

Proposed new high school diploma requirements due Monday

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What it takes to earn a high school diploma in New York is on the cusp of change.

Will New York's venerable Regents exams lose their central role?

After doing extensive research and gathering feedback from students, parents and others, a state commission dedicated to rethinking New York's graduation requirements will share its recommendations with the state Board of Regents on Monday.

"We have listened, we have agreed to disagree, but we've done it with respect and we've done it with a sense of openness," state Education Commissioner Betty Rosa said during last month's Board of Regents meeting.

Rosa said the long review, started in 2019, has focused on offering students multiple pathways to a diploma, rather than the single path of passing a series of Regents exams.

In a series of regional meetings in 2020 and 2022 (they were paused because of the COVID-19 pandemic), state officials, educators and others discussed the following:

- What students should know and be able to do when they graduate.

How students can demonstrate their knowledge and skills while capitalizing on their culture and language.

- How learning and achievement is measured.
- How those measures apply to students with disabilities and English language learners.
- What coursework and tests will make sure students are prepared for life after high school.

A 68-member Blue Ribbon Commission on Graduation Measures was appointed by the Board of Regents in September 2022 to review research and feedback and prepare the recommendations that will be given to the Regents on Monday.

On the commission were students, teachers, parents and administrators with a range of backgrounds and areas of expertise, and representing both small, rural districts as well as the "big 5" city districts.

Proposed changes 'can be transformational'

Alprentice McCutchen, a New Rochelle High School history teacher who served on the commission, said he is often critical of the state Education Department. But this case, he said, SED gave the commission the space it needed to work on new requirements.

"They can be transformational if they're followed through," McCutchen said of the requirements, but "Everybody has to be all in."

Since the commission's first meeting in October 2022, it explored what knowledge, skills and qualities a student should have to be prepared to enter the workforce directly or go to college – and, more generally, to

be prepared for life in the 21st century.

Among the commission's more challenging tasks were creating new mechanisms to measure the desired knowledge and skills, while ensuring the new requirements don't lower standards.

The commission also heard from students on how current requirements affect English learners, students with disabilities, youth in the court system, and military-connected students. A major consideration throughout was the need to address diversity, equity and inclusion for students of all backgrounds.

Current graduation requirements include passing five Regents exams and meeting credit requirements in different subject areas.

Feedback included criticism of Regents exams

At last month's Board of Regents meeting, commission members shared a wide range of feedback they received about what should be included in the new graduation requirements.

Sagrario Rudecindo-O'Neill, a commission member and an assistant superintendent for the Beacon school district, shared feedback from an online survey. Participants focused "a lot on criticism of testing and Regents Exams," she said. "Many participants suggested that testing and Regents requirements be loosened or removed to allow students to learn better the skills they need, as crucial for success after high school."

She said others emphasized the importance of the arts in preparing them for life after graduation.

Lorna Lewis, superintendent of the Malverne school district, said students and parents emphasized flexibility in credit requirements.

"As many stressed, credit requirements can pose real obstacles to students graduating, taking classes that they're more interested in, or that benefit them in their preferred post-secondary life choices," Lewis said.

Parents, students and educators also wanted the commission to consider financial literacy and projectbased learning when fashioning their recommendations.

"The work that this Blue Ribbon Commission has been engaged in for these many months is designed to change the fabric of education for the future of New York State," Regents Chancellor Lester Young said at the meeting last month. "Now, that's life-changing, right?"

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