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A Year of Early Exits:

A Closer Look at High School Enrollment Losses During the First Full Pandemic School Year

Introduction

In a recent [brief](#), IBO examined New York City enrollment losses following the first full school year of the pandemic (2020-2021). Within traditional public schools in Districts 1-32, IBO found a decrease in student retention after that year. When fewer students returned, overall enrollment in traditional public schools declined. Charter schools, which experienced a similar decrease in retention, offset that enrollment loss with a slight increase in the number of new enrollees. In that analysis, IBO excluded 12th graders, who would typically graduate and not return the following year, as well as students who graduated early, having earned any sort of diploma, before their 12th grade year. As a follow-up, IBO investigated discharge codes for a range of high school outcomes, including early graduates, that might lead a student to exit the school system early and not continue their schooling elsewhere. The Department of Education (DOE) assigns discharge codes to students who leave the city's public school system, as required by New York State and the [DOE Chancellor's Regulation A-240](#). We begin by discussing several policy changes during the pandemic that provided unique opportunities for students either to continue schooling past their traditionally eligible age (and thereby delay discharging from the school system), or to graduate without certain requirements that were difficult to administer during the pandemic.

Pandemic Changes That May Have Affected Students' Decisions to Extend Their Schooling or Graduate Early

Changes to Allow Extended Enrollment. During the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years, New York City allowed students who turned 21 during the school year to return to schools the next fall; before the pandemic, those students would have otherwise "aged out" of the school system.¹

Changes to Graduation Requirements. New York State Education Department (NYSED) determines diploma requirements for all students within the state. NYSED issues three categories of diplomas: High School Equivalency (HSE) diplomas, Regents diplomas, and local diplomas—each type of diploma has its own set of requirements, which the New York City DOE supports students to complete.

Students aged 17 to 21 years old are eligible to exit the school system with a High School Equivalency (HSE) diploma. There are four ways by which a student may earn an HSE diploma: an HSE exam, the completion of 24 college credits, a competency-based performance assessment, or the passage of four Regents exams and one HSE subject exam.²

To earn a Regents diploma, students must pass a Regents exam within each of the four core disciplines (English Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies), and satisfy an additional "pathway" requirement.³ Often, students satisfy this

additional “pathway” requirement by earning course credit and passing an additional Regents exam within one of the four core disciplines. Students may earn an Advanced Regents diploma if they earn additional credits and pass additional Regents exams within the disciplines of math, science, and World Languages.⁴

Some students with disabilities have the option of earning a local diploma, which requires lower exam scores than the passing score of 65 required by the Regents diploma.

Because testing sites could not administer exams during the pandemic, NYSED created an exam exemption policy for any course that typically culminated in a Regents exam: if students earned credit for completing that course during the 2019-2020 or 2020-2021 school year, they could receive an exam exemption to apply towards an HSE, local, or Regents diploma. These exemptions applied to any eligible courses students were enrolled in during the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years.⁵

Findings on Voluntary Withdrawals And Early Discharges

Students may receive a discharge code for voluntary withdrawal if they are over the mandatory school age and either withdraw from school voluntarily or do not attend school for 20 consecutive school days. These students have not graduated from the school system but they have passed the maximum compulsory school age, which in New York City is the end of the school year during which they turned 17 years old.⁶ IBO found that across all types of schools—Districts 1 through 32, District 75, District 79, and charter schools—the share of students who received a voluntary withdrawal discharge code during the first pandemic year decreased. This decrease was especially large for schools within District 79 (by about 7 percentage points). Schools in District 79 include alternative high schools and programs.⁷ Schools in District 75—which includes citywide special education schools—saw the next highest decrease, albeit very slight, of 0.5 percentage points, followed by traditional public schools in Districts 1 through 32 and charter schools of roughly 0.1 percentage points. Pandemic policy changes, such as the option to learn remotely, may have encouraged more students to remain enrolled,

at least for the additional year captured by this analysis. Students within District 79 chose remote learning at a higher rate than students in traditional public schools: during the 2020-2021 school year, 86 percent of students in District 79 chose remote learning, compared with 48 percent of students across all grades within Districts 1 through 32.

District 79 also saw pronounced increases in the share of early graduates. Early graduates include students who graduated before beginning their 12th grade year, after they accumulated the mandatory number and type of course credits and exam scores. Within District 79, after the first pandemic year of 2020-2021, the share of students earning early HSE diplomas increased by 2 percentage points, and the share of students earning early local, Regents, and Advanced Regents diplomas increased by 4 percentage points, compared with the school year before the pandemic 2018-2019. Traditional public schools in Districts 1 through 32 and District 75, as well as charter schools saw almost no change in the share of students exiting early with HSE diplomas. Schools in districts 1 through 32 and District 75 did see very slight increases in the share of students earning early local and Regents diplomas (by 0.2 and 0.3 percentage points, respectively), while charter schools saw almost no change.

