

Taking Stock:

A Progress Report on Public Education in New York State

What's the state of public education in New York State?

As college campuses bustle to life and nearly 2.7 million students begin another school year, it's a fair question to ask.

The answer may surprise a lot of people.

A growing collection of objective new research shows that New York's public education system is making significant progress and is achieving at levels perhaps never before seen in the state's history. Indeed, viewed as a whole, New York's public education system – including its SUNY, CUNY and community college institutions – is among the best in the nation.

In a months-long examination of student achievement at all levels, an analysis by NYSUT researchers contains a wellspring of good news for educators, students, parents and community members. Educational success is significantly deeper and far more widespread than has been acknowledged by critics. Moreover, New York's educational progress – measured by improvement in a number of key indicators – has been steadily charting an upward course.

It's important to note that the strong advances documented in **Taking Stock: A Progress Report on Public Education in New York State** are without question jeopardized by recent cuts in student programs and staff. The gains which New York's public education system have made over the last two decades in graduation rates; Regents diplomas; college readiness and college enrollment; and teacher quality are now very much at risk. When New York State invests in education, the result is measurable progress — progress that has been undermined by recent rounds of cuts. As school bells ring to open the 2012-13 school year, the state's 697 school districts will be operating with \$1.1 billion *less* in state aid than at the start of the 2008-09.¹ That translates to painful cuts in student courses and programs, and some 35,000 *fewer* teachers and paraprofessionals statewide. State support for public higher education – SUNY, CUNY and community colleges – has been cut by \$1.7 billion since 2008-09, leaving campuses starved at a time when more students are seeking access to higher education opportunities. Meanwhile, the property tax cap enacted in 2011 is undemocratically restraining local communities' ability to invest in programs essential to continued student success. Clearly, New York has reached a critical juncture if the Empire State is to retain its place among the top tier of states' education systems — particularly when this report and others show that the single biggest factor linked to student under-achievement is, in one word: poverty.

Still, students, educators and community members deserve the opportunity as the academic year begins to take stock of and recognize significant progress in public education. *That does not mean ignoring the very real needs of students who are not yet achieving at a level necessary for success in school and in life.* No one knows better than those engaged in education how significant the challenges are, and how urgently achievement gaps must be addressed to further improve public education at all

¹ NYSUT Division of Research and Educational Services (Bennett/Applebee)

levels and for all students. But, too often, public discourse about education fails to start with the facts. *Conversations about strengthening public education for all students must continue with an objective and more balanced view of educational achievement — a view that acknowledges success in order to build on it.*

The key findings summarized in this back-to-class report identify gains in New York’s educational achievement and progress, a number of which have not been previously acknowledged. This report seeks to address an imbalance in characterizing public education that too often overlooks progress — even as we maintain our focus on the very real challenges that remain, and must be remedied.

✓ **New York’s School Graduation Rates Are Soaring**

In 1999, New York’s graduation rate was calculated at 58.5 percent, a level that put it near the bottom among the 50 states.² Over the next decade, however, New York’s graduation rate soared, despite higher academic standards, more rigorous tests and much tougher Regents graduation requirements. Strong economic growth and a significant investment by the state and its local communities in its public schools over much of that 10-year span fueled dramatic gains in student achievement. **New York’s graduation rate climbed 19.9 points from 1999 to 2009, rising to 78.4 percent.**³ New York’s 10-year rise in graduation rates was second only to Arizona’s among the 50 states and the District of Columbia. In fact, New York’s nearly 20-point increase in graduation rates from 1999 to 2009 is nearly triple the nation’s 6.7 percentage point gain over that same time span.⁴

A similar charting of graduation gains found **New York and Tennessee were the only two states to show double-digit gains in graduation rates from 2002 to 2009.** A March 2012 report, *Building a Grad Nation: Progress and Challenge in Ending the High School Dropout Epidemic*, found that New York State increased its graduation rate by 13 percentage points from 2002 to 2009. The report also named New York as a national leader in reducing the number of students attending high schools the report’s authors identified as “dropout factories” because of the large numbers of students – mostly poor and minority students – leaving school before graduation. The report noted that New York’s progress in improving its graduation rate is a major driver behind the national increase in graduation rates over the past decade.⁵

The State Education Department typically reports graduation data for New York State as a whole; for school districts grouped according to geography and/or financial need; and by students’ race, ethnicity or ability to speak English fluently, for example. While accurate and fair, this method can also mask the high degree of success many individual school districts are experiencing. It may be one reason why New Yorkers, when polled, repeatedly express strong support for – and satisfaction with -- local schools in their own communities while expressing worry about public education statewide.

