

Trends in New York City Education Outcomes

POLICY BRIEF NO. 4

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SUMMARY
This brief focuses on trends among students in New York City’s (NYC) public schools to provide context for the efforts made to increase the educational advancement of NYC transition age youth in foster care. The high school graduation rate overall increased steadily over the past decade in NYC, consistent with NY State, and national trends. Additional markers of educational progress such as rates of attendance, dropping out, and college enrollment demonstrate significant improvements. Though NYC public school students have made significant progress overall, racial disparities remain.

The method used to calculate high school graduation rates for the general population is not applicable to foster youth, who often stay in foster care for short periods. In accordance with several federal laws, NYC developed alternate measures for tracking foster youth educational outcomes. This brief includes the initial years of data from these metrics, although they are early in tracking. Additional areas to explore in future briefs could go further into postsecondary outcomes such as college persistence and job readiness, neither of which are currently tracked for foster youth.

KEY METRICS

Four-year high school graduation rate | College enrollment | College persistence | Chronic absenteeism

The importance of educational advancement

As the nation transitions to a knowledge-based economy, educational advancement becomes that much more important for the success of youth transitioning to adulthood. For transition age youth in foster care, educational attainment offers the chance to balance out challenges many foster youth face in garnering support from other sources, such as family members, friends, and savings accounts. As with other youth, a high school diploma and college attainment predict greater earnings for youth formerly in foster care.² These earnings gains, in turn, may help to end intergenerational cycles of child welfare involvement, as leaving poverty helps prevent child maltreatment when youth leaving foster start their own families and may be accentuated among youth of color.³

Measuring educational advancement

New York State and City use the high school graduation rate as a key barometer of secondary educational progress for youth. Other measures of academic performance include tests of basic skills, attendance

¹ Many thanks to Mike Jolley for his contributions to this brief.

² Okpych, N. J., Courtney, M. E. (2014). Does education pay for youth formerly in foster care? Comparison of employment outcomes with a national sample. *Children and Youth Services Review*, Volume 43, Pages 18-28. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2014.04.013>.

³ Barth, R. P., Wildfire, J., & Green, R. L. (2006). Placement into foster care and the interplay of urbanicity, child behavior problems, and poverty. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 76(3), 358-366. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0002-9432.76.3.358>; Hines, A. M., Lemon, K., Wyatt, P., Merdinger, J. (2004). Factors related to the disproportionate involvement of children of color in the child welfare system: a review and emerging themes, *Children and Youth Services Review*, Volume 26, Issue 6, Pages 507-527, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2004.01.007>.

rates, and credit accumulation. The high school graduation rate is especially useful, as the methodology used by New York is consistent with the methodology used in other states and by the federal government.⁴ Student graduation cohorts are clearly defined for the purpose of tracking and the four-year graduation rate is widely emphasized as an essential measure of success by local, state, and federal education agencies.⁵

Specifically, the New York State Education Department (NYSED) defines the four-year high school graduation rate as “the percentage of cohort members who earned a local or Regents diploma by August 31 four years after entering grade 9.”⁶ Five-year and six-year graduation rates are also tracked but the four-year time frame is emphasized heavily in school funding and accountability systems and frequently cited in the education literature and media.⁷ Other measures used by key stakeholders are associated with high school graduation such as credit accumulation, attendance, and dropout rates.

NYC, NY State, and national trends in high school graduation rates

Although still below the state and national averages, the NYC graduation rate has trended upward since the mid-2000s (see Figure 1). Most recently, in 2020, a record high of 78.8% of NYC’s public school students graduated with a Regents diploma or Advanced Regents diploma by August after their fourth year in high school, an increase from 60.7% in 2008.⁸

In addition to the overall graduation rate, the NYC DOE tracks and reports on the graduation rate for students with disabilities, current and former English language learners, and breaks down the rates by race/ethnicity. The rate for Black NYC public high school students who graduated in June after four years of instruction increased from 44.5% in 2005 to 73.8% in 2020 (+29.3%) and increased from 41.4% to 72.1% for Latinx students (+30.7%).⁹ Though disparities between Black, Latinx, and their White and Asian peers remain, the graduation rate for Black and Latinx students demonstrates a positive trend. The graduation gap continues to narrow, down from 18.9 points between Black and White students in 2008 to 8.0 points. The same is true of the Hispanic-White gap, having decreased from 21.5 points in 2008 to 9.7 points in 2020.

