

**More than a Statistic:  
Faces of the Local Diploma**  
*A Call to Create Pathways to Graduation for All Students*



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**Advocates for Children of New York**

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## Introduction

In 2009, 14.5 percent of students in New York State graduated high school with a local diploma. The State is in the process of phasing out the local diploma as an option, requiring students to achieve the more rigorous Regents diploma or drop out and seek their General Educational Development (GED) diploma. For now, students with disabilities have the additional possibility of leaving school with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) diploma, which is basically a certificate of achievement that carries few of the benefits of the other graduation credentials. Policy makers reason that without the local diploma to fall back on, schools will push harder to prepare more students to qualify for the Regents diploma and thereby graduate young adults who are better equipped to succeed in higher education and the job market.

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What will happen to the young people who previously depended on the local diploma to graduate from high school? Will they be able to achieve the more challenging Regents diploma? Or will they be left behind? And would they have derived any benefit from the local diploma in the first place?

In this paper, we explore the potential loss of opportunity that individual students are likely to experience as a result of the phasing out of the local diploma. We first explain the current diploma options available in New York State and identify the demographic profile for each type of diploma. We then provide a closer look at nine students who graduated with a local diploma in recent years and what would have happened, from their perspectives, if the local diploma had not been available. We conclude by urging the State to develop pathways to graduation for struggling students, particularly students who are unable to pass the Regents exams.

### What are the diploma options in New York State?

In New York State, there are three types of high school diplomas available for students: Regents diploma, Regents diploma with Advanced Designation and the local diploma. While the requirements for the diplomas vary, they all require that a student earn forty-four credits and pass a minimum of five standardized tests in various subjects.

Diploma Options in New York State as of October 2010		
Diploma Type	Credits Needed	Required Tests
Regents Diploma	44	5 Regents exams passed with a score of 65 or higher
Regents Diploma with Advanced Designation	44	8 or 9 Regents exams passed with a score of 65 or higher
Local Diploma	44	5 Regents exams passed with a score of 55 or higher* <b>Or</b> 6 Regents Competency Tests (RCTs) passed**

Source: NYC Department of Education, *NYC General Education Students Graduation Card, Students Entering 9th Grade In September 2008, September 2009, and September 2010 (June 2010)*; NYC Department of Education, *NYC Students With Disabilities Graduation Card, Students Entering 9th Grade In September 2008, September 2009, and September 2010 (June 2010)*

Two other credentials are available in New York in addition to the three regular high school diplomas: the IEP diploma and the GED diploma. The IEP diploma is available only to students with disabilities and is not really a diploma at all. It does not indicate the attainment of any particular skills or level of achievement; rather, it signifies that a student has completed the goals on his or her IEP. Most colleges will not accept it, and the same goes for the military and some vocational training programs. The GED is a high school

\* This option is no longer available for general education students as of the class entering ninth grade in 2008.

\*\* This option is available only for students with disabilities and is set to expire in the fall of 2011. RCTs are exams students with disabilities can take if they have failed a Regents exam.

equivalency diploma that is available to students who pass a set of tests to demonstrate the knowledge they would have acquired over their high school years.

The local diploma is widely viewed in the educational community as being less rigorous than the Regents diploma. In 1996, a phase-out plan for the local diploma was proposed to the Board of Regents. This plan arose in part from criticism that two classes of students were graduating from New York's high schools: one class was prepared for college, while the other class was barely prepared to enter the workforce. The local diploma was set to phase out by 2005, but extensions were granted, and ultimately, it is the general education students in the entering ninth-grade class of 2008 that will no longer be able to obtain a local diploma at graduation. For students with disabilities, the option to earn a local diploma by passing six Regents Competency Tests (RCTs), also known as the Safety Net option, was extended by the Regents until 2011. Students with disabilities entering ninth grade in 2011 will no longer have this option, although they still will be able to obtain a local diploma if they pass five Regents exams with a score of 55 or higher.

### **Who is receiving a local diploma?**

In the graduating class of 2009, 61.4 percent of students statewide received a Regents diploma or Regents diploma with Advanced Designation, while 14.5 percent of students received a local diploma. However, that same year, only 21.7 percent of English Language Learners (ELLs) received a Regents diploma, and 43.7 percent of ELLs received a local diploma. Similarly, just 22.1 percent of students with disabilities received a Regents diploma, with 47.5 percent receiving a local diploma.

The gap between Black and Latino students receiving Regents diplomas compared to White and Asian students is also significant. In 2009, 75.3 percent of White students and 73.4 percent of Asian students received a Regents diploma, while Black and Latino students each had a 40.1 percent graduation rate with the Regents diploma. Even more disturbing is the graduation rate for Black males. In 2008, only 25 percent of Black males graduated with a Regents diploma, compared to 68 percent of White males.

