

March 2018

NYS High School Regents Exams Policy Alert

Are English Language Learners Students Getting the Help They Need?

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Summary: Last December, the New York State Education Department (NYSED) released the Regents Exam scores for 2016-17. It's now four years since the Common Core Regents Exams were first used in June of 2014. With the transition period over, the question now is how are students faring especially for two at risk groups: students with disabilities and English Language Learners? Below is an analysis of the test scores with new findings and questions highlighted here.

- ✚ **The number of students failing the Common Core Algebra 1 and ELA Regents is comparable with the old Regents exams for all students and students with disabilities groups¹:** For the all students group, 3,422 *less* students failed the exam. For students with disabilities, there was only a slight increase, 638 students, in the number failing. NYSED has succeeded with one of its goals for the transition to Common Core Learning Standards for these two groups. The drop in the number of students failing the Common Core ELA exam was even larger. For the all students group, there were 5,394 *less* students failing the exam. For students with disabilities group, there were 1,072 *less* students failing the exam. Despite the progress, 54% of the students with disabilities group are still failing the Algebra 1 Regents exam.

- ✚ **The number of English language learner (ELL) students now failing the Common Core Algebra 1 has increased by 28%:** Based on 2016-17 test scores, 3,391 more ELL students failed the Common Core Algebra 1 exam than the Integrated Algebra exam or 28%. 1,218 more students failed the ELA Common Core exam than in 2014 or 13%. The data points to one question: *Are ELL students getting the enough help to pass these Regents diploma required exams.*

- ✚ **Will the Class of 2018 see a dip in the graduation rate:** This coming June will be the first graduating class that only took the Common Core Algebra 1 Regents Exam (cohort of students entering high school in fall of 2014). Since the NYS Grade 3 to 8 Math Test made the switch to Common Core beginning in 2013, thousands more students have been entering high school with Level 1 math scores. The 2018 graduating class will be the first year to see if these Level 1 students were able to improve while in high school, pass their Math Regents requirement and graduate with a Regents diploma.

- ✚ **Around 10,000 students with disabilities will benefit from recent NYSED change in the local diploma graduation requirement:** NYSED instituted an "emergency change" in diploma requirements effective January 1, 2018. The change will allow students with disabilities to graduate with a local diploma even if they scored below 55 on the Math and ELA Regents exam. This change will help around 10,000 students with disabilities to graduate. The change will not help another 13,470 students with disabilities that failed the Algebra Exam with a score between 55 and 64.

¹ This report focuses on the number of students that failed the Regents Exam. In other reports, the issue is typically framed as the passing rate. Passing rate only shows the % or number of students that passed. By focusing on the change in the number of students failing is a more precise method for determining the change in the actual number of students that need additional help.

1. Common Core Algebra 1 Regents exam:

The number of students failing is now comparable with the old Integrated Algebra Regents exam for the all students group and students with disabilities. However, for ELL students, the number failing has jumped by 28.5%. 2016-17 is the first year in which high school students were only allowed to take the new Common Core Algebra 1 exam (and could no longer take the old Integrated Algebra Exam). The test scores in Chart 1 below show that NYSED succeeded at meeting its goal of keeping the number of students failing the Common Core Algebra 1 Regents exam comparable with the old Integrated Algebra Regents Exam. The number of students that failed the Common Core Algebra 1 exam in 2016-17 dropped by 4%; from 74,528 in 2013-14 to 71,106 in 2016-17. A drop of 3,422 students. The students with disabilities group is also very close to the pre-Common Core test scores. While the test scores are now comparable, 54% of students with disabilities are still failing the Common Core Algebra 1 Exam.

More English Language Learners are struggling to pass: Over the past three years, a much larger number of ELL students are now struggling to pass the math Regents diploma requirement; a hurdle that may keep some of these students from graduating. Last year, 15,257 ELL students failed the Common Core Algebra 1 exam. 3,371 more students than in 2013-14 (the last year the old Integrated Algebra Regents exam was administered for all students). In terms of actual number of students that failed the exam, it's an increase of 28.3%. There was a total of 28,308 total of ELL test takers in 2016-17; 15,257 ELL students failed the exam or 54%. ***On a practical level, the data suggests that high schools must find ways to direct more resources to help ELL students pass the Common Core Algebra 1 Regents Exam.***

Chart 1. Students with a score of below 65/not passing on the Algebra Regents Exam

Regent Exam Test Takers	Integrated Algebra	Common Core Algebra 1			Change between 2014 and 2017	% Change between 2014 and 2017
	2013-14	2014-15 ²	2015-16	2016-17		
All Students	74,528	122,307	85,418	71,106	-3,422	-4.5
Students with Disabilities	26,206	40,504	30,442	26,844	638	2.4
English Language Learners	11,866	18,371	14,820	15,257	3,391	28.5%

Source and notes: <https://data.nysed.gov/>.

2. Common Core ELA Regents exam:

For the all students and students with disabilities groups, there has been a drop in the number of students failing. However, more ELL students are now struggling to pass the ELA Regents exam. For most high school students, the ELA Regents exam is administered at the end of 11th grade. While there was much concern that the new Common Core ELA Regents would be more challenging for students with disabilities and English language learners, once again same pattern of improvement for all students and students with disabilities groups. There was a total of 17,946 ELL test takers in 2016-17; 10,568 ELL students or 59% failed the exam.