NYSUT’s analysis of graduation rates confirmed the gains identified by the State Education Department, but also showed that, over the seven-year-period **from June 2004 to June 2011, 255 of the 637 school districts with high schools increased their graduation rates, many by double-digits.**

² Diplomas Count, *Education Week*, June 7, 2012, p. 26

³ Diplomas Count, *Education Week*, June 7, 2012, p. 26

⁴ Diplomas Count, *Education Week*, June 7, 2012, p. 26

⁵ <http://www.americaspromise.org/About-the-Alliance/Press-Room/Press-Releases/2012/Grad-Nation-Report-Update.aspx>

NYSUT’s analysis of state Education Department data also shows that 195 school districts – including affluent suburban as well as small rural and city districts – reported June 2011 graduation rates above 90 percent. While even one drop-out is too many, graduation rates above 90 percent signal not only an educational resurgence – but excellence – in nearly one-third of New York’s school districts.

The New York State Education Department has, too, touted New York’s impressive gains in graduation rates over the last decade, noting on June 11, 2012 that, “While different organizations use different methodologies to calculate graduation rates, it is clear that New York State’s graduation rate continues to trend upwards and at a faster pace than most other states.”⁶

Other measures also show New York’s public education system is, indeed, improving or succeeding at levels not generally recognized by the public and news media. For example, while the achievement gap in New York’s Big 5 school districts is more pronounced than in the rest of the state, bright spots can be found. Yonkers increased its graduation rate by 32 percentage points from 2004 to 2011 while, in the most recent round of state testing, student scores jumped 6.4 percent in math and 2.9 points in English Language Arts. In a district where 69 percent of students qualify for a free- or reduced-price lunch and 13 percent are English language-learners, these gains are meaningful.

✓ **More Students are Earning Regents Diplomas**

Regents exams were first administered to eighth-grade students in November 1865, near the height of the Civil War.⁷ These examinations resulted from a Regents proclamation passed on July 24, 1864 which said, “At the close of each academic term, a public examination shall be held of all scholars presumed to have completed preliminary studies.” To encourage students to pursue further education, Regents “scholars” were awarded a certificate entitling the holder to “admission into the academic class in any academy subject to the visitation of the Regents.”

While much has changed in more than two centuries, Regents exams remain a benchmark of academic excellence for New York students. Indeed, a Regents diploma – and, better yet, a Regents diploma with distinction – is a rigorous, nationally recognized marker of academic achievement and a ticket to higher education for New York students.

In 1988-89, just 35 percent of New York students earned Regents diplomas. Through the Regents Action Plan and various other “reforms” over the next three decades, the number of students earning this prestigious diploma has been steadily rising. By 1999-2000, 48 percent of students earned the Regents’ diploma, a gain of nine points.⁸

The numbers today are even more impressive. More rigorous Regents standards introduced in the mid-1990s means more students are taking -- and passing -- rigorous exams in five subjects just to earn a Regents diploma.

⁶ <http://www.oms.nysed.gov/press/GraduationRates2012OverallImproveSlightlyButStillTooLow.html>

⁷ <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/apda/hsgen/archive/rehistory.htm>

⁸ NYS Education Department, Report to the Governor and Legislature on the Educational Status of the State’s Schools, June 2001, p. 49

In June 2011, 66.7 percent of graduates earned a Regents diploma, nearly double the number more than 20 years ago. In another sign of the resurgence of New York’s public education system, State Education Department data shows 87 school districts had at least 90 percent of its graduates earn the prestigious Regents diploma, compared to 36 districts in June 2004. Even more promising is the fact that 141 school districts experienced at least a 20-percentage point gain in its number of graduates earning Regents diploma over just that seven-year period.

✓ **New York’s Education System is Nationally Recognized**

When looking at broad measures of educational achievement, how does New York stack up? *Education Week*, which has a well-deserved reputation for rigorous reporting of the national education scene, annually publishes an overview of the states’ education systems. In its January 12, 2012 report, *Quality Counts*, *Education Week* ranked New York’s overall public education system third in the nation – behind only Maryland and Massachusetts – based on its cumulative score on six broad measures of educational success. New York’s score of 83.9 points put it well ahead of the national average score of 76.5. Meanwhile, New York also outpaced other large states with great diversity and large pockets of poverty, surpassing, for example, California (76.1); Texas ((79.2); Florida (79.4) and New Jersey (80.5).⁹ In 2011, New York ranked second in the nation in the same survey.