Though graduation rates improved, this finding comes with a caveat. College readiness levels, defined as a “student who does not require remediation in either math or reading before taking a college level course” and operationalized through standardized test scores, fall below the high school graduation rate in NYC.¹⁰ NYC students reached their highest-ever college readiness rates in 2020 with 57.7% of all students meeting CUNY standards in English and math, up from 42% in 2011.¹¹ Some schools which serve areas where many children enter foster care have high graduation rates and low college readiness

⁴ Recently, new questions have been raised about the states’ graduation requirements as a result of new language in the Every Student Succeeds Act. See, for example, the August 25, 2017 edition of Education Week:

<https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2017/08/30/graduation-rate-rule-puts-some-states-in-a.html>

⁵ The national and state public high school graduation rates come from the National Center for Education Statistics, located within the U.S. Department of Education and the Institute of Education Sciences.

⁶ NYSED Glossary of Terms: <https://data.nysed.gov/glossary.php?report=accountability>

⁷ For example, see NYSED guidance regarding the definition of school Adequate Yearly Progress:

<https://data.nysed.gov/glossary.php?report=accountability>

⁸ <https://infohub.nysed.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/2020-graduation-rates-website-deck.pdf>

⁹ We use the June graduation data here as race and ethnicity breakdowns are only available for that date. The overall rate for NYC students who graduated as of June after four years of instruction increased from 50.7% in 2005 to 76.9% in 2020. See Keeping Track Database: <http://data.ccnyc.org/data/map/121/graduation-rate#121/a/5/205/25/a>

¹⁰ See https://comptroller.nyc.gov/reports/diploma-disparities-high-school-graduation-rates-in-new-york-city/#_edn5; See “The State of College Readiness and Degree Completion in New York City”: <http://www.graduatencity.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/GNYC-Report-Brief-2.pdf>

¹¹ <https://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/029-21/mayor-de-blasio-chancellor-carranza-record-high-graduation-rate-record-high-college>

scores.¹² There is limited information on the impact of college readiness on college completion and the NYC DOE’s college readiness index has caused debate.