² 2014-15 test scores reflect the challenges with the test design. Common Core Algebra 1 Test scores for all groups saw a big drop in the passing rate for 2014-15 (see [Chalkbeat 11-5-2015](#), [New York Times 11-20-2015](#) and [Chalkbeat 11-15-2016](#) articles). As a result, NYSED made changes to the exam so that it would not affect the passing rate with the old Integrated Algebra Exam. NYSED issued two memos explaining a test redesign for the June 2016 exam. The memo said that test scores will improve in 2016.

Chart 2. Students with score of below 65/not passing on the ELA Regents Exam

Regent Exam Test Takers	Comprehensive English	Common Core ELA		Change between 2014 and 2017	% Change between 2014 and 2017
	2013-14	2015-16	2016-17		
All Students	41,929	41,291	36,535	-5,394	-12.8%
Students with Disabilities	15,808	16,587	14,736	-1,072	-6.7%
English Language Learners	9,350	11,311	10,568	1,218	13%

Source: <https://data.nysed.gov/>

3. Regents Math and ELA test scores offer a reliable estimate of the number students with disabilities that will benefit from the NYSED December-2017 change in local diploma requirements:

Regarding new changes ([NYSED 12-5-2017 Memo/Rules Amendment](#)) in the local diploma graduation requirements for students with disabilities (CDOS commencement credential instead of a minimum passing score of 55 on a Math and ELA Regents), NYSED did not offer an estimated figure for the number of students with disabilities that may benefit from this policy change. The 2016-17 Regents test scores offer a reliable estimate of how many students with disabilities may benefit and how many will see no benefit. For the 2016-17 Regents Exams, a total of 13,374 students with disabilities scored below 55 on the Common Core Algebra I Regents exam.

Students with Disabilities	Total Test Takers	Below 55	55 to 64	65 and higher
Common Core Algebra	49,046	13,374	13,470	22,202
Common Core ELA	35,954	10,023	4,712	21,219

There were also 10,023 students with disabilities that scored below 55 on the Common Core ELA Regents (while most students take the Algebra 1 Regents in 9th grade, this figure also includes test re-takers from grades 10, 11, or 12). Some of these students will achieve a 55 by retaking the test. The total number of students with disabilities that failed the Algebra 1 Regents was 26,844. Since half of all test takers scored between 55 and 65, these students will not be helped by the new Regents graduation policy change. Students in this group can retake the exam as many times until they receive a passing score (65 or above) or give up and not graduate with a Regents Diploma. For students that cannot pass four required Regents exams, only the NYSED [Project Based Assessments](#) initiative will help them. The importance of launching a statewide Project Based Assessment initiative has been discussed in an [earlier report](#).

4. This June will be the first graduating class that was only allowed to take the Common Core Algebra 1 Regents Exam for the Regents diploma math exam requirement.

Despite the gain in the passing rate for the Common Core Algebra 1 Regents Exam noted above, one still has to wonder about the 71,106 students that did not get a passing score of 65. Which group of students will they become in high school: the group that will succeed with passing the Regents exam after several more tries or the group too far behind to catch up. How many of these 71,106 students arrived in high school with a Level 1 Math Score? Level 1 means not on track to graduate.

Five years after the launch of Common Core, the number of students with NYSED 8th Grade Level 1 Math scores entering high school remains very high (43,701 for 2017) compared with pre-Common Core Levels. As the chart below clearly shows, the number of Level I students has seen little change in the last three years.



Students Scoring Level 1 on the NYSED 8th Grade Common Core Math Test 2011-2017

8 th Grade Math Scores	2011 (Pre-Common Core) Students/%		2012 (Pre-Common Core) Students/%		2013 Common Core Students/%		2014 Common Core Students/%		2015 Common Core Students/%		2016 Common Core Students/%		2017 Common Core Students/%	
	Students	%	Students	%	Students	%	Students	%	Students	%	Students	%	Students	%
Level 1	18,291	9%	14,050	7%	61,446	31%	54,371	37%	44,822	40%	42,338	40%	43,701	41%

Source: <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/reportcard/>

This spring will be the first graduating class that was only allowed to take the Common Core Algebra 1 Regents Exam for the math Regents exam diploma requirement. The new [New York State Education Department \(NYSED\) Multiple Pathways to Graduation](#) 4 +1, CDOS, test score appeals and safety net options will most likely keep the statewide graduation rate stable.

5. Recommendation

Instead of waiting for the graduation figures to be released, one strategy for NYSED and NYC-DOE to consider comes from the US Department of Education Institute for Education Sciences-What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) 2017 [Preventing Dropouts in Secondary Schools](#) Report. The main recommendation for increasing the graduation rate is for high schools to use a tracking system for at risk students. The WWC reports are widely accepted as the gold standard for education research as well as having practical applications to the classroom. NYSED and NYC-DOE should be able to offer information showing how many high schools are currently using a tracking system to help students stay in school and graduate.