While District 79 saw the greatest proportional changes in high school outcomes, it also represents the smallest population of students. During the first pandemic year, 4,578 students enrolled in District 79, compared with other Districts: 827,823 students enrolled within Districts 1 through 32; 21,758 students enrolled in District 75; and 133,555 students enrolled in charter schools.⁸ Still, even in absolute terms, District 79 saw greater changes in the number of students receiving voluntary withdrawals, early HSE diplomas, and early local, Regents, and Advanced Regents diplomas than District 75 or charter schools. As we would expect given its much larger total size, traditional public schools in Districts 1 through 32 saw the largest change in absolute counts.

Conclusion

The pandemic brought a host of disruptions to New York City schooling, and in response, the City and State made several changes to high school exit

District 79 Saw The Greatest Change in Share of Students With Voluntary Withdrawals and All Types of Diplomas



-7 Percentage Points

Change in share of students in District 79 who voluntarily withdrew



-276 Students

Change in count of students in District 79 who voluntarily withdrew.



+2 Percentage Points

Change in share of students in District 79 who earned early High School Equivalency diplomas.



+150 Students

Change in count of students in District 79 who earned early High School Equivalency diplomas.



+4 Percentage Points

Change in share of students in District 79 who earned early local or Regents diplomas.



+172 Students

Change in count of students in District 79 who earned early local or Regents diplomas.

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requirements. The DOE allowed students who would have normally aged out of the system to return for an additional year, and NYSED issued exemptions for tests typically required for HSE, local, and Regents diplomas. Following the 2020-2021 school year, New York City schools saw a decrease in the share of students exiting with a voluntary withdrawal discharge, and an increase in the share of students

earning early diplomas. While a broad range of factors likely contributed to these trends, District 79 saw the largest changes that year. NYSED is currently reconsidering the future of graduation requirements including Regents exams. It is worth noting that during a year of widespread exam exemptions, New York City students earned higher rates of early HSE, local, and Regents diplomas.⁹

Glossary

Traditional Public Schools (Districts 1 through 32): Geographically determined public school districts across NYC Public Schools.

District 75: Citywide special education schools.

District 79: Alternative high schools and programs.

Charter Schools: Independent public schools, operating under a contract of up to five years.

Discharge code: A code assigned to students when they leave the New York City school system.

Voluntary withdrawal: A discharge code assigned when students who are over mandatory school age either withdraw voluntarily or are discharged after 20 consecutive days of non-attendance.

High School Equivalency diploma: A diploma available to students aged 17 to 21 through one of four pathways, including a state-approved high school equivalency exam.

Local diploma: A diploma available to some students with disabilities, which requires lower Regents exam scores to constitute a passing grade.

Regents diploma: A category of diplomas that includes Regents and Advanced Regents diplomas, which depend on the number and type of course credits accumulated and Regents exams passed.

Endnotes

¹Zimmerman, A. (April 15, 2021). "NYC students set to 'age out' of school may stay an extra year." *Chalkbeat NY*. [NYC students set to 'age out' of school may stay an extra year - Chalkbeat New York](#).

²In 2022, NYSED announced the General Educational Development Test (GED Test) would replace the Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC Test), beginning January 2022. For more information, see NYSED, "What is the HSE Exam?" <https://www.acces.nysed.gov/what-hsetasc-test>.

³NYSED. "Diploma Types." <https://www.nysed.gov/curriculum-instruction/diploma-types>

⁴NYC Public Schools. "Graduation Requirements". <https://www.schools.nyc.gov/learning/student-journey/graduation-requirements>

⁵NYSED. "New York State Graduation Requirements: Understanding Exemptions due to the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency." <https://www.nysed.gov/sites/default/files/programs/curriculum-instruction/exemptionflyer.pdf>

⁶NYC Department of Education (August 21, 2013). "Regulation of the Chancellor: A-240." A-240_8-21-2013_final_remediated_WCAG2.0 (nyc.gov)

⁷For a full list of schools included within District 79, see NYC Public Schools, "District 79". [District 79 \(nyc.org\)](#).

⁸For this analysis, IBO excluded students in home and hospital instruction settings.

⁹NYSED (July 27, 2023). "Graduation Measure Blue Ribbon Commission Holds Final Meeting to Develop Graduation Requirements for New York Students." <https://www.nysed.gov/news/2023/graduation-measures-blue-ribbon-commission-holds-final-meeting-develop-graduation>