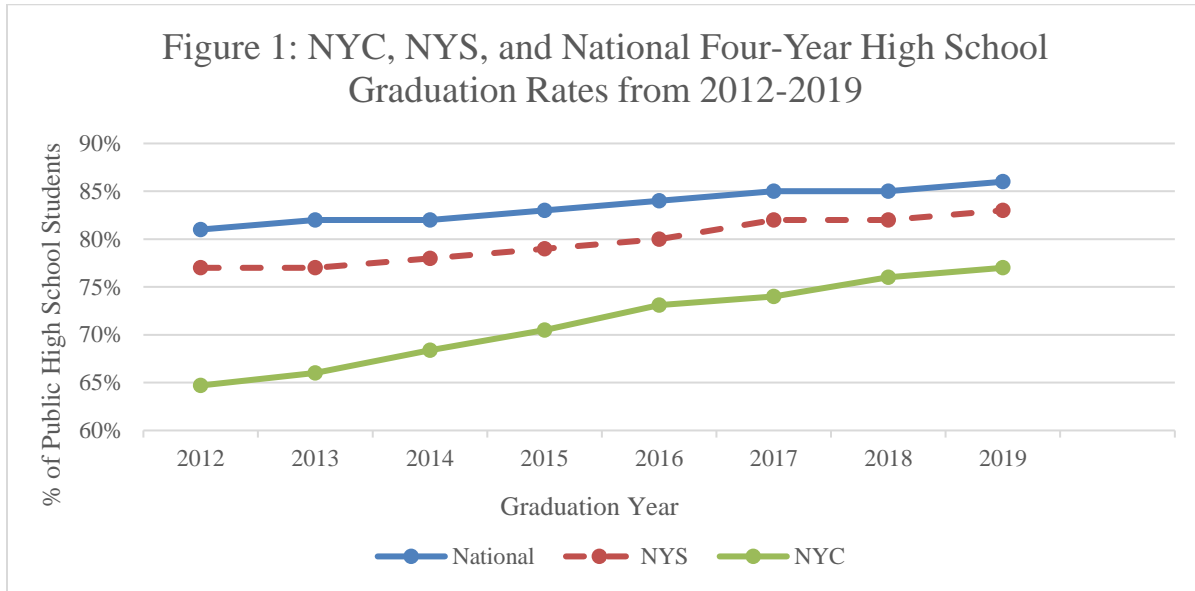


Figure 1: Four-year high school graduation rates (by August of their fourth year) in NYC, NY State, and nationally from 2012 to 2019.^{13,14,15}

NYC has also seen improvements in attendance and dropout rates from 2008 to 2019 (see Figure 2). The rate of NYC public high school students who had dropped out as of June after four years of instruction decreased from 15.8% in 2007 to 5.9% in 2020 (-9.9%). Likewise, school year attendance increased from 89.8% in 2008 to 91.5% in 2019. This nearly 2% improvement translates into roughly 3.5 additional days of instruction per year per student.

¹² See <https://nypost.com/2017/02/05/high-graduation-rates-no-guarantee-kids-are-ready-for-college> last accessed June 30, 2021.

¹³ For National rates: https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_coi.asp

¹⁴ For NYS rates: https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20_219.46.asp

¹⁵ For NYC rates: <https://infohub.nyced.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/2020-graduation-rates-website-deck.pdf>

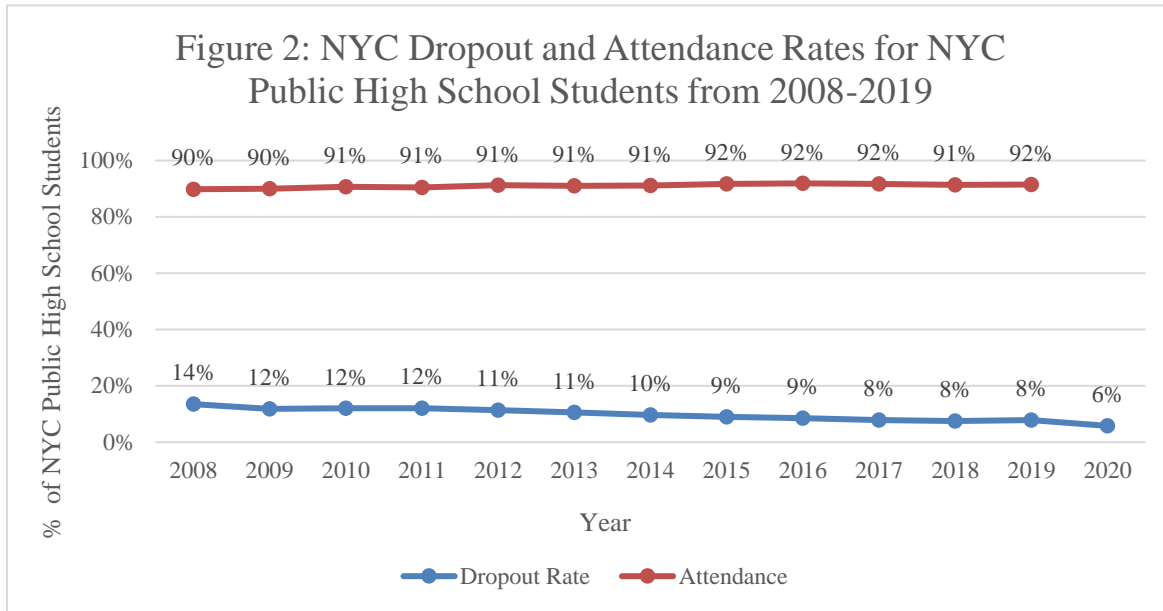


Figure 2: NYC public high school students who had dropped out as of June after four years of instruction and school-year attendance rates – calculated by dividing the total number of days students were present in school divided by the total number of days all students were absent and present.¹⁶

