

Graduation rates up

RCSD graduation rate hits 68%, highest in years

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The Rochester City School District made its largest jump in graduation rate in many years in 2020, the state Education Department announced Thursday, rising 5.2 points to 68.2%.

That growth in the August graduation rate outpaced the state average and continued a clear trend of gains over the last decade. The district graduation rate in August 2013 was just 43%.

“Our students endured an unprecedented school year that no one could have expected, and the increase in our graduation rate is due to the collective work of students, families, staff, teachers, and administrators,” Superintendent Lesli Myers-Small said in a statement.

It was unclear what effect the cancellation of Regents examinations due to COVID-19 had on the results. The state awarded a Regents diploma to students who had passed a Regents-level course, even though they could not sit for the exam.

In Rochester, 51% of Regents diploma recipients received such an exemption for at least one test, the highest rate in the state. The figure was 46% in Syracuse and 22% in Buffalo.

In wealthy districts, meanwhile, only 3% of graduates received an exemption, in large part because students there tend to complete their exams before their senior year. Dia Bryant, deputy director and chief partnerships officer for The Education Trust – New York, said she was “especially concerned” about that disparity, and said the apparent good news statewide “asks urgent equity questions about historical and persistent opportunity gaps.”

The effect of the bypassed Regents exams will be even more pronounced for this year’s high school seniors, who have already missed

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Lesli Myers-Small

Superintendent



Twins Ismari and Ismerari Gonzalez enter a decorated hallway at World of Inquiry en route to their graduation ceremony June 23. Along the way they picked up gift bags and their yearbooks. The school created graduation ceremonies inside its gym for its seniors and up to five family members. The seniors could attend June 23 or June 24. Several schools in the Rochester area have held similar types of graduation ceremonies due to COVID-19.

TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

“Our students endured an unprecedented school year that no one could have expected, and the

rounds of exams, in June 2020 and January 2021, and may miss those in June 2021 as well. Interim Education Commissioner Betty Rosa said the state is still analyzing the data to determine how great the effect was.

Rosa said the state Board of Regents is now considering whether students should be exempt again this spring from taking Regents exams.

“Knowing that we are in January, we are looking to try to make this decision as soon as possible,” she said.

Rosa said the state is also talking to the incoming Biden administration about the annual standardized tests for grades 3 to 8 that are scheduled for the spring. Those tests, which are required by federal law, were canceled last spring.

Gains difficult to decipher

In past years, Rochester’s growth has been driven in large part by gains in the local graduation rate, a trend that has raised questions of whether its students were receiving a sufficiently rigorous education. In 2020, though, the Regents and Advanced Regents rates grew sharply while local diplomas fell.

This was true statewide and likely the result of the Regents exam cancellation, Rosa said. But Rochester also saw drops in the number of students dropping out or remaining enrolled in school.

RCSD’s 5.2-percentage-point gain is its largest in recent memory but did not approach the whopping 11.6 point gain in Buffalo. Syracuse, too, gained more, rising 6.2 points. Rochester is still the lowest-achieving of the Big 5 districts but now trails Syracuse by just 2.5 points.

Gains across New York

Across the entire state, students achieved an August graduation rate of 84.8% – 1.4 percentage points higher than the previous year’s class.

The graduation rate for these students who entered ninth grade in 2016 was 8 percentage points higher than for the statewide class of 2011 almost a decade earlier.

The Yonkers school district surpassed the state graduation rate and became the first of the Big 5 to reach a rate over 90%. Only three years earlier, Yonkers’ class of 2017 became the first in a Big 5 system to hit an 80% graduation rate.

Rosa cited Yonkers’ strong My Brother’s Keeper mentoring program and said the state has talked to Yonkers officials about their work with students with disabilities and English language learners. But she said additional conversation is “in order.”

“The resilience and persistence of the Class of 2020 graduates and their families as well as the relentless commitment of Yonkers administrators and teachers resonates in the graduation data released today,” Yonkers Superintendent Edwin Quezada said.

The Regents and Education Department plan to hold the first of three “equity summits” in two weeks to map out strategies to close technological and other gaps that separate students. Rosa said she hopes a report will be issued in the spring.

Rosa also said the state hopes this summer to continue a major study of New York’s graduation requirements and how they might be revamped to better reflect what students need to know in the modern world. This study, potentially the most significant education-related project in recent state history, was put on hold because of the pandemic.

Elsewhere in Monroe County, the wealthy east-side districts of Pittsford, Penfield, Brighton and Webster all exceeded 95%, while Wheatland-Chili, Gates Chili and East Rochester were in the 80s. *Contact staff writer Justin Murphy at jmurphy7@gannett.com.*

Brockport made the greatest gain, rising six points to a 95% graduation rate. Greece, the 11th-largest district in the state, gained four points for a 93% rate.

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