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To the Blue Ribbon Commission on Graduation Measures of the New York State Education Department

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Good evening, members of the Blue Ribbon Commission and New York State Education Department (NYSED). My name is Julia Konrad, and I am the Assistant Director for Education at the New York City Independent Budget Office (IBO). Thank you for the opportunity to provide public comment on the recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Commission on Graduation Measures.

IBO is a nonpartisan, independent government agency established by the New York City Charter, following voter approval to adopt proposals put forth by the 1989 Charter Revision Commission. IBO's mission is to enhance public understanding of New York City's budget, public policy and economy through independent analysis. In 2009, the New York State legislature amended State Education Law, granting IBO access to detailed data from the New York City Department of Education (DOE) to provide analysis and publish reports. As a result of IBO's unique position in New York City government and access to DOE data, IBO has published many [reports](#) using student-, school-, and system-level information. In my comments today, I will discuss two such examples from our recent research.

Tonight, I will focus on the third transformation NYSED has proposed: to sunset diploma assessment requirements. First, I will discuss IBO's [prior research](#) on changes to graduation requirements during the first full pandemic school year, the 2020-2021 school year. Then, I will share findings from IBO's recent report, [Education Indicators](#), which includes analysis of Regents pass rates by student subgroups for the 2022-2023 school year. In particular, I will highlight student groups that may be most impacted by NYSED's recommendation to move away from the Regents exams as the sole measure of proficiency to earn a diploma.

During the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years, when testing sites could not administer Regents exams due to pandemic-related health concerns, NYSED created an exam exemption policy for any course that typically culminated in a Regents exam. Students who received credit for a course could then receive an exam exemption. These exemptions allowed students to satisfy assessment requirements towards a High School Equivalency, local, or Regents diploma based on course completion. In a [report](#) on enrollment changes during the pandemic, IBO identified changes in the share of students who graduated early from high school, before completing 12th grade. IBO found that during this period of policy change, students in District 79—a citywide district for alternative high schools and programs—experienced the greatest change in early graduation outcomes. A larger share of students in District 79 graduated early

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with either a High School Equivalency, local, or Regents diplomas. In contrast, students in districts 1 through 32, District 75, and charter schools earned early diplomas at similar, or only slightly higher, rates than before the pandemic. These findings suggest changes to diploma requirements may provide additional benefits for students within District 79.

In a recent IBO publication, Education Indicators, IBO reported on Regents performance for New York City's [traditional public school](#) and [charter school](#) students during the 2022-2023 school year. Under existing assessment requirements for a Regents or local diploma, NYSED requires students to pass at least four Regents exams—one in English language arts, one in mathematics, one in science, and one in social studies—along with one additional assessment, such as a fifth Regents exam. IBO examined Regents pass rates for English and mathematics subject exams, determined by the highest score of any exam within that subject a high school student received that year (IBO did not examine Regents exams taken by middle school students).

For traditional public school high school students, IBO found notable disparities in Regents pass rates by neighborhood poverty, race/ethnicity, English Language Learner status, special education status, and housing status. IBO examined neighborhood poverty with two measures: IBO defined a neighborhood as low-income if the corresponding census tract's household median income was at or below the NYCgov Poverty Threshold for 2020, and IBO further classified neighborhoods as high, medium, or low poverty based on median household income and federal thresholds to determine eligibility for public assistance programs (see IBO's [Data Notes](#) for more detail). Among IBO's findings:

- While 78% of students residing in neighborhoods with low poverty passed an English language arts exam that year, only 65% of students from neighborhoods with high poverty received passing scores. A similar gap existed for mathematics exams that year, with a 14-point difference between students from low and high poverty neighborhoods.
- English Language Learners had substantially lower pass rates for English Regents exams than their classmates, even after controlling for neighborhood poverty status. Among students from low-income neighborhoods, roughly 29% of English Language Learners passed English exams that school year, compared with 70% of English proficient students. Among students not from low-income neighborhoods, the difference was larger: while 29% of English Language Learners passed the English exam, approximately 82% of English proficient students not from low-income neighborhoods earned passing scores.
- Math Regents pass rates were lower for students with disabilities compared with students without disabilities—by 26 percentage points for students from low-income neighborhoods and by 30 percentage points for students not from low-income neighborhoods.
- While 74% of students in permanent housing passed English Regents exams that year, only 50% of students living in shelter passed their exams. This discrepancy persisted, although with a smaller gap, for mathematics exams: 50% of permanently housed students passed mathematics exams, compared with 30% of students in shelter.

IBO also reported on Regents pass rates for high school students in charter schools during the 2022-2023 school year. Among IBO's findings:

- While charter school students had lower overall pass rates for English and mathematics exams than traditional public school students, pass rates did not differ as much by neighborhood poverty level. Roughly 61% of students from low poverty neighborhoods passed an English exam that year, compared with 62% of students from high poverty neighborhoods. Similarly, 34% of students from low poverty neighborhoods passed a mathematics exam that year, compared with 36% of students from high poverty neighborhoods.
- Similar to traditional public school students, English Language Learners in charter schools had substantially lower pass rates for English exams than their English proficient peers: 21% of English Language Learners from low-income neighborhoods passed English exams and 25% of English Language Learners not from low-income neighborhoods did the same. In comparison, 64% of English proficient students from low-income neighborhoods passed their English exams that year, along with 67% of English proficient students from not low-income neighborhoods.
- Similar to traditional public school students, students with disabilities in charter schools had lower math exam pass rates than students without disabilities, with a gap of 21 percentage points for students from low-income neighborhoods and 19 percentage points for students not from low-income neighborhoods.

IBO's research-to-date suggests changes to diploma assessment requirements could have varying impacts on student subgroups. When diploma requirements changed during the pandemic, IBO found that students within District 79 saw greater increases in early diploma obtainments. Additionally, IBO's analysis of the 2022-2023 school year identified disparities in Regents pass rates for students by neighborhood poverty, English Language Learner status, disability status, and housing status. New measures to demonstrate proficiency for a high school diploma may provide additional pathways towards graduation for these student subgroups.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments. I am happy to answer any questions.