There is other evidence that New York’s public education system is on track. Even the news media is taking notice. *Newsweek*, in its May 2012 report on *America’s Best Public High Schools*, ranked 118 public high schools in New York among the top 1,000 in the nation.¹⁰ Only California – with 6.21 million students compared to New York’s 2.7 million – had more public high schools (138) in the top 1,000. City Honors in Buffalo was rated the No. 1 public high school in the Northeast and No. 11 in the United States based on a number of measures, including SAT and ACT scores; AP exam scores; graduation rates; and the percentage of graduates enrolling in college. In all, New York placed six public high schools among the top 10 in the Northeast. Joining City Honors was Bronxville HS (No. 4); Jericho HS (No. 5); Hunter College HS (No. 6); Bronx HS of Science (No. 9) and Locust Valley HS (No. 10).

U.S. News and World Reports, in its issue of “*America’s Best High Schools*,” awarded 68 New York high schools “gold medals,” based on their ability to help students surpass state proficiency standards, how well they prepare students for college and other factors.¹¹ Only California had more gold medal schools than New York State. In addition, the news magazine awarded 174 New York high schools “silver medals” and 128 schools “bronze medals.” Hundreds of other New York high schools made the *U.S. News and World Reports* rankings of successful high schools but did not receive medals.

✓ **New York a National Leader in Advanced Placement Exams**

New York is a national leader in The College Board’s Advanced Placement program.

⁹ Quality Counts 2012, State Report Cards. January 12, 2012

¹⁰ <http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/newsweek-releases-2012-best-high-schools-in-america-rankings---kentuckys-gatton-academy-tops-list-152206815.html>

¹¹ <http://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/national-rankings>

New York ranked second in the nation in 2011 with 26.5 percent of its high school graduates participating in the College Board's Advanced Placement courses and scoring at least a 3 on an AP exam.¹² New York State is a leader in increasing overall AP participation, and in significantly improving the number of under-represented minority students taking AP courses. The number of African-American and Latino students taking AP courses more than doubled in the last 10 years, rising from 16,968 in 2002 to 38,216 in 2011. Even as New York State has greatly increased the number of students taking AP exams, New York's mean score has held steady, 3.05 in 2011 compared to 3.07 in May 2002, signaling that more students are taking and passing AP exams.

Over the past 10 years, the number of New York students taking Advanced Placement courses while still in high school more than doubled.¹³ In May 2002, 84,536 New York high school students took 142,083 college-level AP exams while still in high school. A decade later, the number of New York students taking college courses while in high school hit an impressive 188,871 students taking 228,147 exams.

New York's Teachers among the Nation's Most Educated, Highest Achieving

Success in public education is due to many factors. It takes the hard work and dedication of superintendents, school administrators and school board members. Community and parental support are of course, essential. Adequate and equitable investment in students makes a difference, as well. Yet, there is no question that the skill, dedication and compassion of New York's 210,000 teachers and tens of thousands of paraprofessionals are the building blocks behind New York's significant gains in school and student performance.

New York's teachers are among the best-trained and most highly educated in the nation.

New York is one of just 12 states to require teachers to hold a master's degree to become certified. Unknown to the public, many teachers go well beyond that "minimal" requirement. **Nearly 40 percent of the state's teachers have earned at least 30 graduate credits beyond the required master's degree or a doctorate.**¹⁴ **In some regions of New York State, such as Long Island, some two-thirds of teachers have earned at least 30 graduate credits beyond the minimally required master's degree, acquiring knowledge and depth of understanding that benefits students and their communities.**

In addition, New York teachers must engage in meaningful professional development. On top of the master's degree, New York teachers must receive 175 hours of professional development every five years in order to maintain their teaching certification. New York's comprehensive, rigorous and fair teacher-principal evaluation system – enacted in May 2010 and amended in February 2011 – will also help ensure that high-quality teachers are in front of every classroom.

