

## Moving beyond Regents exams

Panel outlines a new, broader path to earn a high school diploma in NY

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New York's new requirements for high school graduation would allow for more ways to assess what students know – outside of standardized testing – and would ensure access to career and technical education.

A commission tasked with reimagining what it should take to earn a diploma presented a dozen recommendations Monday morning to the state Board of Regents, ranging from requiring “culturally responsive” training for teachers to reorganizing credit requirements into bigger categories.

“It needed to be looked at through the lens of all of our students, but particularly those students in our subgroup categories and those students that were really having challenges and having difficulty,” state Commissioner of Education Betty

### Exams

Continued from Page [1A](#)

Rosa said last week ahead of the commission's presentation.

The commission also recommended moving away from the standard four-year timeline for high school, suggesting that students should have three to six years to complete the requirements to graduate.

Rosa said the Board of Regents, which makes statewide education policy, will need to digest the broad recommendations through the summer and into the fall. It's not clear when the board might adopt the recommendations or a revised version.

Some new requirements could need changes in state law or regulations, Rosa added, plus professional development for educators.

Officials did not say how long it might take to put new diploma requirements in place once they are approved.

### The main goal is multiple ways to assess students

A chief goal is to give students new opportunities, other than Regents exams, to demonstrate what they know and can do.

“While the Commission recognized the value of Regents Exams as a valid, reliable, and efficient assessment for determining student proficiency, they also sought to provide additional options for alternative assessments,” said the commission's report. The commission had four priority areas:

- Consider multiple “rigorous, equitable” pathways students might take to get a diploma.
- Review different options for assessing what students know and can do.

- Understand skills that prepare students for life after high school, including soft skills such as problem solving and empathy, career skills such as public speaking and coding, and literacy skills such as financial and digital literacy.
- Explore culturally responsive curriculum, instruction, and assessments.

“We know that our students have different ways of demonstrating their knowledge and so what we want to do is uplift that,” Rosa said. “It’s not about the test. It’s about the assessment.”

She said New York would not be lowering standards, but looking at evaluating students in a more comprehensive way.

According to the report, a priority of students who provided feedback is having more flexibility in credit requirements.

“Many stressed that credit requirements can pose real obstacles to students graduating and that taking classes that students are more interested in, or that benefit them and their preferred postsecondary life choices, should also be possibilities,” the report said.

Angelique Johnson-Dingle, deputy state commissioner of P-12 instructional support, noted students with anxiety around testing could benefit from being able to show what they learned in other ways.

“Our students have talked about just wanting more options to be able to demonstrate what they know,” Johnson-Dingle said. “Talking about making sure that students are in environments that are inclusive and affirming of their strengths — this is one way in which we can do that.”

The state is in the second year of a five-year pilot for using performancebased assessments, which allow students to demonstrate knowledge or skills by performing a task or developing a product or response.

Johnson-Dingle said the pilot would give the state more information on what schools would need to move toward project- based assessments.

### **What would change?**

Rosa committed to a review of graduation requirements in 2019, which was followed by a series of regional meetings in 2020 and 2022 at which state officials, educators and others discussed what students should know when they graduate and how it should be measured.

The Board of Regents created a 68person Blue Ribbon Commission on Graduation Measures in September 2022 to recommend what changes should be made.

Here are the commission’s 12 recommendations: 1 Replacethethreediplomatypes— Regents diploma, Advanced Regents diploma and local diploma — with one diploma, with the option to add seals and endorsements.

2 Include among graduation requirements: civic responsibility (ethics); cultural competence (how cultural beliefs and values differ); financial literacy education; fine and performing arts; science, technology, engineering, and mathematics credit(s); and writing, including writing skills for realworld scenarios.

3 Ensureaccesstocareerandtechnical education, including internships and work-based learning opportunities for all students.

4 Move to a model that organizes credit requirements into larger categories. For example, mathematics and

science courses could be included in a broad “STEM” category, instead of each subject having its own credit requirements. Also, allow districts to offer options for earning credit related to students’ identities and experiences and increase the number of electives that could count toward earning a diploma.

5 Allow more assessment options, including performance-based assessments, capstone projects and experiential learning. Those options must be culturally responsive; allow students to show competence in multiple ways; and allow student choice in satisfying requirements.

6 Create standard scoring criteria for any performance-based assessments that are allowed.

7 Create tailored graduation requirements to address the unique circumstances of certain groups of students, like newcomer students and refugee students.

8 Provide exemptions from diploma requirements for students with significant cognitive disabilities or extenuating circumstances like major life events. Examples: medical conditions, death of a family member, trauma prior to sitting for a required exam.

9 Pursue regulatory changes to allow the discretion to confer high school degrees posthumously.

10 Require all New York State teacher preparation programs to provide instruction in culturally responsive-sustaining education practices, which acknowledge and make use of students’ backgrounds and perspectives.

11 Require that professional development plans include culturally responsive sustaining education practices.

12 Review and revise the New York State learning standards to: better align with college and career expectations, and update for family and consumer sciences, health, media literacy, and climate education; emphasize critical thinking skills such as health education, communication, decision-making, time management and soft skills; and look at all subject areas through a culturally responsive and diversity, equity and inclusion lens.

The report acknowledged that the state would have to provide adequate funding to implement these outlined changes but didn’t specify how much it might cost.

Under current graduation requirements, students must pass Regents exams in English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies and a fifth exam.

Students must also pass courses in English, language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, world languages, the arts, physical education, health and electives.

New York State United Teachers released its own recommendations last week, which, like the commission’s, included additional forms of assessment, such as projects and career and technical programs. NYSUT also called for revision to federal testing requirements.

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Tuesday, 11/14/2023 Page .A01

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