

Looming Crisis or Historic Opportunity?

Meeting the Challenge of the Regents Graduation Standards

A Report by the



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NYC Coalition for Educational Justice

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Contents

Figures

1 About the NYC Coalition for Educational Justice

2 Summary

5 Introduction

The Impact on Employment and Lifetime Earnings 6

A Looming Crisis 7

A Historic Opportunity 8

9 Dimensions and Disparities of the Graduation Crisis

Gaps by Race, Income, and Gender 11

Gaps for English Language Learners and Students with Disabilities 12

Most Schools Ill Equipped for Higher Graduation Standards 13

16 Consequences of the Crisis

Low College Aspirations in New York City 16

Unequal AP Offerings by Income Level 18

High Levels of Remediation at CUNY 18

Challenge and Opportunity of Historic Proportions 19

21 Changing Futures: A Time for Bold Action

The Need for a Comprehensive Improvement Plan 21

Proposals for Transforming Teaching and Learning 23

25 References

27 Member Organizations of the NYC Coalition for Educational Justice

Figures

- Figure 1. Synthetic work-life earnings estimates by highest level of educational attainment
- Figure 2. National unemployment rate by educational level
- Figure 3. NYC four-year high school graduation rates, classes of 1996–2007
- Figure 4. NYC seven-year high school graduation rates, classes of 1986–2004
- Figure 5. NYC four-, five- and six-year Regents graduation rates, class of 2005
- Figure 6. NYC four-year graduation rates by race and gender, class of 2007
- Figure 7. NYC four-year Regents graduation gap by race, classes of 2005–2007
- Figure 8. Regents graduation rates in high- and low-poverty high schools, class of 2007
- Figure 9. NYC four-year graduation rates for English language learners, classes of 2005–2007
- Figure 10. NYC four-year graduation rates for students with disabilities, classes of 2005–2007
- Figure 11. Distribution of NYC high schools by four-year Regents graduation rate, class of 2007
- Figure 12. Sample of NYC high schools by four-year graduation rates, class of 2007
- Figure 13. U.S. tenth-graders who expect to attain a bachelor's degree or higher
- Figure 14. College aspirations in NYC high schools by poverty level, 2006-2007
- Figure 15. College aspirations in NYC high schools by school structure, 2005-2006
- Figure 16. AP course offerings in NYC high schools, 2006-2007
- Figure 17. Average U.S. income by education level, 2005
- Figure 18. Annual cost of incarcerating vs. educating a NYC youth, FY2007
- Figure 19. Ninth-graders' progress toward graduation by race, 2007
- Figure 20. Academic level of incoming ninth-graders in NYC high schools, 2007

About the NYC Coalition for Educational Justice

The NYC Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ) is a collaborative of community-based organizations and unions with long track records of strengthening their communities through organizing, social services, and housing development in New York City. Launched in 2006, CEJ believes that education is a critical lever for social and economic equity, that the opportunity for an excellent education is not distributed equally across New York City's neighborhoods, and that far too many children attend failing schools that are not preparing them for college and the world of work.

Led by parents, CEJ is organizing a movement to ensure a quality and well-rounded education for all students and to end the inequities in the city's public school system. The coalition, together with its allies, is mobilizing the power of parents and the community to effect policy change and create a more equitable educational system.

CEJ and its member organizations, by forming new kinds of collaboration among parents, teachers, and school staff, have won important victories in securing new programs and resources for historically neglected schools. Our successes so far include:

- **Middle grades:** CEJ's efforts led to the creation of the Middle School Success Initiative, a New York City Department of Education grant fund of almost \$30 million to support comprehensive reform in low-performing middle grade schools.
- **Science labs:** The Brooklyn Education Collaborative, composed of CEJ groups in the borough, secured a commitment of \$444 million from the Department of Education to build science labs in every middle and high school by 2010.
- **Teacher quality:** The Community Collaborative to Improve Bronx Schools, composed of CEJ groups in the borough, created the Lead Teacher Program, which puts master teachers in schools to support the development of other teachers. The program began in District 9 in the South Bronx in 2004 and has since expanded to more than 100 schools citywide.

CEJ will continue working with community organizations, faith-based institutions, and unions to build a broad social movement to end educational inequities and ensure that all of New York City's children receive an excellent education.

This report was written for the NYC Coalition for Educational Justice by staff of the Community Organizing and Engagement group of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University.

The charts, graphs, and tables were produced by Deinya Phenix, Christina Mokhtar, Ivonne Garcia, Tara Bahl, and Megan Hester of the Annenberg Institute.

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We acknowledge the invaluable assistance of all the New York City parents, students, teachers, principals, and other staff who helped us conceive and prepare this report.

Summary

New York City is entering a critical year for public education. In 2009, fundamental decisions will be made about how the school system will be governed. The outcomes of the mayoral and city council races will shape education policy for the next four years. Threatened budget cuts will force prioritization of resources across the school system. But another critical education policy decision may even more profoundly affect the future of New York City students – the end of the local diploma. Starting with this year’s ninth-graders, all general education students in New York State will be required to earn a Regents diploma to graduate high school.

This policy change, promulgated by the New York State Board of Regents more than ten years ago, is part of efforts across the country to raise expectations and standards and to prepare all students for success in college and a range of fulfilling options in the labor market. The NYC Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ) believes that high standards are essential, but that schools must provide robust and equitable supports to enable students to meet those standards. This report will demonstrate that the higher New York State graduation requirements pose an enormous challenge, as well as an opportunity, to the New York City school system. While 52 percent of New York City students graduate from high school in four years, only 37 percent of students achieve a Regents diploma, and outcomes are sharply differentiated by race and class:

- Only 28 percent of African American and 26 percent of Latino students achieve a Regents diploma in four years, compared with more than twice that percentage – 57 percent – of White students.
- Only 32 percent of students in high-poverty schools achieve a Regents diploma in four years, compared with 58 percent of students in low-poverty schools.
- Almost 90 percent of English language learners do not achieve a Regents diploma in four years.

These new requirements will have a broad impact across the school system:

- Approximately 22,000 New York City high school students attend a high school where more than three-quarters of the students do not achieve a Regents diploma in four years.
- If the new requirements had been in place in 2007, close to 10,000 additional students would have failed to graduate.

On a positive note, graduation rates have been rising over the past decade. And during Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein’s tenure, more of those graduates are achieving Regents diplomas. Between 2005 and 2007, over 5,500 additional students achieved Regents diplomas. However, the Regents graduation rate is still far too low, and the present rates of increase are too small to meet the challenge of the new graduation requirements.

Neither the city school system's past policies and practices, nor the reforms introduced during the seven years of mayoral control of public education, are sufficient to meet the challenge of the new Regents graduation requirements. While the new small high schools – the New York City Department of Education's signature high school reform – have a total graduation rate significantly above the citywide average, they have only managed a Regents graduation rate equivalent to the citywide rate. Only a pathbreaking effort to transform teaching and learning at low-performing schools across the city will generate the dramatic increase in school performance necessary to turn this looming crisis into an historic success.

Many students who graduate with a local diploma are unprepared for college-level courses or promising options in the job market. But to meet the higher Regents standards, our city system will have to provide increased curriculum rigor and enrichment, expert teaching, and robust social and emotional supports and intensify the focus on improving schools serving low-income African American and Latino students. Without greater supports to match higher standards, and without a concentrated effort to eliminate inequities, the new Regents graduation standards threaten to set off a worsening graduation crisis. While CEJ believes that high standards are essential, we are not taking a position on whether the Regents exams are the sole or the most appropriate measure of high school proficiency and college readiness. That question is beyond the purview of this report. Rather, the report focuses on the enormous challenge that the higher New York State graduation requirements pose and the urgent necessity for the New York City school system to provide effective supports to enable all the city's students to meet those higher standards.

The scope and scale of the systemic transformation our students need to meet the new graduation requirements is especially daunting in a deteriorating economy. Yet historically, radical reforms have been more likely in periods of economic, political, and social crisis. On the national level, President Barack Obama is using the financial crisis to rethink energy provision, financial regulation, tax equity, and health care and to begin to address gaps and inefficiencies that have long been taken for granted. In this spirit, CEJ calls on the New York City Department of Education and New York State Education Department to immediately form an Emergency Working Group on School and College Success. This Working Group should create a comprehensive plan to tackle the inequities afflicting the system's struggling schools and raise student performance over the next three years so that this year's and subsequent ninth-graders are prepared to graduate with a Regents diploma. These key stakeholders, along with external partners, should seize the opportunity to re-imagine and reshape teaching and learning, so that this potential threat becomes an opportunity to close the achievement gap and prepare all students to succeed in college and the world of work.