New York's teachers are also standing out by achieving national certification from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, considered the 'gold standard' of the teaching profession. While New York is recognized nationally for having a highly educated, highly skilled teaching force, an increasing number of teachers have voluntarily taken on the challenge of proving they meet rigorous

¹² <http://press.collegeboard.org/releases/2012/advanced-placement-results-class-2011-announced>

¹³ http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/ap/exgrd_sum/2011.html

¹⁴ <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/pmf/2011-12/home.html> Chart 12

national standards through study, expert evaluation, self-assessment and peer review. A growing body of research, including a National Research Council report mandated by Congress in 2008, documents that students taught by NBCTs make higher gains on achievement tests than students taught by teachers who are not nationally certified.

Yet, in 2000, only 104 New York teachers had achieved national certification. New York ranked in the bottom half of the states in its number of teachers who successfully completed the demanding evaluation process. **Today, however, with 165 New York teachers achieving ‘master teacher’ status in November 2011, New York has 1,302 nationally certified teachers – 11th highest in the nation.** Moreover, most of those highly accomplished teachers are working with New York’s neediest students. As of August 2012, 97 percent of the state’s nationally certified teachers are working in a Title I eligible school, or a school where at least 40 percent of the students are eligible for a free- or reduced-price lunch. In 2007, only 57 percent of the state’s nationally certified teachers were working in high-need school environments.

New York’s gains have caught the attention of former West Virginia Gov. Bob Wise, chairman of the Board of Directors of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. In a statement to NYSUT, Wise noted that, for 25 years, the NBPTS has “been at the forefront in establishing the highest measures of teaching excellence.”

He said, “Today, there are more than 1,300 National Board Certified Teachers working in New York schools to ensure the state’s students receive a first-class education and are able to compete in a 21st Century global economy. Last year, there was a 14.5% increase in the number of teachers in the state who achieved National Board Certification. In the coming years, I am confident that New York will continue to partner with the National Board to forge teaching into a true profession and use the skills and knowledge of the state’s National Board Certified Teachers to drive school reform.”

✓ **More New York Students Are Enrolling in College**

Like graduation rates, test scores have been also been steadily edging higher. In the April 2012 testing cycle, average scores on both the math and ELA tests improved, and the State Education Department reported an increase in the number of students in grades 3 through 8 who met or exceeded state proficiency standards on both exams. (Regents Chancellor Meryll H. Tisch acknowledged that “positive momentum,” while noting -- as NYSUT made clear in its October 2008 conference on Ending the Achievement Gap – that large number of students, especially students of color; those who receive special education services and English Language Learners, are not yet achieving at high levels.¹⁵)

In 1980, just 63 percent of New York’s public school graduates entered college.¹⁶ **Nearly 35 years later, the number of New York graduating high school students enrolling in two- or four-year colleges hit 81 percent, tying for the highest mark in New York since 2003.**¹⁷ With better than four of every five high school graduates enrolling in college, New York continues to have one of the nation’s

¹⁵ <http://www.oms.nysed.gov/press/3-8MathELATestScores.2012.html>

¹⁶ New York State Education Department; Annual Educational Summary, 1978-79, Table 14

¹⁷ http://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/statistics/public/table_9

most highly educated workforces. **Indeed, New York has the fourth-highest percentage of college degree holders in the 25-34 age group in the nation.**¹⁸

In a new analysis, NYSUT's Research and Education Services Department looked at data from the 637 school districts with high schools. **Nearly 41 percent – or 264 -- school districts increased their percentage of graduates enrolling in two- or four-year colleges – a figure that hides an even more impressive reality: Many districts had little room to improve.**

For example, Shoreham-Wading River's "going to college" rate declined, but 93 percent of its graduates still enrolled in college in 2011, compared to 95 percent after the 2000-01 school year. Likewise, Arlington in the Hudson Valley; Clarence in Western New York and Penfield outside Rochester all enrolled 92 percent of their students in college after their June 2011 graduations, but all saw slight declines from the 10-year snapshot.

Shoreham-Wading River, Arlington, Clarence and Penfield, however, are among the many shining lights of New York's public education system. **They are among 175 school districts across the state which enrolled at least 90 percent of their June 2011 graduates in two-or four-year colleges.** While that number includes many affluent suburban districts, small cities like Rye, Watervliet and Little Falls, as well as rural districts such as Cossackie-Athens, Windam-Ashland-Jewitt and Webb also sent at least 90 percent of their graduates to college.

