board and UR agreed earlier this year to extend the partnership for up to five more years.

Full details, including school-by-school breakdowns as well as the figures for the rest of New York state, will officially be released by the state Education Department later this year or early next year.

JMURPHY7@Gannett.com

Rochester has the second-highest proportion of non-special education graduates receiving local diplomas in New York, excluding very small districts; it is tied with Syracuse at 13%.

“You want to make sure you’re looking at every graduation pathway for a student,” Ray Giamartino, RCSD’s chief accountability officer, said. “The latitude the state has provided in terms of pathways has ... resulted in more students being afforded the opportunity to take advantage of alternate pathways, including that local diploma appeal.”

The effect has been particularly pronounced at some Rochester high schools. 2019 school-level data is not yet available, but Northeast College Prep High School’s local diploma rate increased from 4% in 2013 to 18% in 2018, while Monroe High School went from 6% to 17%.

The state is studying whether to do away with the Regents exams, questioning whether they are an unfair barrier for students of color and poor students in particular. Most states do not have similar exit exams.

East High School

The same dynamic regarding local diplomas does not seem to be a major factor



Families cheer on graduates during Vanguard Collegiate High School’s Class of 2019 commencement. MAX SCHULTE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE FILE PHOTO