While the NYC graduation, attendance, and dropout rates are all moving in a positive direction, concerns remain. The NYC graduation rate falls below the graduation rate in the rest of the state and the nation. And while attendance has improved, “chronic absence” remains an issue.¹⁷

In 2019, 26.5% of NYC students met the chronic absence threshold of missing 10% or more of their school year, up from 24.6% in 2015.¹⁸ The NYC rate is nearly twice the national rate of 16%.¹⁹ A national truancy reduction program that began in 2013 had marginal success, but numbers have since increased to their previous rates. Additionally, disparities associated with race and neighborhood poverty have persisted. In 2018, 10% of NYC Asian students were chronically absent, compared to 14% of White students, 28% of Latinx students, and 30% of Black students. This means that Black and Latinx are more than twice as likely to be chronically absent than Asian and White students.²⁰ These trends are continued nationally.²¹ The chronic absentee rates for students from neighborhoods with high poverty levels were 15 percentage points higher than their peers living in neighborhoods with low to moderate poverty.²² The compounding effect of neighborhood poverty level and racial disparities in absenteeism can substantially burden marginalized students.

Chronic absenteeism is a strong predictor of academic success for students as well as schools. For children, it can be a negative predictor of graduation rates and has been linked to involvement in the

¹⁶ For more information, see <https://www.cccnewyork.org/data-reports/keeping-track-database>. Graduation and dropout rates from NYC DOE publication “NYC Graduation Rates Class of 2020” <https://infohub.nyced.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/2020-graduation-rates-website-deck.pdf>.

¹⁷ The 2013-2014 Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC). See <https://ocrdata.ed.gov/assets/downloads/2013-14-first-look.pdf>

¹⁸ See “Battling Chronic Absenteeism” by Kim Nauer, from Kappan Magazine

https://www.pdkmembers.org/members_online/publications/archive/pdf/PDK_98_2/28pdk_98_2.pdf

¹⁹ Data from 2016, most recently reported national chronic absenteeism rate. See “Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation’s Schools,” U.S. Department of Education. <https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html>

²⁰ <https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research-alliance/research/spotlight-nyc-schools/how-has-attendance-nyc-schools-changed-over-time>

²¹ See CRDC Data Collection 2013-2014: <https://ocrdata.ed.gov/assets/downloads/2013-14-first-look.pdf>

²² <https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research-alliance/research/spotlight-nyc-schools/how-has-attendance-nyc-schools-changed-over-time>

criminal justice system and future poverty.²³ For schools, the rate of absenteeism was a better predictor of schools' test scores than other common measures including the school's percentage of students in special education, English language learners, or students receiving free or reduced-price lunch. On average, the number of students who pass New York State tests decreases by 1.3% for every percentage point increase in chronic absenteeism.²⁴

Trends in college and postsecondary enrollment

Another measure of educational advancement is immediate college and postsecondary enrollment. The immediate college enrollment rate refers to the annual percentage of high school completers, including those who received a Graduate Equivalency Degree (GED), ages 16 to 24 who enroll in two- or four-year colleges in the fall immediately following high school completion. Nationally, the immediate college enrollment rate decreased from the high of 70.1% in 2009 to 66.2% in 2019.²⁵ NYC stands in contrast to this trend, with more students than ever enrolling in postsecondary options (college, vocational, or public service program). Earlier this year, Mayor de Blasio announced that a record-high 62.8% of the class of 2019 enrolled in a postsecondary option.²⁶ Though this figure cannot be compared to the national average because it also includes vocational and public service program enrollment, it is a 5.8% increase since 2016, indicating a positive trend.