Chancellor Klein has repeatedly said that closing the achievement gap is the “civil rights issue of our time.” As the next step in this effort, CEJ proposes several bold interventions, targeted at schools where few students are graduating with a Regents diploma.

Redesign and Expand Time for Learning

CEJ believes that to definitively close the achievement gap, all low-performing schools need to initiate an ambitious effort to significantly redesign and expand time for learning. The traditional school day and year are historical artifacts that no longer fit and must change. Principals, teachers, and parents should work together to redesign the structure of the school day, add 25 percent more time, and use this time to provide more diverse types of instruction, more effectively. The additional time should include rigorous academic and enrichment courses to engage and challenge students and summer academies before sixth and ninth grade to ease difficult transitions. The redesigned school day should also organize school faculties into teacher teams with daily time dedicated to collectively analyze student data, plan for improved student performance, and engage in school-based professional development.

Community Schools

CEJ believes that all low-performing schools should be transformed into community schools where comprehensive medical, social, and emotional support services are provided to students and their families inside the school, through health clinics, adult education classes, legal services, and more. Community-based and city agencies should be thoroughly integrated into school operations, early warning systems should be established to identify and address student difficulties immediately as they arise, and a strong safety net should be developed to address student and family needs that inhibit or interfere with learning.

Aggressive, comprehensive strategies such as these are critical to tackle the persistent inequities in the New York City school system that threaten to turn the higher graduation standards into a dropout epidemic.

Introduction

For those students who earn their high school diplomas by meeting New York State's minimum graduation requirements, the expectations of success in an associate – let alone a baccalaureate – degree program are simply not realistic ones.

– *City University of New York, A New Community College*

In 2007, the graduation rate for New York City public schools was 52 percent, or slightly more than half of the students who entered the city's schools in ninth grade, graduated in four years.¹ This overall city graduation rate has been rising since 2002 under Mayor Michael Bloomberg's and Chancellor Joel Klein's administration.

But New York City high schools have traditionally offered two tracks to graduation: the local diploma and the more demanding Regents diploma, long considered the minimum criterion for college readiness.² Although the Regents graduation rate has also risen across the past three years, it is still quite low. Only 37 percent of the class of 2007 passed the required examinations and were awarded a Regents diploma. In other words, in 2007, more than 48,000 out of the 76,000 students who began in ninth grade four years earlier did not achieve a Regents diploma.

The Regents graduation rate for African American and Latino students in the city system is even lower. Less than 30 percent of African American and Latino students in the class of 2007 – and less than 25 percent of African American and Latino male students in that class – attained a Regents diploma.

The city's graduation rate is likely to worsen, because New York State is phasing out the local diploma. Starting with the cohort of ninth-graders that entered high school in 2008, New York State is requiring all general education students to earn a Regents diploma to graduate high school.³ This new requirement poses an enormous challenge to the city school system. Unless the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) seizes this moment of opportunity to strengthen teaching and learning, particularly in the schools with low Regents diploma rates, additional thousands of the school system's high school students will be threatened with failure to graduate.

¹ This is New York State's calculation of the city's graduation rate. New York City's traditional calculation, which counts August graduates, GEDs, and IEP diplomas, yields 62 percent. A new common city-state calculation will go into effect for the class of 2008 and will count August graduates, but not GEDs and IEP diplomas. This rate was 56 percent for the class of 2007 but is not available for prior years.

Throughout this report, we use the New York City and New York State terminology in referring to entering cohorts and graduating classes. Thus, the *class of 2007* comprises the students who were slated to graduate in June 2007, which was the *entering cohort in 2003*. The *entering cohort in 2008* will become the *graduating class of 2012*, which will be the first graduating class subject to the new Regents diploma requirements.

² In 2005, New York State added a third credential, the Advanced Regents diploma, which requires a 65 score on three additional examinations: Math B, a science course, and a Language Other than English. In this report, all references to Regents diplomas include both the regular Regents diploma and the Advanced Regents diploma.

³ Special education students will still be granted local diplomas.

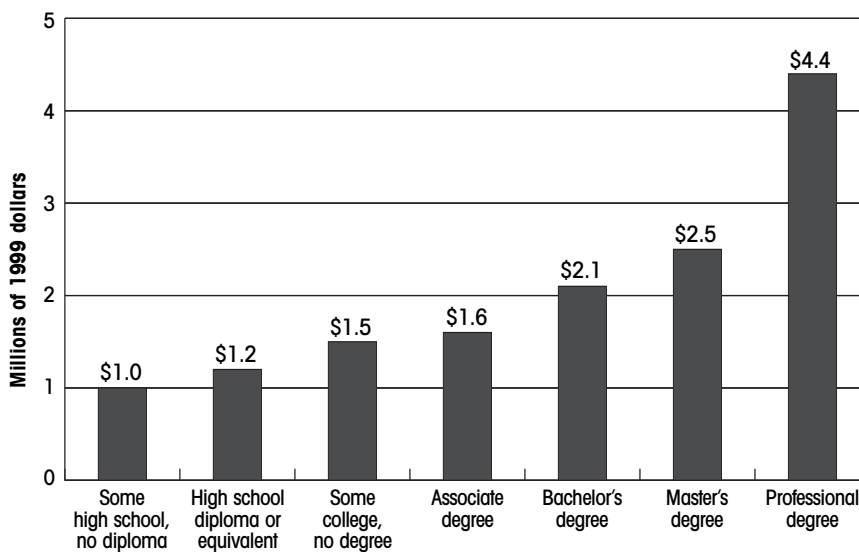
This policy change was promulgated by the New York State Board of Regents more than ten years ago and is part of efforts across the country to raise expectations and standards and to prepare all students for success in college and careers. It is widely acknowledged that the local diploma sets far too low a standard. Chancellor Klein has commented, “We need to raise high school graduation standards. I supported the elimination of the local diploma, which I think will put greater pressure on us” (Kolodner 2008). Higher standards for graduation are necessary to prepare all New York City public school students to enter college prepared to succeed academically; to reap the career, cultural, and social benefits a college education offers; and to effectively enter and succeed in the world of work.

This report does not take a position on the merit of the Regents exams as an accurate or equitable measure of high school proficiency. Rather, given the need to couple higher standards with equitable and effective supports for all the city’s students to meet those standards, the report argues that it is imperative that the city system increase curriculum rigor and enrichment, expert teaching, and support services and focus intensively on improving schools serving African American, Latino, and low-income students.

The Impact on Employment and Lifetime Earnings

Research has firmly established the economic benefits of increased educational attainment. Findings from the U.S. Census Bureau show that the lifetime earnings of college graduates

FIGURE 1
Synthetic work-life earnings estimates by highest level of educational attainment



NOTE: Earnings estimates are for full-time, year-round workers and are based on 1997–1999 work experience. “Synthetic” work-life earnings estimates are created by using the working population’s one-year annual earnings and summing their age-specific average earnings for people aged 25 to 64. The resulting totals represent what individuals with the same educational level could expect to earn, on average, in today’s dollars during a hypothetical forty-year working life.

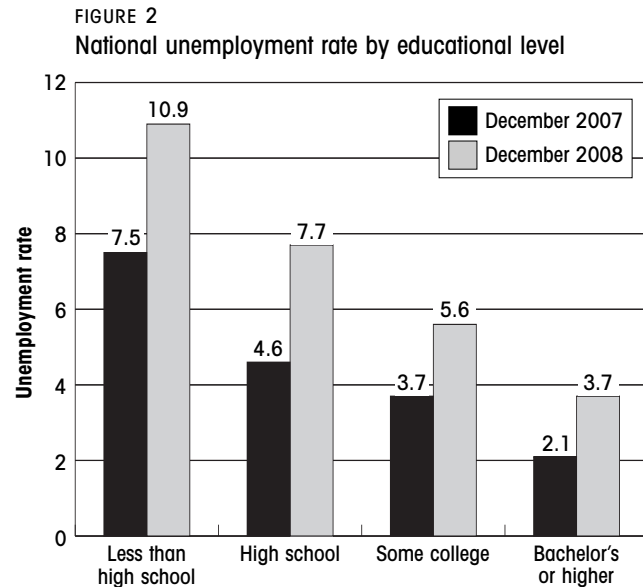
SOURCE: “More Education Means Higher Earnings – For Life,” *Occupational Outlook Quarterly*, Fall 2002, p. 48, based on Jennifer Cheeseman Day and Eric C. Newburger, *The Big Payoff: Educational Attainment and Synthetic Estimates of Work-Life Earnings*, Current Population Reports, P23–210. U.S. Census Bureau, July 2002; available at www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/p23-210.pdf (data are from Current Population Surveys, March 1998, 1999, 2000)

are 40 percent more than the earnings of graduates with some college but no degree, nearly twice as much as for high school graduates only, and more than twice as much for students who fail to graduate from high school (see Figure 1). The difference between failing to finish high school and graduating from high school has diminished, and college graduation and education

beyond the bachelor's degree have become necessary for many people to successfully sustain a fulfilling career.

