

Another backward step on education

Relaxing Regents standards continues erosion of New York's educational rigor

BY DIA BRYANT AND JEFF SMINK
Guest essay

New York was once a national leader in K-12 education and academic rigor, largely due to the end-of-course Regents exams that have long been a hallmark of the state's education system.

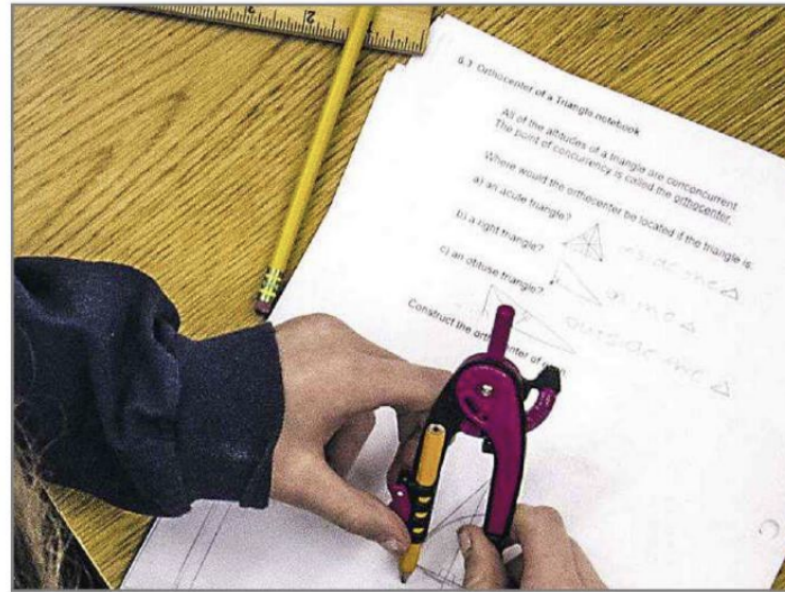
Sadly, that is no longer the case.

Over the past decade, state education leaders have diminished the once-prestigious Regents diploma by weakening graduation requirements and making it far easier for students to pass the exams. The trend continued last week as the Board of Regents approved an amendment that would allow students scoring as low as 50% on Regents exams to pass and earn their diplomas. This means, as a recent online article from a New York teacher illustrated, that due to score scaling, students could now pass the Regents Algebra 1 exam by getting correct just 20% of the questions — or 17 out of 86.

The amendment, which passed unanimously, also eliminates a requirement that students who fail exams are to be provided with academic support and an opportunity to retake the exam. It automatically enters students who fail the exam into a "special appeal" of their scores, putting the onus on parents, not schools, to ensure their students receive academic assistance.

While the amendment is temporary and designed to address the impact of the pandemic on students, it sends the wrong message to students, teachers, and parents as we begin one of the most important school years in recent history.

The amendment is particularly egregious since schools across New York State have received more than \$9 billion in federal funds and record increases in state aid designated in part to help students catch up academically from the pandemic. Schools have had ample time to develop and implement



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strategies using these funds to help identify students at risk of not graduating and provide extra support, tutoring, and other evidence-based instructional resources that prepare them for success on both Regents exams and postsecondary plans.

New York's actions stand in stark contrast to Massachusetts, which recently raised its graduation requirements, citing links between its state exit exams

and the long-term success of students. While there was strong opposition from teachers unions and others, the state board of education voted, 8-3, to raise the standard.

This tale of two states raises key questions for New York's education leaders. What message does a weakened New York diploma send to colleges and employers? Which state will produce students better prepared for college and ca-

reer?

What can state education leaders do? To start, there needs to be more urgency in using federal relief funds to provide holistic support to students at risk of not graduating. The state also needs to improve guidance to districts on how these funds should be utilized and require transparency on how they are spent.

New York's educational system is currently moving in the wrong direction, but it's not too late to change course. The state is convening a Blue Ribbon Commission on graduation requirements, providing an opportunity to better balance the need for flexibility with necessary accountability and academic rigor. Achieving this balance will result in better-prepared students and a return to national prominence for New York's once-proud educational system.

■ **THIS GUEST ESSAY** reflects the views of Dia Bryant, executive director of The Education Trust-New York and member of the state's Blue Ribbon Commission on Graduation Requirements, and Jeff Smink, deputy director at The Education Trust-New York.

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