

At Vertus, two years with no Regents exams

Regents

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At most high schools in New York, conscientious 11th-graders will sit for Regents exams later this month in hopes of knocking off the last state tests they'll need for graduation next spring.

Vertus Charter School in Rochester will have 11th-graders taking Regents exams as well. For many of them, though, it will be the first such tests they've taken.

Unlike nearly every other school in the state, Vertus has encouraged its students not to take Regents exams until they're almost certain they'll pass them. In practice, that means the majority of students went their first two years of high school without passing even one of the five Regents exams needed for graduation. School co-founder and CEO Leigh McGuigan said the approach is necessary considering the low academic level of entering ninth-graders. It also fits the school's instructional model, where students do most of their coursework on computers, at their own pace, rather than in traditional classrooms.

Backloading four or five Regents exams into the 11th and 12th grades, though, greatly raises the stakes for the students and leaves them little room for error in case they fail one or more. Indeed, while McGuigan said the school is on track for an 80 percent graduation rate in its first class in 2018, she is also trying to get students and families used to the idea of taking five years, not four, to finish.

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Leigh McGuigan

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“You have to pass five (tests) to graduate – there’s no rule about when,” she said. “The right path for every student is different.”

Ready sooner or later

Vertus, an all-boys high school, first opened in September 2014; not a single student took a Regents exam the following June. Four took the Living Environment test in August, and all four passed it.

The school administered 50 tests the following year to its 137 students, with some students taking more than one exam but the majority taking none at all. All but two of the tests taken were passed, according to information provided by the school.

Those numbers — both the total tests administered and the passage rates — are starkly different from any other high school in Rochester, whether in the city school district or a charter school.

Considering just the four tests most common in the ninth and 10th grades — one of two Algebra tests, Earth Science, Living Environment (biology) and Global History — Vertus administered 45 tests to its 137 students in 2016. That is about 33 tests per 100 students.

By comparison, no other Rochester high school administered fewer than 182 tests per 100 ninth- and 10th-graders. University Prep Charter School had the most, with 340 tests per 100 students, meaning each student took an average of 3.4 Regents exams during the year.

On the other hand, nearly every other school, traditional and charter, has an average passage rate of those tests below 50 percent. For Vertus in

2016, it was 98 percent.

“If we know a kid’s not ready, we’re not going to have them sit for the test and fail,” McGuigan said. “They get increasingly discouraged, and it’s not good pedagogy. We tell our students to take the test when they’re ready. Some are ready sooner, and some are ready later.”

Part of the difficulty, she said, is that most entering ninth-graders are nowhere near a ninth-grade level academically.

“Our students come to us on average at a fifth-grade (reading) level,” she said. “You’re not going to be able to take that Global History exam after two years and pass it. You’re just not.

No other charter schools begin in ninth grade, but three RCSD high schools do. Their average passing rates on the Global History exam — for all test-takers, not just first-timers — are between 32 and 39 percent.

Data from other schools comes from the New York State Education Department. McGuigan, though, said the state data for Vertus was incorrect — not an uncommon occurrence — and provided her own.

Clenita Thomas has two children at Vertus, in 10th and 11th grades. The older one has taken and passed Algebra and Living Environment, and is scheduled to take four exams this month. The younger one hasn’t taken a single test and will sit for two this month.

“They’re kind of cramming everything in this year because they’re behind,” Thomas said; she is looking to transfer her boys to another school next year.

Non-traditional classes

Students usually take a Regents exam in June after having spent the year in the corresponding class. At Vertus, though, it’s not so simple.

Rather than taking a traditional schedule of classes, Vertus students do most of their work online and at their own pace, with teachers floating around the room to help. That means not every 10th grader is studying Living Environment, or finishing it by June.

With that approach, students have averaged 1.5 years’ progress each academic year, McGuigan said, and more are ready for testing this June.

The school’s target four-year graduation rate is 80 percent, and it believes it’s on track for that with its first two cohorts. At the same time, many students are being encouraged to take an extra year.

“Since many of our students arrive far behind and are lacking the background knowledge that is a crucial factor for post-secondary success, it would be better for many students to stay with us for five years in order to be better prepared for a good college or career,” McGuigan wrote in an email. “That’s a new concept for many young men and their families, and we will have to work this out in partnership with our students and families based on what they ultimately believe is best for their sons.”

Starting this year, the school has been somewhat more aggressive in having its students take the Regents tests. In January, 58 tests were administered, but the passage rate dropped to 57 percent.

Thomas, the mother, said the school wasn't clear with her about where her children stood until she tried to take them elsewhere. She said relying on online learning, a key component of the school's model, left the students without enough support from qualified teachers.

"They'd be in school from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and they weren't really accomplishing anything; they were just drained from being on the computer," she said. "You can ask questions (of the teachers) but they don't teach you proactively."

McGuigan said the school has been clear about its philosophy, including delayed test-taking, with both parents and the New York State Board of Regents, which regulates the school and will decide in 2019 whether to renew its charter.

That renewal decision will hinge largely on whether Vertus students are able to take, and pass, enough exams in their last two years after having mostly bypassed them in the first two years. The results of this year's exams will be a critical indicator.

The state education department and Board of Regents did not respond to a request for comment.

"We have to deal with the students we have," McGuigan said. "We can do things the same way everybody else does and get the same results. We don't want to do that."

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