Measuring educational attainment among foster youth

Nationally, studies show that foster youth educational outcomes lag behind their non-foster peers.²⁷ Neither the NYC Administration for Children's Services (ACS) nor the NYC Department of Education report four-year graduation rates for children in foster care in a manner comparable to NYC and NY State education agencies. Methodological concerns are one reason: determining who counts as a youth in foster care for purposes of a four-year graduation rate is complex. Many youth stay in foster care for short periods—often fewer than 45 days. Recent federal laws have allowed ACS and provider agencies to report data on foster youth educational outcomes, although there is only limited comparison data.

ACS receives monthly reports on school attendance for youth in care with unique identifiers on the child level, allowing ACS to monitor school transfers.²⁸ In accordance with Local Law 147²⁹ ACS generates an annual report on the high school graduation of foster youth in care at the end of the school year, as well as data on the rate of foster youth who are on track to graduate in four and five years. ACS also conducts matches with CUNY enrollment data, with youth consent, to assess college enrollment and persistence.

In the 2019-2020 school year (SY), there were 7,607 foster care youth enrolled in NYC Public Schools, a 1.7% decrease from the previous 2018-2019 school year. 2,041 total foster care youth enrolled in high school at the end of the school year, compared to 2,515 in the 2018-2019 SY (-18.9%). As this measure is recorded at the end of the school year, it is highly likely that the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic affected

²³ See US Department of Education: <https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html?src=pr#four>.

²⁴ See "Batting Chronic Absenteeism" by Kim Nauer, from Kappan Magazine https://www.pdkmembers.org/members_online/publications/archive/pdf/PDK_98_2/28pdk_98_2.pdf

²⁵ See https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cpa.asp

²⁶ See <https://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/029-21/mayor-de-blasio-chancellor-carranza-record-high-graduation-rate-record-high-college>

²⁷ See "Fostering Success in Education: National Factsheet on the Educational Outcomes of Children in Foster Care April 2018" by the National Working Group on Foster Care and Education

²⁸ This is allowed by amendments to the Family Educational Rights & Privacy Act (FERPA) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). See Page 4 of "Fostering Success in Education: National Factsheet on the Educational Outcomes of Children in Foster Care April 2018" by the National Working Group on Foster Care and Education

²⁹ New York City Administration for Children's Services website: "In compliance with Local Law 147 passed by the New York City Council in 2016, ACS submits an annual report on high school graduation rates of youth in foster care to the Council. This report is also required to be posted on the ACS website.": <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/acs/about/data-analysis.page>

enrollment. In SY2020, 55% were on track to graduate in 4 years (+2% from the prior year) and an additional 6.2% were on track to graduate in 5 years (+0.4% from the prior year).

	SY 2019-2020	% Change from 2018-2019
Number of foster youth enrolled in NYC public schools	7,607	-1.7%
Number of foster youth enrolled in high school	2,041	-18.9%
Percent on track to graduate (4 years)	55%	2%
Percent on track to graduate (5 years)	6.2%	0.4%

Table 1: Foster Youth Enrollment and Graduation, SY2019-2020. Data from ACS Annual Report.

In the 2018-2019 SY, 216 foster care youth graduated from high school (+9.6%), 53.2% of whom were African American (-5.2%), 33.3% Latinx (-1.2%), and 6.5% White (+3.5%). Racial disparities continue to persist in the educational attainment of foster youth, with only 53.1% of enrolled African American foster youth on track to graduate in 4 years (+0.9%), compared to 54.4% of Latinx youth (+1.5%), 63.3% of White youth (+7.1%), and 76.5% of Asian youth (+4%).³⁰ As there is only one year of comparison data, these trends may not continue in coming years.

Race/Ethnicity	Foster Youth Graduation Rate	% Change from 2018-2019	On Track to Graduate (4yr)	% Change from 2018-19
African American	53.2%	-5.2%	53.1%	0.9%
Latinx	33.3%	-1.2%	54.4%	1.5%
White	6.5%	3.5%	63.3%	7.1%
Asian	N/A	N/A	76.5%	4%

Table 2: Graduation Rates by Race/Ethnicity. Data from ACS Annual Report.