These findings are from 2000 and do not reflect the current fiscal crisis. Yet this crisis is dramatically increasing unemployment rates across New York City and the nation. Because education credentials enable a wider variety of career choices and thus become even more important in a deteriorating economy, students who do not complete college face significant additional employment hurdles, and students who fail to complete high school will be at even more of a disadvantage.

Figure 2 shows that the current unemployment rate for high school graduates is double that of college graduates, while the unemployment rate for those who do not graduate high school is over 10 percent – nearly three times the rate for college-degree holders. Further, the increase in the unemployment rate over the last year is twice as large for people with a high school diploma or less than it is for college graduates.



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. Cited in Louis Uchitelle, "Broad Job Losses as Companies Face Sharp Downturn," *New York Times*, p. A1, January 10, 2009

A Looming Crisis

Given the intensifying linkage between education and lifetime earnings, the school system needs to radically improve its current performance, or the new Regents graduation requirements will put the system on a collision course that will damage the prospects of more of its students. African American and Latino students from low-income families comprise the vast majority of students now facing the threat of failing to graduate. Without a high school diploma, these young people will be unable to enroll in, let alone complete, college and may be unprepared for the demands of the modern workplace.

Success in the workplace demands advanced skills in critical thinking and problem solving, as well as a kind of intellectual agility that enables one to shift readily from one task or project to another. Workers who have strong language and math skills, technological capabilities, and a capacity to work well in teams are most likely to succeed. (Gates Foundation 2009, *Postsecondary Success*)

Without a high school or college degree, and without the complex skills necessary for survival in the increasingly global economy, thousands of students may face a work life in a secondary labor market offering only low-wage, low-benefit jobs and a lifetime of financial insecurity.

Moreover, the benefits of college going and college completion are not limited to economic success. College is a common venue that offers expanded opportunities for students' intellectual, social, and developmental growth and for developing their skills and critical capacities. College experience offers challenges that help students maximize their potential and define new goals, aspirations, and commitments, as well as opportunities to shape themselves as life-long learners and effective participants in our democracy.

A Historic Opportunity

The new Regents requirements can either become a historic schooling crisis or a historic opportunity to address the achievement gap that Chancellor Klein has called “the civil rights issue of our time” by radically reshaping New York City high school education to more effectively prepare students for college success and productive careers. The NYCDOE can seize this opportunity by targeting the many schools where a majority of students are currently failing to achieve Regents diplomas and aggressively intervening to ensure the highest-quality teaching, a rigorous and enriched curriculum, and a comprehensive web of supports. Moreover, to address the roots of this looming crisis, the NYCDOE needs to build on its work in low-performing middle schools and transform instruction in our low-performing elementary and middle schools so that students master the basic proficiencies and critical-thinking skills necessary to be effectively prepared to succeed in high school, graduate with a Regents diploma, and enter college fully prepared for success.

To complicate this critical task, that systemic improvement must take place within the context of the immense economic crisis facing our country. But historically, it is in periods of crisis that fresh ideas and innovative proposals emerge to shape our future. On the national level, President Barack Obama is using the financial crisis to rethink energy provision, financial regulation, tax equity, and health care and begin to address gaps and inefficiencies that have long been taken for granted. In this spirit, all the stakeholders critical to improving the education of the city's students need to come together to help the NYCDOE use the economic crisis and the federal stimulus as an opportunity to rethink teaching and learning, achieve equity across the system, and finally close the racial and class-based achievement gap.

This report defines the dimensions of the challenge to the NYCDOE that the state's new Regents graduation requirements present. The report's next section examines the city system's graduation rates and projects the huge number of high school students at risk of not graduating, once the new Regents requirements are phased in. The following section examines the consequences of the city system's failure to prepare its students for high school graduation and success in college, defines the limits this failure imposes on students' subsequent careers, and suggests some dimensions of the societal costs. The final section argues that the school system's response to the challenge of the new Regents requirements must be systemic, radical, and comprehensive and calls for a citywide Emergency Working Group on School and College Success to develop a plan to guide that work.

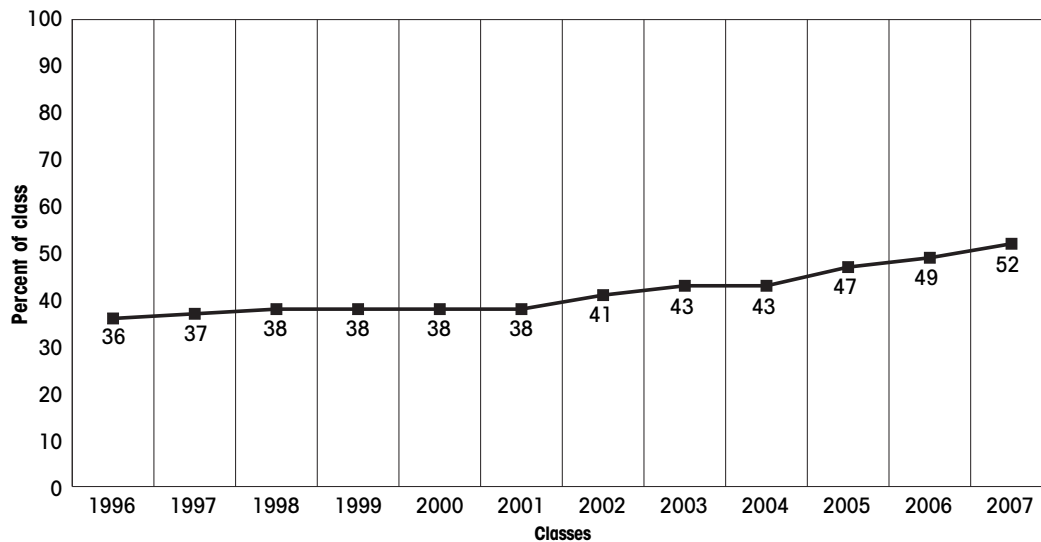
Dimensions and Disparities of the Graduation Crisis

In the face of rising global competition, we know that education is the critical, some would say the only, road to economic security. ... In fact, I believe the fight for quality education is about so much more than education. It's a fight for social justice.

– Arne Duncan, U.S. Senate confirmation hearing, 2009

The city system's high school performance has been on an upward trend over the past decade, with the greatest increases since 2001. The four-year graduation rate of the city's public high school students has increased from 36 percent in the 1995-1996 academic year to 52 percent in the 2006-2007 academic year (see Figure 3). The 2007-2008 graduation rate, when released, will count students who graduated in August of 2008, and so will show a somewhat greater increase.

FIGURE 3
NYC four-year high school graduation rates, classes of 1996-2007



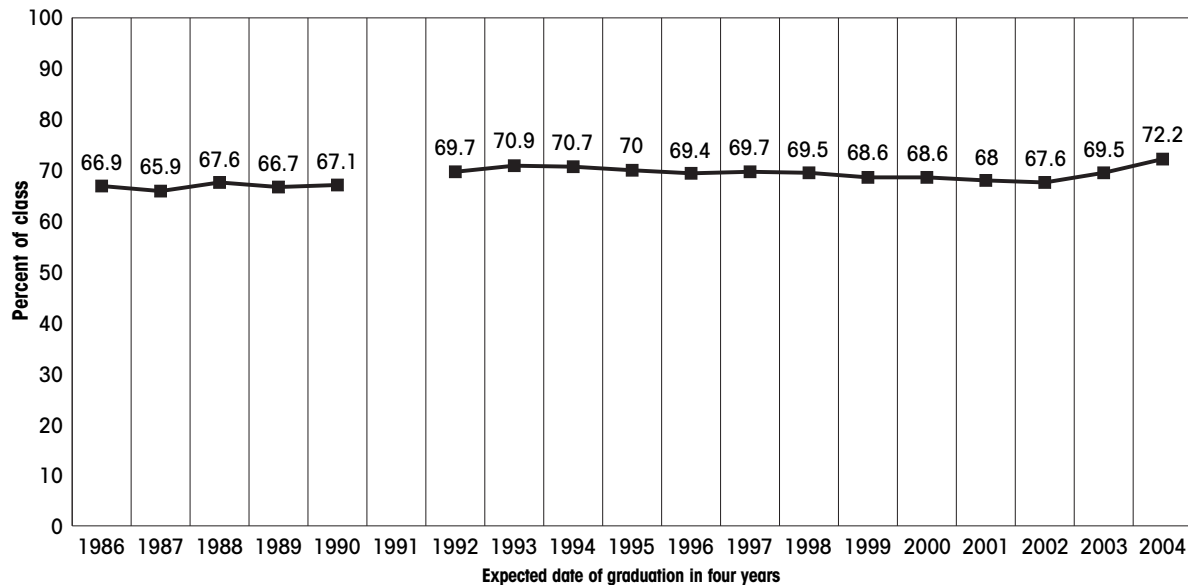
SOURCES: Classes of 1996 to 2006 (New York State data, see footnote 1 on page 5): NYSED. *Graduation Summary after Four Years: New York City Classes of 1995-2006* (PowerPoint)

Class of 2007 (New York City data, see footnote 1 on page 5): NYCDOE, Research and Policy Support Group. *Graduation Rates: Class of 2007 (2003 Cohort)*, August 11, 2008

In contrast, the seven-year graduation rate has been fairly consistent for the last two decades, slowly rising from approximately 67 percent for the class of 1986 to 72 percent for the class of 2004 (see Figure 4 on page 10).

