

What will happen to Regents exams?

Another year without them raises question

Sophie Grosserode

Rockland/Westchester Journal News USA TODAY NETWORK

New York will soon graduate its second class of high school seniors exempt from passing Regents exams, a shakeup that has many asking if the Empire State’s trademark exams should return post-pandemic.

The immediate future of the Regents exams is not something the Board of Regents – which sets state education policy, as well as lending the tests their name – has formally discussed, said Regent Fran Wills, who represents the Lower Hudson Valley.

But questions about the exams’ long-term future were on the table before the pandemic convinced the state to allow students to get graduation credit for Regents courses, last year and again this year, without taking the exams.

The Board of Regents began a major review in 2019 of what high school graduation requirements should look like going forward, with an eye on supplementing or replacing the Regents exams as key measures of what students know. The project was dropped last year because of the pandemic.

The board is still committed to reevaluating what

makes a graduate, Wills said, especially when he pandemic has highlighted the importance of equity, critical thinking skills, and different modes of delivering education.



A school bus passes a sign encouraging parents to refuse to allow their children to take state tests in Rotterdam.

AP FILE PHOTO

Regents

Continued from Page **1A**

“We have to find ways to assess students that truly measure what they know, and then we have to take a look at what we’re asking them to know,” Wills said. “That’s key.”

attitudes of 2021.

Moving forward

Perspectives on how New York should evaluate students in the current century are varied, although there is a broad consensus that standards should be “rigorous.”

Rethinking high school graduation standards will take time. But the graduation of two consecutive high schools classes without required Regents exams raises an interim question: Should the exam requirements return at all?

Opting out?

The goal of the Board of Regents' Graduation Measures Project, a two-year review of graduation requirements, was to examine the creation of new ways to earn a high school diploma beyond passing five of the state's hallowed Regents exams. When the pandemic sent students home for remote learning, the board, instead of discussing options to the Regents exams, was forced to cancel them altogether in 2020.

Students planning on taking Regents exams last June were allowed to get graduation credit as long as they passed their courses. This past week, the board voted to extend those exemptions into the current school year. The state is canceling six of its ten Regents exams this year. The other four must be administered to fulfill a federal testing requirement, but are not required for students to get graduation credit.

As a result, this is the first year students will can opt out from Regents exams, just as some students do for federally mandated grade 3-8 assessments, said Lisa Rudley of Ossining, founding member of the New York State Allies for Public Education and a leading proponent of the testing opt-out movement.

According to state Education Department officials, the Graduation Measures Project will resume this summer. Stakeholder meetings, like those held in January of 2020, are expected to return in the fall.

The department plans to present a report of its findings to the Board of Regents in 2022.

The gold standard

Testing is one of the most divisive issues in education today, with many teachers, school administrators and lawmakers decrying "high stakes" testing required by federal law.

Still, Regents exams don't receive the same level of criticism that other assessments do.

Regarding the immediate future, principals across the state are concerned about students being forced to take Regents exams next year after two years of severe educational disruption, said Carol Conklin-Spillane, president of the Empire State Supervisors and Administrators Association and former principal of Sleepy Hollow High School in Tarrytown.

Some say the state can begin offering graduation alternatives to Regents exams even before New York has new graduation requirements.

"I've met people who were ready to graduate. They passed all their courses, but because they didn't pass this one specific Regents exam ... they didn't have a diploma," said Jasmine Gripper, executive director of the equity-focused advocacy organization The Alliance for Quality Education "They literally would just wait for June and January when the Regents are given, and go back to the school and take the test again," she said. "It was really a waste of a person's time, this fully functional adult, just because they couldn't get a 65 on this one test."

Going back to traditional exam requirements next year would be "a missed opportunity," Rudley said. The state should review the impact of having students earn credit solely through their classroom work.

"Whatever we do, we can't go back," Rudley said.

But downplaying tests could be a mistake, said Dia Bryant, interim executive director of The Education Trust-New York, a nonprofit that supports standardized testing as a means to show that all students are ready to graduate. Testing exemptions were disproportionately given in 2020 to graduates of high-needs districts, Bryant said.

"We definitely think that it is possible that many students departed high school or transitioned into the next grade underprepared," she said.

Clear standards and assessments are the best tool to measure preparedness, Bryant said, and New York should not abandon Regents exams until a better alternative is in place.

Alternate pathways

New York isn't heading into entirely uncharted territory. A majority of states don't use high school exit exams, and alternate approaches

One reason for that, said Jolene Di-Brango, vice president of New York State United Teachers, is that Regents exams are created by New York teachers rather than third-party testing companies. They are widely thought to be more naturally tied into the curriculum, and many teachers feel a sense of pride in their development.

Another reason is that the Regents have a longstanding reputation as a “gold standard” among high school exit exams, said Christine Clayton, associate professor of education at Pace University. New York has built a whole infrastructure around them, and there’s almost a sense of nostalgia about them among policymakers who earned Regents diplomas themselves.

“There is a loyalty to that system,” Clayton said. “There’s also a pride ... a feeling that this is a way that we can assert ourselves as a state and say, ‘We know at the end of these 12 years, this is what our students can do’.”

But the philosophy of determining students’ futures based on their performance on a single test is “very 20th century,” Clayton said, and doesn’t necessarily reflect the

already exist in New York.

The New York Performance Standards Consortium, a group of schools in New York City, evaluates students’ readiness using performance assessments: projects, portfolios and the like, rather than standardized exams.

The idea of Regents exams as a statewide standard has always been relative, said Ann Cook, executive director of the consortium. She noted that the scoring of Regents exams is scaled, meaning that a score of 65 doesn’t mean a student correctly answered 65% of the questions. It means they met the minimum standard of correct answers determined by the most recent state review.

“What most people think is that if you pass all these exams, you’re prepared for whatever comes next,” Cook said. “I’m not sure we have a lot of evidence for that.”

Sophie Grosserode covers education.