By enrolling thousands of additional students in college, New York is increasing its skilled and highly educated workforce. And, the state's educational progress has been recognized by the business community. **The CNBC television network, in its 2012 Special Report, *America's Top States for Business*, ranked New York's education system No. 1 in the nation for meeting the needs of business.** CNBC noted, "Education and business go hand in hand. Not only do companies want to draw from an educated pool of workers; they want to offer their employees a great place to raise a family."¹⁹

New York's Public Higher Education Systems Rank among the Best

Measuring the success and achievement of higher education institutions is not an objective exercise. Still, a number of media outlets attempt to rank and measure the nation's college and universities. A look at these outside evaluations of the New York's State University, City University and community college systems leaves little doubt: SUNY, CUNY and New York's network of community colleges are on the rise and providing excellent learning and research opportunity for their students.

For example, *Forbes* magazine recently ranked Binghamton University, the University at Albany, Stony Brook University and the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry among its "Best Buys" and "America's Best Public Colleges." Among a long of honors for SUNY, *U.S. News and World Reports* honored Binghamton, Albany and Stony Brook, while also recognizing SUNY Geneseo; SUNY New Paltz, SUNY Oneonta and SUNY Fredonia among its "Best Regional Universities in the North." And, the *Princeton Review* ranked Albany, Binghamton and Stony Brook – as well as SUNY Buffalo,

¹⁸ <http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/new-state-state-college-attainment-numbers-show-progress-toward-2020-goal>

¹⁹ <http://www.cnbc.com/id/46413846/>

SUNY Geneseo and SUNY Purchase among its “Best Colleges,” while listing those as well as SUNY Brockport, SUNY Oswego and SUNY Fredonia among its “Best Northeastern Colleges.”²⁰

Meanwhile, CUNY is also being widely recognized for raising standards for its more than 271,000 students. In fact, over the years, CUNY has increased its numbers of “high achievers” – students with high school grade point averages above 85 – while earning accolades for granting degrees that deliver in the marketplace. CUNY spokeswoman Rita Rodin recently noted that new initiatives – such as the CUNY School of Public Health at Hunter College and the new CUNY School of Journalism “reflect a resurgent CUNY reaching for the stars.

“Our world-class faculty, from scientists to fiction writers, includes some of the most creative minds teaching today,” Rodin said. “Our students, in recent years, have earned top accolades: four Rhodes Scholarships, seven Truman Scholarships, eight Goldwater Scholarships, numerous National Science Foundation graduate fellowships and other prestigious awards and fellowships.”²¹

Meanwhile, the nation is also taking notice of New York’s terrific network of community colleges.

The Aspen Institute, as part of a study of community college excellence, recently placed six New York community colleges among the 120 best in the United States.

Culled from 1,008 public community colleges in all 50 states, only those in the “Top 120” – based on a detailed metric measuring performance, improvement and equity – will be eligible for the 2013 Aspen Institute’s Prize for Community College Excellence.²²

The six New York community colleges – including Broome CC; Finger Lakes CC; Genesee CC; Hudson Valley CC; Jefferson CC and CUNY Kingsborough CC – all help set national benchmarks for excellence in the community college sector by performing among the nation’s elite in student retention, graduation rates, in showing steady improvement over time, and in demonstrating evidence of success by minority and low-income students.

Conclusions

This report supports three recommendations as students head into a new academic year.

- First, educators, parents and communicators must aggressively counter misperceptions about public education. As **Taking Stock** demonstrates, New York’s public education system is succeeding. More students than ever are showing substantial gains in performance. Many school districts and campuses are leading the way to excellence. Just as effective teachers first acknowledge student progress before identifying areas where students must improve, New York must adopt a more balanced approach to discussing public education.

²⁰ https://www.suny.edu/student/university_others_say_about_suny.cfm

²¹ CUNY Office of Media Relations, Aug. 20, 2012

²² <http://www.aspeninstitute.org/policy-work/aspen-prize/roundidata>

- We must keep a laser-like focus on what needs to improve. Clearly, much work remains to be done, especially in districts where low student achievement and high drop-out rates track closely with the common denominator of poverty. Ending the achievement gaps must include building new partnerships with communities and pressing for programs and policies that help students and families who are most vulnerable – those who live in poverty, those who have special needs, and those who are English Language Learners.
- New York State must support the momentum students and educators have achieved by making sustained, significant investments in public education. New York’s elected leaders must join educators, as partners, in working to reverse cuts in programs and services that have impacted campuses and classrooms. If New York is to continue its national rise in education, the state must look at its public schools and its public higher education institutions not as expenses to be cut because times are tough, but as long-term investments in the state’s economic future.