But closer analysis of the city's graduation rates reveals a looming crisis. New York State schools have traditionally awarded two high school diplomas: the Regents diploma, which involves passing the state's five subject-specific Regents examinations with a 65, and a local

FIGURE 4
NYC seven-year high school graduation rates, classes of 1986–2004



NOTE: Each graduating class was followed for an additional three years; therefore, final outcomes for the class of 2004 were determined in June 2007; class of 2003, in June 2006; etc. A final follow-up was not completed for the class of 1991.

SOURCE: NYCDOE, Research and Policy Support Group. *The Class of 2004 Final Longitudinal Report: A Three-Year Follow-up Study* (see footnote 1 on page 5 re New York City data)

diploma, for which students need to score only a 55 on the five required exams. However, all the general education ninth-graders who entered public high school in September 2008 or later will have to achieve a Regents diploma in order to graduate.³ The local diploma, awarded to almost 16 percent of the city system's entering 2003 cohort who graduated in 2007, will be eliminated.

The current change is the latest stage in establishing more rigorous high school graduation requirements that the New York State Board of Regents began over a decade ago. These higher standards are crucial in an economy in which college graduation is increasingly essential for career success and financial security.

³ This change is part of a gradual phase-in beginning with students in this year's graduating class, who will have to score at least a 65 on two Regents exams in order to graduate. Each subsequent year's graduates will have to score at least a 65 on one additional exam, until this year's ninth-graders will be required to score at least a 65 on all five Regents exams. Special education students are exempted from this change.

⁴ In 2005, state graduation requirements were changed to allow students to earn a Regents diploma by passing five exams, rather than the original eight exams. Thus, Regents graduation rates are not comparable prior to 2005.

⁵ The seven-year graduation rate is only available using the city's methodology for calculating graduation rates.

However, as New York State phases in the new graduation requirements, the low rate of Regents diploma acquisition threatens to grow to catastrophic dimensions in New York City. In 2007, only 37 percent of the students who entered as ninth-graders four years earlier graduated with a Regents diploma. This rate has risen from 30 percent to 37 percent since the change

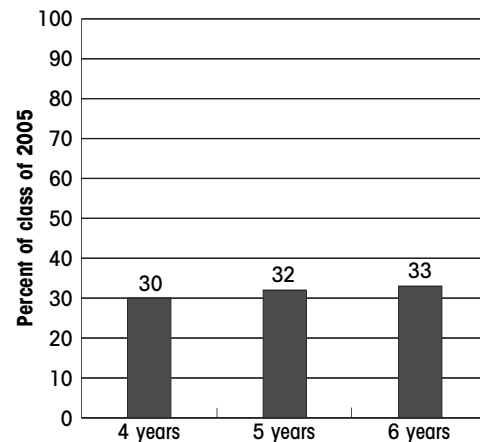
in Regents diploma requirements in 2005 and, in a positive sign, constitutes a growing percentage of the total graduation rate.⁴ Still, the Regents graduation rate is dismally low. And historically, very few of the students who stay beyond four years graduate with Regents diplomas (see Figure 5).⁵

Gaps by Race, Income, and Gender

When the graduation outcomes are disaggregated by race and class, they reveal stark inequities. While more than 57 percent of the city's White high school students attained a Regents diploma in 2007, only 28 percent of African American students, and only 26 percent of Latino students, were awarded this more demanding diploma. Worse, less than 23 percent of African American and Latino male students attained the Regents diploma in 2007 (see Figure 6).

The Regents graduation rate has steadily increased for all student population groups across the past three years (see Figure 7). Since 2005, more than 5,500 additional students have achieved Regents diplomas. However, the gap between White students' Regents diploma acquisition rates and the rates of African American and Latino students has not narrowed.

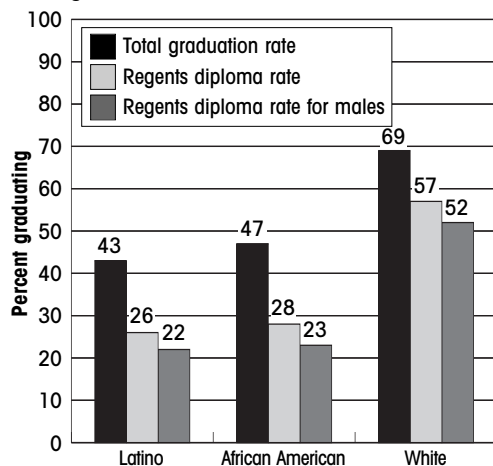
FIGURE 5
NYC four-, five- and six-year Regents graduation rates, class of 2005



NOTE: Figures are the sum of data disaggregated by race and gender.

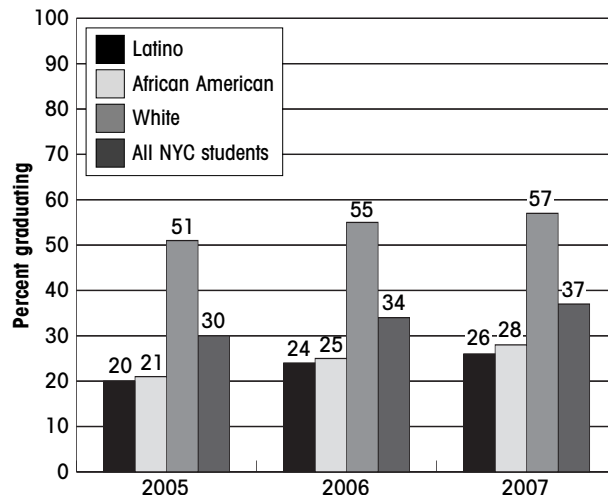
SOURCE: NYCDOE, Research and Policy Support Group. *Graduation Rates: Class of 2007 (2003 Cohort)*, August 11, 2008

FIGURE 6
NYC four-year graduation rates by race and gender, class of 2007



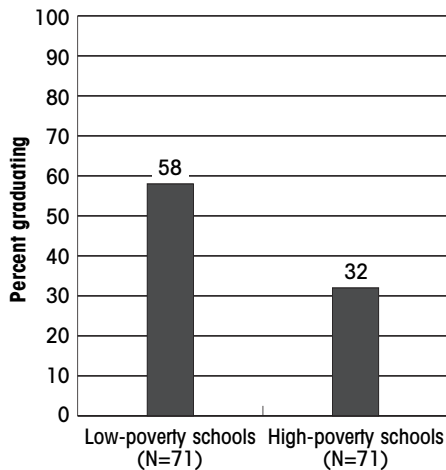
SOURCES: NYCDOE, Research and Policy Support Group. *Graduation Rates: Class of 2007 (2003 Cohort)*, August 11, 2008; *The Class of 2007 Four-Year Longitudinal Report and 2006-2007 Event Dropout Rates*

FIGURE 7
NYC four-year Regents graduation gap by race, classes of 2005-2007



SOURCE: NYCDOE, Research and Policy Support Group. *Graduation Rates: Class of 2007 (2003 Cohort)*, August 11, 2008

FIGURE 8
Regents graduation rates in high- and low-poverty high schools, class of 2007

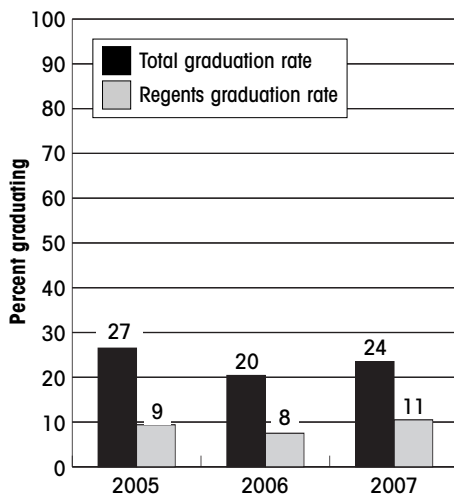


SOURCES: NYCDOE, *Annual School Report, 2005–2006*; NYSED, *State Report Card 2006–2007*

The looming crisis presents an opportunity to initiate new strategies to tackle this persistent achievement gap.