The average attendance rate of foster youth 5-10 years old was 91%, compared with 88% for youth 11-15 years old and 64% for youth 16-20 years old.³¹ These attendance figures suggest high rates of chronic absenteeism, and an almost double likelihood of being absent as compared to a non-foster care youth. Out of the total 1,622 children placed in foster care during the 2019-2020 school year, 83% remained in the school of origin 90 days after foster care placement, while 17% did not.³² Additionally, between 35-75% of foster youth in 2018 changed schools upon entering care, meaning that the level of school mobility is much higher than recorded after care begins.³³

Non-diploma credentials, educational programs, and alternate pathways to a secondary education credential

³⁰ See High School Graduation Rates of Youth in Foster Care Annual Report 2020, ACS. <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/acs/pdf/data-analysis/2020/HSFosterCareAnnualReport2020.pdf>. Compared to the previous school year, 2018-2019: <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/acs/pdf/data-analysis/2020/HighSchoolGraduationRatesOfYouthInFosterCareAnnualReport2019.pdf>.

³¹ See Educational Continuity of Children in Foster Care, School Year 2019-2020, ACS. <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/acs/pdf/data-analysis/2020/LL142SY20192020.pdf>

³² See Educational Continuity of Children in Foster Care, School Year 2019-2020, ACS. <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/acs/pdf/data-analysis/2020/LL142SY20192020.pdf>

³³ See “Fostering Success in Education: National Factsheet on the Educational Outcomes of Children in Foster Care April 2018” by the National Working Group on Foster Care and Education

New York City stakeholders place less emphasis on metrics related to other secondary education credentials and placements. These other credentials and placements include non-diploma options like the High School Equivalency (HSE) diploma and alternate pathways to earning a traditional diploma. Both NYSED and the NYC DOE track and share some data on these non-diploma credentials³⁴ but emphasize the four-year high school graduation rate in their goals and strategic priorities.

With many foster youth likely to experience an interrupted education, however, alternative pathways to a secondary education credential are particularly important for this population.³⁵ According to the National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, “Because of grade retention, children in foster care are more likely to be old for their grade and under-credited compared to their peers who have not been involved with the child welfare system.”³⁶ Over the past few years, NYC has developed several alternative programs and made changes to the GED track, now known as High School Equivalency (HSE).

NYC DOE programs for youth who are over-aged/under-credited are often conducted in partnership with CBOs and businesses and housed administratively in “District 79.” The Pathways to Graduation program, for example, has locations in each borough and prepares students ages 18-21 years for the Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC), which leads to an HSE diploma. The NYC DOE also operates transfer schools that are specialized full-time high schools intended to re-engage youth ages 16-21 who have dropped out or who need credit recovery to earn a traditional diploma. These schools include a small school environment, access to academic and social/emotional supports, and an attached “Learning to Work” programs at many sites. Finally, the Young Adult Borough Centers (YABCs) offer academic programming and related services outside of traditional school hours for under-credited students who are in their fifth year or more in high school.

The NYC DOE reports publicly on some District 79 programs and outcomes for different student populations through the broader school quality reporting system but does not produce a separate report focused on foster youth. This system includes the annual School Quality Snapshots, School Quality Guides, and an interactive School Performance Dashboard³⁷ as well as other tools for understanding student and school performance. While these programs and non-diploma credentials are well positioned to meet the needs of NYC transition age foster youth, over 90% of NYC foster youth who earn a secondary credential receive a traditional diploma as opposed to an alternative credential.³⁸

Education during the COVID-19 pandemic

Foster youth face increased educational instability due to the high rate of school changes. School mobility has many negative effects on academic achievement and relationship development.³⁹ The COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing school shutdowns has exacerbated school instability, leaving foster youth disproportionately vulnerable to educational interruption. Recent studies have found that access to internet is deeply unequal, as well as to devices with internet. These disadvantages may be compounded for children in poverty based on where they live. The study also found that children’s access to online