New York State Graduation Rates – Class of 2009				
Student Group	Percentage graduating with Regents Diploma or Regents Diploma with Advanced Designation	Percentage graduating with Local Diploma	Percentage graduating with IEP Diploma	Percentage Dropping Out
Latino	40.1%	27%	1.7%	14.6%
Black	40.1%	28%	2.5%	13.4%
ELLs	21.7%	43.7%	3.0%	20.7%
Students with Disabilities	22.1%	47.5%	11.5%	15.9%
White	75.3%	9.0%	1.5%	6.2%
Asian	73.4%	8.7%	0.4%	4.9%
All Students	61.4%	14.5%	1.7%	9.2%

Source: New York State, Graduation Rates Supplemental Packet, PowerPoint presentation (March 9, 2010); New York State, Graduation Rates, PowerPoint presentation (March 9, 2010).

The following pages highlight stories from young adults across New York City who were able to obtain a high school diploma only because the local diploma existed. From hard-working professionals to recent graduates holding down multiple jobs, these young people respond to the planned phase out of the local diploma and show how the availability of this credential has made a difference in their lives.

**Kariel Paul** is twenty years old. She keeps herself busy with three jobs since graduating from high school in 2009 with a local diploma. Kariel works at her old high school as a one-on-one paraprofessional and spends her weekends splitting her time between working as a cashier for the Mets at Citi Field and the Brooklyn Cyclones. However, these jobs are just temporary until she can achieve her dream of becoming a medical technician. She has already identified a program in Brooklyn that she would like to attend. The medical field is a natural choice as several of her family members are in that field.

Despite having a difficult childhood, Kariel was able to overcome obstacles that could have left her without a high school diploma and on a very different path than her current one. Both of her parents did not receive their high school diplomas, but some of her siblings were able to get their high school diplomas or GEDs. Kariel has a learning disability and did not want her family to view her as “stupid” because she was the “youngest and had a disability.” Earning her high school diploma was extremely important, and she made sure to come to school every day to accomplish that goal. Kariel took the various Regents exams multiple times before passing the RCTs and earning her local diploma.

Kariel’s message to the Regents is this: “Some kids are on a higher level and some are on a lower level. What happens to the ones in between? [By taking away the local diploma, these students] will be placed into a category they don’t fit. There are some that can’t pass the Regents, but can earn their local diploma. [These kids are] smarter than an IEP diploma.”



**Dana Parchue** is a twenty-year-old student who graduated from high school in 2009 and has just completed her first two semesters at the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) where she is pursuing a degree in Liberal Arts. Dana is



taking the next semester off because she wants to gain work experience. She likes BMCC because they teach skills that are helpful for students with disabilities.

It was in high school that Dana was diagnosed with a learning disability and ADHD. Dana was unable to pass the Regents exams, and she decided to take the RCTs to earn the local diploma. If the local diploma had not been available, Dana's educational path would have been severely hampered. She explains, "I would have gone for a Regents, but I would have been held back and held back." Her mother chimed in, "She would still be in high school right now. She wouldn't have graduated."

When asked if she would have considered the IEP diploma, Dana was quick to reply, "No, because that doesn't do anything." Earning a high school diploma was an important goal for Dana because she realized that she would not be able to find a job without one. Both her parents earned their high school diplomas, and their encouragement was a strong factor in enabling her to obtain hers. The day she graduated from high school was a "great one."

To those considering changing the graduation requirements by phasing out the local diploma, she responds, "It's wrong to do it because people have different standards. Taking away this diploma is taking away your choices."

Nineteen-year-old **Ashley Washington** recently began a vocational program in Office and Computer Technology at Contemporary Guidance Services, Inc. Ashley ultimately plans to attend college and views this program as a step in the right direction. Not too long ago, Ashley was heading in a direction she did not like. In 2008, Ashley graduated from the Urban Assembly High School for Law and Justice with an IEP diploma. At the time, Ashley and her family were unaware that this certificate was different from a regular high school diploma. However, on graduation day, when a friend next to her shared she was receiving a Regents diploma, Ashley realized that she was not “really graduat[ing].” This sobering realization made her very depressed. “I wasn’t going to college. I wasn’t getting the local diploma. I wasn’t realizing the high expectations I had of myself as a person.”



Ashley went back to school and channeled her disappointment to success, graduating with a local diploma in August 2010. Ashley plans to go to college after she completes her current program. If she did not have the opportunity to graduate with a local diploma, she simply states, “I do not know what would have happened.” Ashley feels that the proposed changes in graduation requirements are contradictory and needlessly setting students up to fail. “[The Regents are] contradicting themselves. It’s saying you want us to succeed on the one hand but not allowing us to succeed at the same time.” Ashley’s message to the Regents is this: “Some people need the local diploma because the high school diploma is hard to get ..., [and a GED does not] have the same kind of accomplishment [as a regular diploma]. Everyone has their own circumstances in life.”