Regents diploma acquisition rates are also differentiated by income status. In low-poverty high schools, 58 percent of students graduate with a Regents diploma, compared with only 32 percent in high-poverty high schools (see Figure 8).⁶ This disparity is predictable because much research, including the CEJ (2007, 2008) analyses of middle school achievement, has documented the inequities in resources and outcomes associated with income. Only with bold, targeted interventions to support these high-poverty schools will the school system finally end these class-based inequities.

FIGURE 9
NYC four-year graduation rates for English language learners, classes of 2005–2007



SOURCE: NYCDOE, Research and Policy Support Group, *Graduation Rates: Class of 2007 (2003 Cohort)*, August 11, 2008

Gaps for English Language Learners and Students with Disabilities

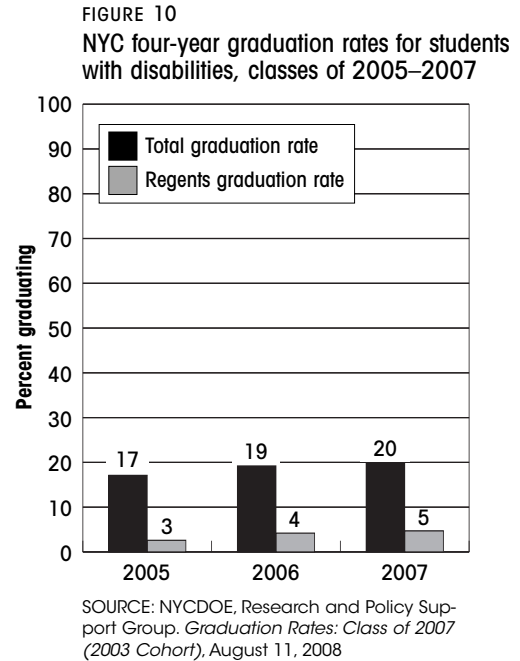
More than 60 percent of the school system's students are immigrants or the children of immigrants. Because the first language of many of these students is not English, they are tested for English language ability on entry to the city school system. Many subsequently are classified as English language learners (ELLs) and assigned to bilingual or English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. Advocacy and community groups across the city have consistently fought to improve the instruction and support services the school system provides to ELLs (NYIC 2008). But both the ELL high school graduation rate and the ELL Regents acquisition rate have always been very low. And while the Regents graduation rate has increased slightly, the overall graduation rate has fallen across the last three years.

As Figure 9 indicates, less than a quarter of the ELL students in the class of 2007 graduated in four years, and one-tenth graduated with a Regents diploma. This means that out of more than 9,000 ELL students in the class of 2007, fewer than 1,000 earned a Regents diploma in

four years. Under the new Regents graduation requirements, almost 90 percent of ELL students are likely to fail to graduate in four years. Moreover, rates of immigrant entry to New York City and, therefore, rates of entry of immigrant and second-language students into the New York City school system, show few signs of abating. Therefore, this systemic failure to effectively educate ELL students, as evidenced by the very low rate of ELL graduation and the even lower rate of ELL Regents diploma acquisition, will exacerbate the challenges posed by the new Regents requirements.

The graduation rate of students with disabilities has risen modestly across the past three years, from roughly 17 percent to 20 percent. The Regents graduation rate for these students is less than 5 percent (see Figure 10).⁷

Of the more than 8,000 students with disabilities in the New York City class of 2007, only 395 graduated with a Regents diploma in four years. Under the new requirements, students with disabilities will still be allowed to graduate with a local diploma. However, as Figure 10 indicates, much more must be done to raise the local diploma acquisition rate within this student population.



Most Schools Ill Equipped for Higher Graduation Standards

The vast majority of New York City high schools are far from meeting the new graduation requirements. Figure 11 (on page 14) shows that in 2007, 208 high schools, or 71 percent of the school system's high schools, failed to graduate a majority of their students with a Regents diploma in four years. Only 84 high schools had a majority of their students attain a Regents diploma in four years.

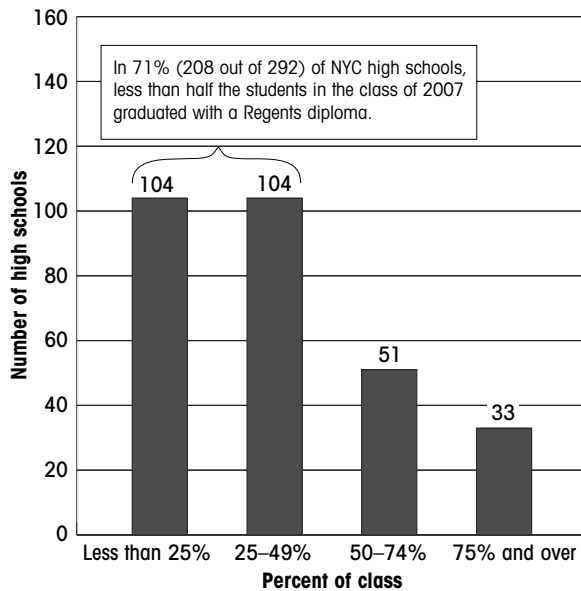
Furthermore, approximately 22,000 New York City high school students attend a school where more than three-quarters of the students fail to graduate with a Regents diploma in four years. To illustrate this impact on the local level, consider the outcomes of Bushwick Leaders High School for Academic

Excellence, a relatively high-performing small high school in Brooklyn. Bushwick Leaders High School had 107 students entering ninth grade in 2003, 75 of whom graduated four years later – a 70 percent graduation rate, well above the city average.

⁶ Throughout the report, *low-poverty* and *high-poverty* high schools are defined as schools in the lowest and highest quartile, respectively, of students eligible for free lunch in 2005–2006.

⁷ Many students with disabilities who have not been able to achieve local or Regents diplomas have traditionally been awarded IEP diplomas, which are certificates of completion. IEP diplomas are not accepted by most colleges, the military, and some vocational programs and are not currently counted in calculations of the official graduation rates.

FIGURE 11
Distribution of NYC high schools by four-year Regents graduation rate, class of 2007

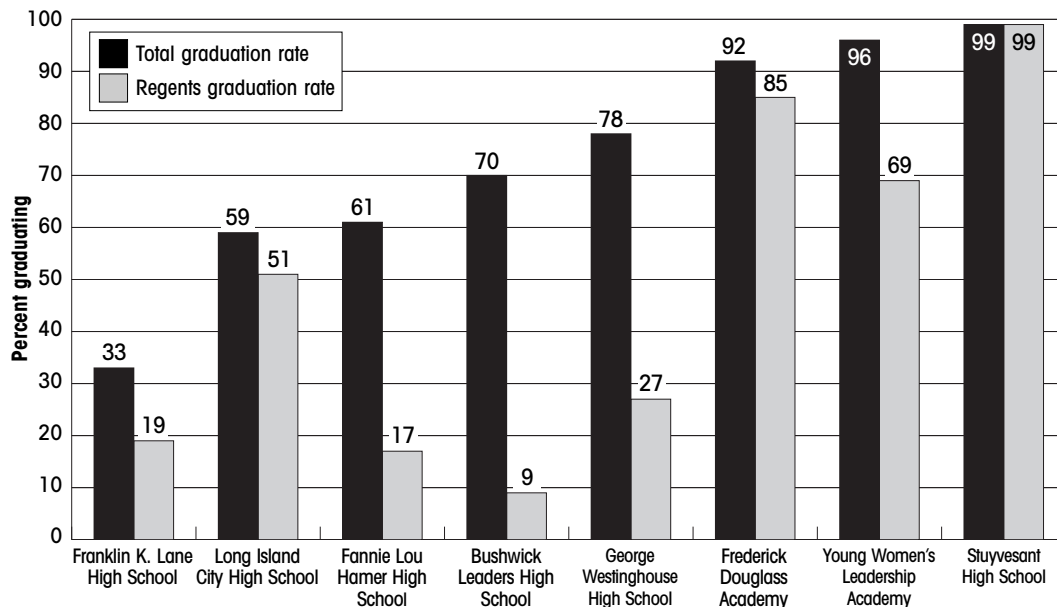


SOURCE: NYCDOE, Research and Policy Support Group. *The Class of 2007 Four-Year Longitudinal Report and 2006-2007 Event Dropout Rates*

However, only ten of those graduates received a Regents diploma. Under the new requirements, the school's graduation rate would have been 9 percent. Figure 12 provides data for other high schools with varied Regents graduation rates. Note that Stuyvesant High School and similar specialized and exam high schools will not be affected by the new requirement, because almost 100 percent of their students already graduate with Regents diplomas.