³⁴ See <https://www.regents.nysed.gov/common/regents/files/ACCES%20-%20HSE%20Update%20-%20National%20External%20Diploma%20Program-College%20Credit-TASC.pdf>

³⁵ For example, see “Fostering Success in Education: National Factsheet on the Educational Outcomes of Children in Foster Care April 2018” by the National Working Group on Foster Care and Education

³⁶ See page 7 of “Fostering Success in Education: National Factsheet on the Educational Outcomes of Children in Foster Care April 2018” by the National Working Group on Foster Care and Education

³⁷ <https://tools.nycenet.edu/dashboard/>

³⁸ See ACS’s “High School Graduation Rates of Youth in Foster Care Annual Report 2017”: <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/acs/pdf/data-analysis/2018/graduationrates.pdf>

³⁹ See “Fostering Success in Education: National Factsheet on the Educational Outcomes of Children in Foster Care April 2018” by the National Working Group on Foster Care and Education

learning is strongly correlated by race, suggesting that the learning gap may widen between Black/Latinx children as compared to White children and that already-marginalized youth may be additionally burdened by the pandemic.⁴⁰

To assist students during the COVID-19 crisis, the NYC Board of Regents adopted changes to their regulations. In 2020, all standardized exams in New York State were canceled. In 2021, high school students were required to take only the Regents exams required by the ESSA. However, passing these exams is no longer a graduation requirement.⁴¹

The regulations have also been changed for HSE programs; previously, students who passed a Regents exam but did not earn a high school diploma were exempt from the corresponding subject sub-test of the TASC, one path to an HSE. The requirement that all students must take and pass at least one subject sub-test of the TASC will be waived during the time period of the COVID-19 emergency for students who meet age eligibility requirements, in accordance with waiving the Regents requirements. Students enrolled in an Alternative High School Equivalency Program are also exempt from Regents requirements, and can follow the TASC pathway. Students planning to take a TASC sub-test when all TASC test centers were closed and no testing was permitted and who meet a set of specific criteria will be exempt from taking the previously required TASC subject tests.⁴²

President Biden's 2021 American Families Plan may also help young people access education during and after the pandemic, particularly by providing all Americans with the option of two years of free community college. While this does not help those unable to achieve HSE certification, it will help to make college more affordable for low- and middle-income students. The pandemic has had adverse effects on the rate of college enrollment for low-income students of color; this legislation lessens the barrier of cost to completing postsecondary education.⁴³

CONCLUSION

Over the last decade, the NYC four-year high school graduation rates have seen a steady increase, though still below the state and national averages. ACS data shows an increase in graduation rates for foster care youth and an increase in the population on track to graduate in either 4 or 5 years. However, a sharp decrease in the number of students enrolled may be affecting these trends. Racial disparities in graduation and graduation preparedness rates persist. With only one year of comparison data, we cannot be sure that these trends will continue in years to come. Still, NYC, with prompting from federal laws, has made considerable progress in developing educational monitoring protocols for youth in foster care. These advances set the stage for more comprehensive assessments of the educational experiences of transition age foster youth.

⁴⁰ See the Household Pulse Survey 2020, <https://www.census.gov/data/experimental-data-products/household-pulse-survey.html>

⁴¹ Fact Sheet 21-6: NYS Assessments and Diploma Requirements, NYSUT. <https://www.nysut.org/resources/all-listing/research/fact-sheets/fact-sheet-nys-assessments-diploma-requirements#:~:text=Regents%20Exam%20Exemptions&text=A%20student%20was%20previously%20enrolled,to%20achieve%20a%20passing%20score>.

⁴² See "High School Equivalency Diplomas during COVID-19" from the New York State Department of Education. <http://www.acces.nysed.gov/common/acces/files/hse/hse-guidance.pdf>

⁴³ See The American Families Plan Fact Sheet, from the White House Briefing Room. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/28/fact-sheet-the-american-families-plan/>