**Parrish Shackelford** currently works at North Castle High School as a one-on-one paraprofessional. He loves working with the students because he can relate to their experience, as he roamed the same halls they did as a student before he graduated in 2009 with his local diploma. While he enjoys working at his alma mater, he knows that he cannot stay there forever and plans to sign up for classes at Bronx Community College in the near future. He would like to be a fitness trainer and plans to major in physical education.

Parrish was taught from an early age that education was important. Both of his parents have their high school diplomas and are correction officers. He also has older siblings who have finished high school and college and was inspired by their experiences. While his mother was able to secure her job without a college degree, she often tells Parrish that it will be harder for him in today's world to do the same. Parrish understands that there are not "many jobs I can qualify for without a high school diploma or college credit."

Earning his high school diploma was important to Parrish. He was able to pass some of the Regents exams, but had trouble passing them all. If the local diploma was not available, Parrish "would not have stayed [in school] because he did not want to stay in school an extra year and be older than other students."

Parrish has this message for the Regents: "Kids do not want to be 19 or 20 years old in high school." He fears students will drop out of school if education officials decide to move forward with eliminating the local diploma.

**Ashley Mitchell** graduated from high school in January 2010 and is attending Herkimer County Community College (HCCC). She plans to study



Human Resources and eventually would like to start her own business. Having earned a local diploma, she is not only optimistic about her ability to graduate college, but also taking the necessary steps to accomplish her goal. This summer, she took two remedial courses at Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) to prepare her further to handle college-level classes.

Ashley grew up in a family where many had dropped out of high school. Her brothers, uncles, and cousins, all for different reasons, had not earned their diplomas. Because of this history, Ashley's aspirations were met with some animosity. As she explained, certain family members could not support her because "they never put the effort in [their studies]." Despite her family's sentiments, she kept a positive outlook and never allowed herself to say, "I can't." Thankfully, her mother and grandmother encouraged her along the way. With a lot of help and support from her teachers, Ashley took a mixture of Regents and RCT exams to earn her local diploma. Graduation day was better than anything she had envisioned for herself. She bubbled over as she explained, "It was the happiest day of my life!"

When asked what she would have done if the local diploma had not been available to her, Ashley said, "I would have kept fighting! I would have kept trying to tell them I needed it. I didn't want to be in school *all* that time just for an IEP diploma." Ashley wants other students to have the same chance for success that she has been given. Ashley's message to state officials is simple: "They should keep it!"

**Desirea Ribot** is a confident twenty-three-year-old young woman who graduated from high school in 2005 with her local diploma. She is currently a teacher's assistant at her old high school and is also attending Westchester



Community College, where she is majoring in Liberal Arts and Social Science. Desirea loves working with students with learning disabilities because she is able to identify, as she has one as well. Her goal is to become a reading specialist, and she plans to pursue a Masters Degree in English once she finishes college.

Desirea is the oldest of five siblings and is the first person in her family to receive a high school diploma. School did not come easily to Desirea, and she had low reading levels when she started high school. With hard work, Desirea passed all of the Regents exams except for Global History. For Desirea, an IEP diploma was not an option because of the limited opportunities she would have after graduation.

Following graduation, Desirea did not feel prepared to go straight to college and worked for two years at her old school. Working at her old high school helped her to develop the ambition to go to college. Desirea has had to take remedial classes, but is preparing to start her regular course load and is looking forward to the upcoming semester.

Desirea was unaware of the difference between a Regents and local diploma, but has this message for the Regents: "It is very necessary [to keep the local diploma], just because you cannot accomplish the Regents ... does not mean you should be walking around with an IEP diploma."

**Raphael Rivas** graduated in May 1999 with a local diploma and went on to attend LaGuardia Community College and Baruch College, where he earned a Bachelors of Arts in Marketing Management in 2005. His plan was to follow in his brother's footsteps and enter the advertising world. However, instead of "putting out information about products," Raphael now "puts out information" to individuals with disabilities about their rights.

Raphael has served as the Youth in Transition Coordinator at the Brooklyn Center for Independence of the



Disabled since 2007. He loves his job because of his ability to "make change in special education." Raphael feels a particular draw to special education as he received services for his own disability throughout his educational career.

Raphael was unable to pass Regents exams and earned his local diploma by passing RCTs in the required areas. If the local diploma had not been available, Raphael believes he would have received "an IEP diploma and struggled" because of his inability to pass the Regents. Receiving the local diploma was important because it "shows that I can complete high school ... [and that] being a youth with a disability is not a barrier but something I can work around. It shows that I can be college ready." Raphael recalls the day of his high school graduation as "one of my best days of my life. It felt good completing high school and going to community college when most of the folks walking with me [at graduation] didn't get that opportunity."