If the new Regents diploma requirements had been in place for the high school class that graduated in June 2007, only 37 percent of the 76,000 students in the cohort that entered high school in 2003 – 27,740 students – would have graduated with a Regents diploma in four years. More than 10,000 general education students who

FIGURE 12
Sample of NYC high schools by four-year graduation rates, class of 2007



SOURCE: NYCDOE, Research and Policy Support Group. *The Class of 2007 Four-Year Longitudinal Report and 2006-2007 Event Dropout Rates*

received local diplomas would not have graduated, meaning that 47,000 students would not have attained a Regents diploma and would have failed to graduate. This number includes more than 70 percent of the African American and Latino students and 90 percent of the ELL students in that cohort. These rates illustrate the dimensions of the disaster threatening New York City's public school students.

High standards are part of the city's responsibility to its youth, and the school system must rise to this challenge – not retreat from it. Only a pathbreaking effort to transform teaching and learning in our low-performing schools will prevent the new Regents graduation requirements from consigning a majority of the city's high school students, most of them African American and Latino, many of them poor, including many ELLs and students with disabilities, to non-graduation and, thus, more limited options in American society. The next section of this report examines the consequences of the potential graduation crisis.

Consequences of the Crisis

Addressing the achievement gap and helping our students graduate from our schools ready for college or work is not a frill or an extra; these steps are fundamental necessities.

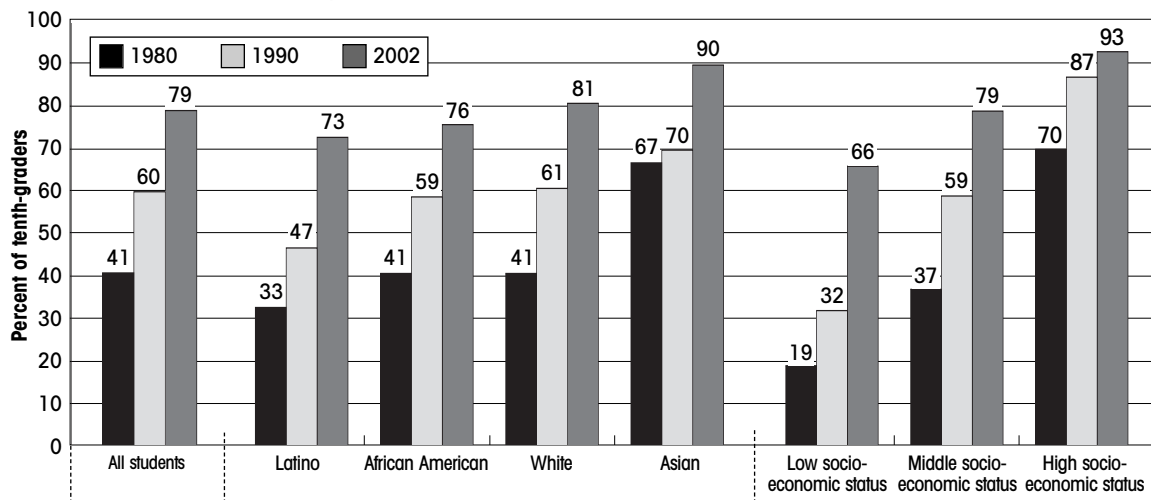
– Chancellor Joel Klein, Principals’ Weekly

Student expectations for enrolling in college and attaining a bachelor’s degree have been rising rapidly across the country. In 1980, only 41 percent of the tenth-graders surveyed in a national study expected to attain a bachelor’s degree. By 2002, that percentage had almost doubled. Moreover, those expectations have risen commensurately for all racial-ethnic groups and all socio-economic categories (see Figure 13).

Low College Aspirations in New York City

These rising college aspirations also characterize big-city student populations. In the 2005 Consortium on Chicago School Research survey of Chicago’s high school seniors, 78 percent stated that they hoped to complete a bachelor’s degree or higher (Roderick, Nagaoka & Allensworth 2006, p. 2). Yet, college aspirations, as reported in the *New York State Report Card*, are far lower among students in the New York City school system. In 2007, only 47 percent of the New York City system’s high school graduates aspired to attend a four-year college, and 17 percent aspired to attend a two-year college (NYSED 2007).⁸

FIGURE 13
U.S. tenth-graders who expect to attain a bachelor’s degree or higher



NOTE: Low socioeconomic status represents the bottom 20 percent of family income; high socioeconomic status is the top 20 percent of family income. Socioeconomic status was determined using parents’ and students’ reports of parental educational attainment, occupation, and family income.

SOURCE: Melissa Roderick, Jenny Nagaoka, Elaine Allensworth, et al. *From High School to the Future: A First Look at Chicago Public School Graduates’ College Enrollment, College Preparation, and Graduation from Four-Year Colleges*, Figure I-1, p. 3. Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research, April 2006

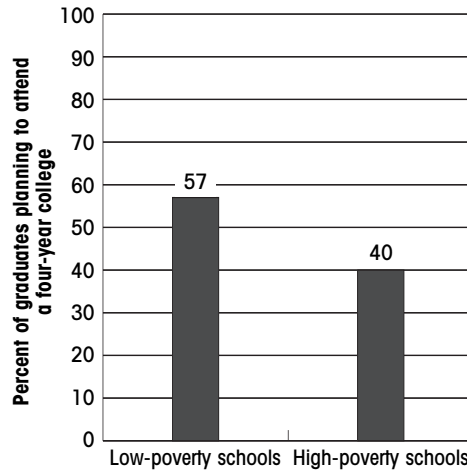
Moreover, aspirations for college going and attaining a bachelor's degree are not uniformly developed across the New York City school system. Rather, those aspirations are characterized by disparities between schools based on poverty. As David Conley (2007), a national expert in college preparedness, indicates, students "from low-income families are particularly vulnerable to a [school] system that does not send clear signals to students on how ready they are for college (p. 10)." Figure 14 shows that only 40 percent of the students in New York City's high-poverty public high schools aspire to attend college, while almost 57 percent of students in low-poverty high schools report such college aspirations. But both rates are far lower than the aspiration rates of U.S. tenth-graders or Chicago Public School seniors.

These low expectations are pervasive across all types of high schools in New York City, as shown in Figure 15.⁹ It is an encouraging sign for current systemic reform efforts that students in the new small high schools have higher rates of college aspiration. But the low rate of college aspiration across all high school types dramatizes the school system's need to do more to develop high expectations for all its students.

⁸ That percentage would undoubtedly have been lower if seniors, rather than graduates, had been surveyed, as in the Chicago research.

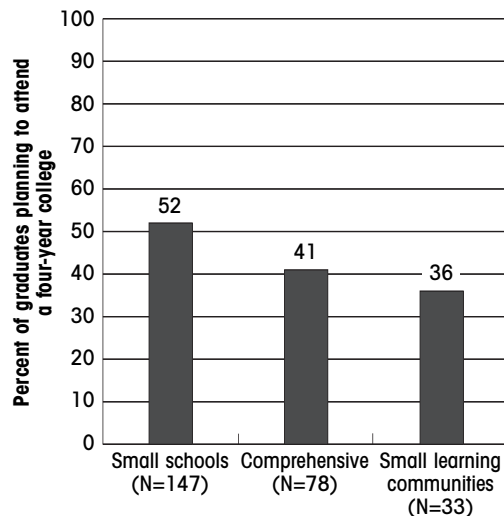
⁹ Schools in Figure 15 are categorized as follows: comprehensive high schools are large neighborhood high schools with more than 500 students. Small learning communities are academic communities of about 400 students within larger comprehensive high schools. Small schools are theme-based schools formed in partnership with outside partner organizations and include New Century High Schools.