Raphael acknowledges that he would have liked more academic and emotional support in school, as he did have to take remedial courses at college, but he believes that the Regents need to work to create options for more students to get to college. "I understand the RCTs are outdated ... but the local diploma can get students to college. It got me to college."

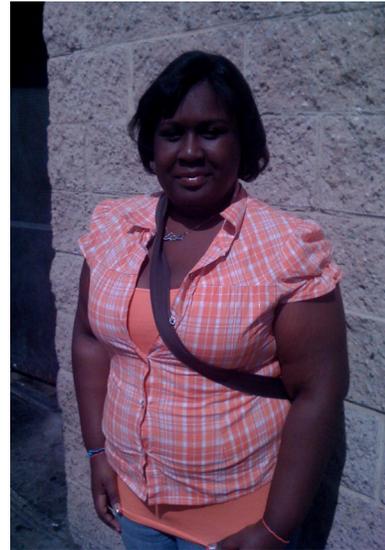
**Temeka McCoy** is a bright nineteen-year-old student who is well on her way to accomplishing her educational goals. She graduated with a local diploma in June 2010 and is currently studying Information Systems at Bronx Community College (BCC).

Temeka's initial goal was to attend Lehman College right away, but since she received an academic scholarship at BCC, she decided to study there first before transferring to Lehman. She is excited to attend Lehman "because I want to do a lot of things. I want to be a computer technician, I want to open my own store, and I want to sell electronics, jewelry and clothes."

Many members of Temeka's immediate family graduated from high school and college, including her mom, aunt, and stepfather. Thus, they encouraged her to persevere when school got challenging.

Graduation day was especially exciting because she had earned a regular high school diploma and all of her family was there to cheer her on. Her parents, aunts, cousins, grandparents, and godmother all watched as she walked across the stage. She remembers, "When they called my name, I was thinking like, 'I did it.' And it made me feel emotional, a little." When asked why it was so important to her that she earned a local diploma, she said, "I want to do a lot of things in life, and it obviously requires a high school diploma. If you get an IEP diploma, you may have trouble."

Temeka's message to the Regents about eliminating the local diploma is this, "I think they shouldn't get rid of it. I think they should re-think it ... If students have goals they should try to accomplish them."



**Meghan Healy** graduated from Bayport-Blue Point High School in 1993 with a local diploma. Following high school, Meghan attended Long Island University at C.W. Post where she earned her B.A. in Fine Arts in 1998. Meghan continued her education at Brooklyn College, earning a Masters in Fine Arts in 2001.



Meghan has spent the last seven years working as an art teacher for students with special needs at a private high school in Queens. She loves her job because she “enjoys helping kids who I see a lot of myself in when I was in school .... These kids have been beaten down and it is nice to see them enjoying themselves [in my class].” Teaching students art has been a dream of Meghan’s since she was young. Earning her high school diploma was essential to achieving this dream.

Meghan believes that if the local diploma had not been available when she was in high school, she “would not have had the opportunity to go to college.” She further reflects, “I don’t know where I would be. I don’t know what direction I would have went in or what I would be doing right now .... I would probably be an angry adult because I would not have had a chance to pursue my dreams.”

Graduation day was an important day for Meghan and her family. She describes it as “pretty emotional. My parents were like, ‘Oh my god, she did it. She graduated. She got into college.’ It was one of the happiest days of my life. Every graduation was extremely important to me.” Meghan’s message to the Regents is simple: “[This decision will cut] out opportunity for kids that need to get a local diploma ... because it will limit kids [in] what they can do or want to do as an adult.”

## Conclusion & Recommendations

The local diploma has provided thousands of students with a lifeline to opportunities after high school that simply would not have been available without a high school diploma. These students still face challenges in being prepared for college-level work, or finding employment that will allow them to continue to move upwardly in society, but without a high school diploma, their opportunities would have been even more limited.

While all students must be held to high standards, New York has a duty to ensure that students who are most at risk are not sacrificed as the State moves to reform graduation requirements. Creating meaningful pathways to graduation for all students must be a priority during this time of reform. The following recommendations would safeguard existing opportunities for all students in the State while the Regents work on a meaningful framework that provides all students with the ability to prepare for and pass the Regents exams:

- ◆ As a temporary measure, reinstate the 55 pass rate option for students in general education to earn a local diploma. Suspend the phase out of the Safety Net option for the local diploma for students with disabilities and maintain the 55 pass rate option.
- ◆ Expand pathways to earn a regular high school diploma, particularly for students with and without disabilities who cannot pass the Regents exams. Consider alternatives like allowing students to prepare portfolios for graduation in required subjects, or permitting graduation based on a composite score of all five Regents exams.

Despite the weaknesses of the local diploma, it has value as a credential that opens doors for students who earn it. Before the state takes it away, it needs a better plan for the students who rely on it to access employment and post-secondary opportunities.

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