FIGURE 14
College aspirations in NYC high schools
by poverty level, 2006-2007



SOURCE: NYSED, *School Report Cards, 2006-2007*

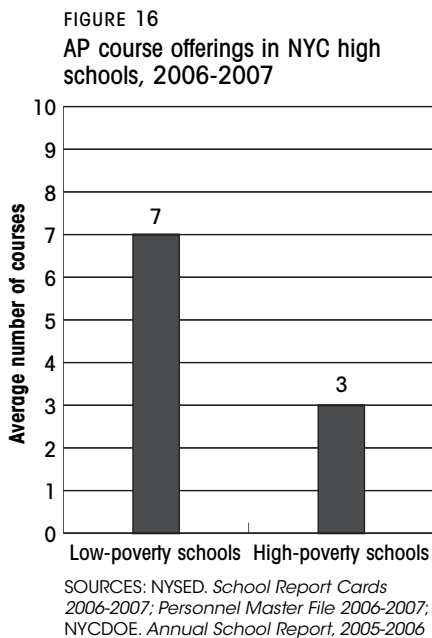
FIGURE 15
College aspirations in NYC high schools
by school structure, 2005-2006



SOURCE: NYCDOE, *Annual School Report, 2005-2006*

Unequal AP Offerings by Income Level

Disparities in Advanced Placement (AP) offerings across the city's high schools demonstrate another dimension of the disparities in expectations for college going and college success. Students who enroll and excel in AP courses in major academic subjects in high school are eligible to skip college introductory courses and proceed to higher-level courses. Many students, parents, and college advisors believe that excelling in AP courses in high school increases students' chances of college admission and improves their college performance.



As Figure 16 indicates, low-poverty schools provide more than double the average number of AP courses offered by high-poverty high schools. Thus, students in high-poverty city high schools have 50 percent less opportunity to take an AP course than their counterparts in low-poverty high schools. High-poverty high schools serve a vast majority of African American and Latino students.

High Levels of Remediation at CUNY

The failure of too many of the city's high schools to prepare *all* students for college success is evidenced by the enormous need for remediation across the City University of New York (CUNY) colleges. Many of the city system's high school graduates who subsequently attend two- or four-year colleges enroll in one of the CUNY colleges. In the 2007-2008 academic year, more

than 80 percent of the students entering CUNY's community colleges failed their placement exams in reading, writing, or math and were required to take remedial courses. The vast majority of those remedial students were New York City public high school graduates (Kolodner 2008).

These levels of remediation demonstrate that the local diploma is not an acceptable standard for students entering higher education and the job market in today's economy. Even the Regents diploma is widely considered too low a standard for college readiness. Although New York City students can earn a Regents diploma, and even an Advanced Regents diploma, by scoring a 65 on the math and English exams, they must score a 75 to be eligible for college-level coursework at four-year CUNY colleges. This means that thousands of New York City public high school students who graduate with a Regents diploma are still not prepared for four-year college.

Stark consequences attend this failure to prepare New York City students for college success. As Thomas Bailey, George O'Neill, and Abby O'Neill (2007) write about New York City students entering the CUNY system:

We are failing these students in profound ways. A majority of incoming students expect to earn a bachelor's degree but only 18 percent obtain one within eight years of enrolling. Some 15 percent earn an associate degree. Many fail to make it through their first year, much less reap the benefits of programs that help them take advantage of new opportunities in the global economy. (p. 4)

Far too many New York City public school students are caught in this systemic vise of low expectations and inadequate academic preparation. Without higher graduation standards and the rigor and supports necessary to meet those standards, tens of thousands of New York City students will be unable to enroll and succeed in two- or four-year colleges.

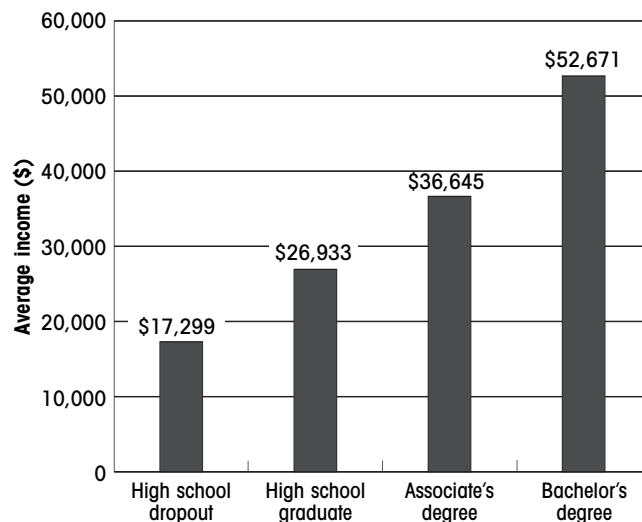
Challenge and Opportunity of Historic Proportions

New York State has delayed this increase in its graduation standards for years. The college-preparatory standards created by the Board of Regents in 1984 have been eroded across the subsequent two decades. When the Regents diploma requirements were first established, students were required to pass eight exams – including a foreign language, two science, and two math. In 2005, with New York City facing an 18 percent Regents graduation rate, New York State lowered the standards to allow students to earn a Regents diploma by passing only five of the eight exams. With the New York State requirements now in place for this year's ninth-graders, New York City must develop a plan to provide the critical supports necessary to enable our students to meet these higher standards.

As Figure 17 indicates, average income in the United States in 2005 was highly differentiated by educational attainment. Earners with bachelor's degrees had almost three times the annual income of earners who had not attained a high school degree, and almost double the income of high school graduates with no college experience.

Thus, the implementation of the new Regents requirements and the elimination of the local diploma present both a

FIGURE 17
Average U.S. income by education level, 2005

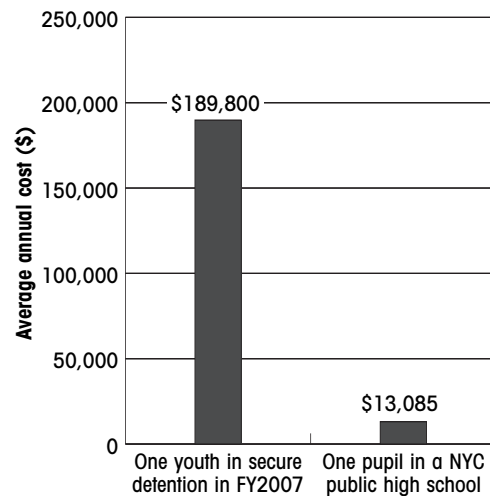


SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, cited in Alliance for Excellent Education, *The High Cost of High School Dropouts*, Issue Brief, October 2007

challenge and an opportunity of immense proportions that is critical to realizing this city and this country's historic promise of equal opportunity. In 2007, the New York City school system had close to 10,000 dropouts, who represented an estimated lifetime cost to the city's economy of approximately \$2.5 billion (AEE 2007). Without a radical transformation of current opportunities to learn at the city's low-performing schools, the number of young people who drop out of high school because they fail to meet the new Regents standards may well dramatically escalate.

These many thousands of young people are more likely to be consigned to the low-wage, limited-benefit, and temporary employment sectors of the local and national economy. Unless the school system significantly increases high school performance, a rising unemployment rate will result in an increase in the social and economic costs of safety-net programs such as unemployment benefits, public assistance, emergency room visits for people without health insurance, and food stamps for families that are unable to support themselves. For these unemployed and underemployed young people, entry to the prison industrial complex is more likely than entry to college and subsequent careers in the global economy, at an enormous cost not only to the young people themselves, but also to all of us, as Figure 18 so starkly demonstrates.

FIGURE 18
Annual cost of incarcerating vs. educating a NYC youth, FY2007



SOURCES: Detention cost: *Mayor's Management Report, Fiscal Year 2007*, p. 142 (annual cost based on per diem cost of \$551); Education cost: *Mayor's Management Report, Fiscal Year 2006*, p. 17

Changing Futures: A Time for Bold Action

To ensure all young people in America graduate high school ready for success, our nation must dramatically change the way we educate our children.

– *Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation*, College-Ready

The scope and scale of the systemic transformation our students need to meet the new graduation requirements is especially daunting in a deteriorating economy. Yet, historically, radical reforms have been more likely in periods of economic, political, and social crisis, when innovative ideas flourish and new paradigms take hold and shape future generations. Now is such a time for New York City schools.

Although graduation rates have been on a steady rise, neither the city school system's past policies and practices, nor the reforms introduced during the seven years of mayoral control of public education, are sufficient to meet the challenge of the new Regents graduation requirements. As the Gates Foundation's 2009 *College Ready* report indicates about the national small schools effort:

While some networks of new, small schools have students performing well above district averages, the percentage of students scoring at high levels of achievement still remains short of where it needs to be to meet our goal.

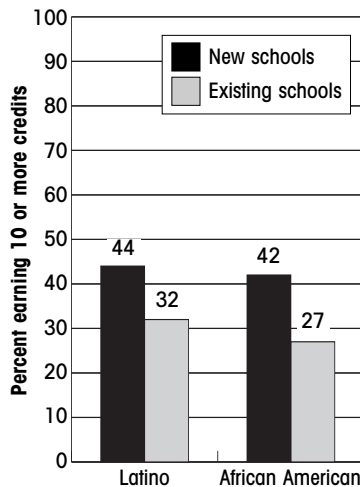
The Need for a Comprehensive Improvement Plan

The New York City school system has been a national pioneer in designing and developing new small high schools. A multi-year evaluation of the New Century High Schools project, initiated by the New Visions for Public Schools reform organization, found that 78 percent of students in the New Century schools' class of 2006 graduated high school in four years, 29 percentage points higher than the citywide average for that year. While this rate is encouraging, only 36 percent of the cohort achieved a Regents diploma – approximately the same as the citywide rate. That same evaluation found that a group of comparison schools selected from the rest of the city system actually achieved a higher cohort Regents graduation rate than the New Century schools (Foley, Klinge & Reisner 2007). Thus, even the new small schools must do much more to prepare all their students to meet the new Regents graduation requirements.

The great majority of the system's high schools – not just its new small high schools – need to similarly redesign their teaching and learning efforts to meet the new Regents diploma challenges. Figure 19 on page 22 uses the percentage of ninth-grade high school students earning at least ten credits as a predictor of eventual graduation. As the graph shows, in the 2006-2007 school year, only 44 percent of ninth-grade Latino students enrolled in new high schools and only 32 percent in existing high schools met that benchmark. Only 42 percent

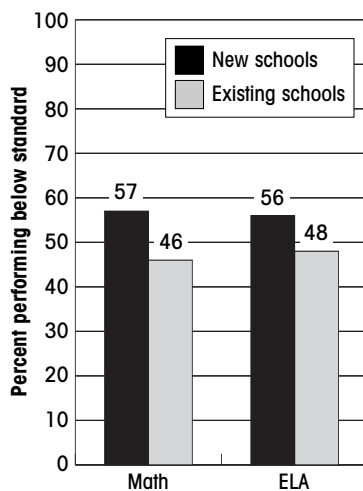
of ninth-grade African American students in new small schools and only 27 percent in existing schools met that benchmark.¹⁰

FIGURE 19
Ninth-graders' progress toward graduation by race, 2007



SOURCE: NYCDOE, Office of Portfolio Development. *English Language Learners in New Schools*, December 2008

FIGURE 20
Academic level of incoming ninth-graders in NYC high schools, 2007



SOURCE: NYCDOE, Office of Portfolio Development. *English Language Learners in New Schools*, December 2008

Thus, far less than half of all Latino and African American high school students were on track to graduate, in terms of their rate of credit accumulation, after completing their ninth-grade year in 2006-2007, the year before the new Regents requirements were phased in. If both new and existing high schools do not radically improve their instruction and their student performance, a great majority of the city system's African American and Latino students will be tracked for failure and non-graduation once the new Regents requirements are implemented.

In order to significantly close the achievement gap and meet this new challenge, elementary and middle schools also need to significantly improve their instruction. As Figure 20 indicates, 46 percent of the 2007-2008 incoming ninth-graders entering existing schools and 57 percent of the incoming ninth-graders entering new schools were below state standards in math. In English language arts, 48 percent of the incoming ninth-graders in existing schools and 56 percent in new schools were below state standards.

These outcomes demonstrate how poorly many of the system's middle schools have historically prepared their students for high school success. The NYCDOE, in collaboration with CEJ, has recently begun the Campaign for Middle School Success. While that program is a strong starting point, it is designed to support significant change in a limited number of schools and will not be sufficient to effectively prepare all middle school students for high school.

The graduation crisis dramatizes the urgent need to improve academic performance across far too many of the city's schools, particularly those serving low-income African American and Latino students. The majority of the system's students are not achieving sufficient content and

¹⁰ "New schools" are schools that have been created since 2002, and "existing schools" refer to the remainder.

skills mastery to meet state standards at middle school or high school levels so that they can eventually pass the Regents exams and graduate. To meet this challenge, particularly when the city school system is facing budget cuts, the NYC Coalition for Educational Justice calls on the NYCDOE and NYSED to immediately form an Emergency Working Group on School and College Success to create a comprehensive plan to raise the performance of city schools across the next three years. The Working Group should focus particularly on schools in which high percentages of students are not on track to earn Regents diplomas, to enable all students to graduate with a Regents diploma in 2012 and beyond and be prepared to enroll and succeed in post-secondary education.

Proposals for Transforming Teaching and Learning

CEJ offers the following broad proposals to spur an urgent public discussion about the scale and scope of the transformation efforts necessary to close the achievement gap and prepare all students to graduate with a Regents diploma and to succeed in post-secondary education and the world of work.

Redesign and Expand Time for Learning

CEJ believes that to definitively close the achievement gap, all low-performing schools need to initiate an ambitious effort to significantly redesign and expand time for learning. Principals, teachers, students, and parents should work together to redesign the structure of the school day, add 25 percent more time, and use these additional hours to provide more diversity and individuation of instruction, more effectively. The additional time should include:

- rigorous academic curriculum that challenges students;
- enrichment courses in arts and sports that engage students' creative energies;
- summer academies before sixth and ninth grade that ease difficult transitions.

The redesigned school day should also support the organization of school faculties into teacher teams, with daily time dedicated to:

- collectively analyze student data;
- plan for instructional improvement with grade-level and subject-matter teachers;
- participate in school-based, content-driven professional development.

The eight-hour school day, when implemented as a redesign of teaching and learning, has been effective across the country in rapidly raising student achievement. It is one of President Obama's education priorities and is a critical component of strategies designed to close the achievement gap.

Community Schools

All low-performing schools should be transformed into community schools where comprehensive medical, social, and emotional support services are provided to students and their families inside the school and a strong safety net addresses the challenges that interfere with learning. Early warning systems should be established in each school to quickly identify student and family needs and match them with the necessary services. Full community schools should include:

- physical and mental health clinics for students and their families, targeted to key community health issues;
- adult education classes, legal services, and translation services to support families' development and integration into the school;
- on-site staff from community-based and city agencies;
- high school and college counseling starting in the sixth grade.

These services must be fully integrated into school operations and, when possible, provided by local community organizations that can root them in the culture, languages, and routines of neighborhood students and their families.

Such aggressive, comprehensive strategies are essential to tackle the persistent inequities in the NYC school system that threaten to turn the higher graduation standards into a dropout epidemic. CEJ invites all the stakeholders committed to improving young peoples' futures to seize this opportunity to improve schooling for all the city's students.

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Member Organizations of the NYC Coalition for Educational Justice

ACORN is a national membership organization of low- and moderate-income families with a thirty-year history of organizing for social change. The NYC ACORN Schools Office has developed new public schools and produced policy studies demonstrating racial and economic inequities in the school system.

Cypress Hills Advocates for Education (CHAFE) was formed in 1997 by a group of parents and neighborhood residents concerned with the quality of public education in Cypress Hills, Brooklyn. Affiliated with the Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation, CHAFE has used outreach, advocacy, education, and community organizing to fight for neighborhood schools that provide all children with a quality, safe, and modern education.

Highbridge Community Life Center has been providing a wide range of educational and social services since 1979, including job-training programs and entitlement assistance to families living in the Highbridge neighborhood.

Make the Road New York is a major force for social change in New York City, with more than 3,000 members who lead the organization in Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island. Make the Road New York offers a variety of services and strategies for neighborhood improvement, including organizing for civil rights and economic justice, legal services, educational programs, and youth development.

New Settlement Apartments owns and operates almost 1,000 units of low- and moderate-income housing in the Mount Eden neighborhood and provides educational and community-service programs to area residents.

New York Civic Participation Project is a collaboration of labor unions and community groups organizing union members in the neighborhoods where they live. The member organizations – SEIU Local 32BJ, AFSCME DC-37, HERE Local 100, the National Employment Law Project, and Make the Road by Walking – represent hundreds of thousands of workers and decades of success fighting for immigrant and worker rights in New York.

Queens Congregations United for Action (QCUA) is a coalition of faith-based institutions working together to empower and unite the community to achieve social justice through organizing. QCUA has organized and won victories on traffic safety, sanitation, neighborhood services, affordable housing, and education issues in the Corona and Elmhurst neighborhoods of Queens.

United Federation of Teachers Brooklyn Parent Outreach Committee works to strengthen home–school collaborations and increase parent involvement and responsibility.

1199 Child Care Fund has established the Public Education Advocacy Project to organize Hospital and Health Care Workers Union members, many of whose children attend public school, to participate in school-improvement activities.

The work of CEJ and its member organizations is supported by the Community Organizing and Engagement group of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. Community Organizing and Engagement staff based in New York City have provided a wide range of strategic support for community organizing for school reform in New York City since 1995, including data analysis, research, and training.

Additional copies of this report are available from
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