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To: District Superintendents  
Superintendents of Public Schools  
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From: New York State Education Department

Date: November 18, 2019

Subject: Equitable Course Access Guidance

The Board of Regents and the State Education Department (“SED”) are committed to ensuring that all students succeed and thrive in school no matter who they are, where they are from, where they live, or where they go to school. This emphasis on equity includes a focus on increasing students’ access to rigorous learning opportunities so that all students are prepared for success after high school.

One way SED is pursuing this goal is through the implementation of New York State’s Every Student Succeeds Act (“ESSA”) plan.

Our ESSA plan uses multiple measures of success to advance equity, including a new “College, Career, and Civic Readiness Index” that will measure, among other indicators, advanced course enrollment and credits. To assist school districts in this area, SED is issuing this guidance to share recommended best practices for providing equitable opportunities for access to rigorous coursework for all students, including those students who are historically underserved.

## Background

During the 2016-17 school year, data shows Latino, Black, and American Indian students in New York public schools were underrepresented in a wide range of *gatekeeper courses* (classes that prepare students for advanced coursework) and in advanced courses.<sup>1</sup> These gatekeeper and advanced courses included Algebra I and Earth Science courses in middle school and Calculus, Physics, Computer Science, advanced foreign language, music, Advanced Placement (AP), and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses in high school.

The data reveals that students of color were far less likely to attend schools that offered a full range of these courses. Where they attend schools that offer these courses, students of color were far less likely to be enrolled in advanced courses. For example, in high schools that offered Calculus, Latino students represented 21% of all students but only 12% of students enrolled in

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<sup>1</sup> “Within Our Reach: An agenda for ensuring all New York students are prepared for college, careers, and active citizenship,” (New York, N.Y.: The New York Equity Coalition, 2018). Available at: [www.EquityInEdNY.org](http://www.EquityInEdNY.org).

Calculus. Likewise, Black students represented 13% of all enrolled students but only 7% of students enrolled in Calculus.

Such disparities can be found across all district need/resource capacity categories from low-need districts to the Big Five districts. For example, in rural high-need school districts, Latino and Black students represented 10% of enrollment in high schools that offered Calculus but just 4% of students enrolled in Calculus. In low-need school districts, Latino and Black students represented 16% of enrollment in high schools that offered Calculus but just 9% of students enrolled in Calculus.<sup>2</sup>

### Guiding Principles for Course Access Equity

The following five district- and school-level guiding principles may assist school districts in their efforts to provide course access equity:

1. Providing a course sequence and foundation-building in earlier grades that make later advanced coursework a viable option;
2. Creating multiple access points to advanced courses;
3. Using only enrollment access criteria that are educationally necessary;
4. Offering a robust set of student supports that help all students succeed in advanced courses; and
5. Publishing materials that encourage all students to participate in advanced courses and making these materials available in multiple languages.

### Foundation-Building in Early Grades

An equitable course enrollment policy builds on rigorous learning opportunities for **all** students in elementary and middle grades.

Positive practices include:

- ensuring high expectations for all students;
- scaffolding curriculum in the early grades so that all students are prepared for advanced coursework in high school; and
- providing educators with the necessary professional development across grade spans.

In school districts that have gifted and talented programs, screening should be equitable and accessible. To the extent feasible, school districts should consider screening all students during the school day rather than inviting students to apply and/or performing screening on weekends, after school, or at other times that parents may not be aware of or be able to attend.

School districts should ensure that, starting in the early grades, all students are provided with opportunities to access the courses and curriculum that will prepare them for a range of rigorous courses by the time they reach high school.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

### Creating Multiple Access Points

An equitable course enrollment policy is rooted in the understanding that students can succeed in advanced courses when they are well-prepared with the appropriate foundation and provided with appropriate supports.

Positive practices include:

- creating multiple pathways so students can enroll in Honors, Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, Dual Enrollment, and other advanced courses at various points throughout their school experience;
- providing access to school counselors who have the skills and training to engage with families and students of all backgrounds, enabling them to better help students navigate course enrollment to prepare for college and careers; and
- providing information on advanced coursework in the student's home language so that both students and parents are aware of all options available.

Districts should carefully consider the use of practices that may have a negative impact on access to advanced coursework for underserved students, including rigid tracking and Honors programs that limit advanced course access to a select group of students without ongoing opportunities for all students to enroll in advanced coursework and required prerequisites. Districts should also consider the impact of any other policies or practices that result in disproportionate under-enrollment in advanced coursework for students of color, students who are low-income, and/or other historically underserved groups of students.

### Enrollment Policies

Positive practices include carefully considering the relevance of course prerequisites and considering non-academic aspects of readiness for advanced coursework. An equitable course enrollment policy would, for example, limit prerequisites and entrance requirements to those that are directly related to a student's potential for success.

An equitable course enrollment policy uses multiple measures to identify students for advanced coursework so that no single measure excludes their participation. Districts should carefully consider the use of practices that may have a negative impact on access to advanced coursework for underserved students, including the use of:

- teacher or administrator recommendations or rigid GPA cutoffs as the sole or controlling criteria for course access;
- unrelated entrance tasks/exams; and
- nonessential prerequisites.

While some school districts have enrollment policies that allow families to formally appeal course enrollment determinations, districts should be aware that such approaches do not substitute for an equitable course enrollment policy. The appeals process may present barriers that families, particularly those from historically underserved groups, may not feel comfortable overcoming.

## Student Supports

An equitable course enrollment policy may include assisting students to **succeed** in advanced coursework. Positive practices include tutoring, access to technology, and support from school counselors. In addition, school districts should be aware of the provisions included in the 2019-2020 Enacted State Budget that authorize SUNY and CUNY to reduce or waive tuition for high school dual or concurrent enrollment students. School districts should also make eligible students aware of the state-provided [AP and IB test fee waivers](#).

## Publishing Inclusive Materials and Conducting Outreach in Multiple Languages

An equitable course enrollment policy may include encouraging students to pursue a wide range of gatekeeper and advanced coursework throughout their academic careers and communicating the benefits of advanced coursework and enrollment information in a language their families can understand.

Positive practices include creating a variety of inclusive materials for students and their families, all available in multiple languages or in a language that families understand. The materials may include:

- course guides;
- enrollment information and instructions; and
- letters to parents that invite students to participate in advanced courses, describe how these courses will benefit students as they pursue college and careers, and describe the supports provided to encourage student success.

Attending to the principles outlined above will help to provide additional opportunities and encourage students who are underrepresented in advanced coursework. Offering the preparation, information, and access to such courses will ultimately improve their ability to be ready for all available post-secondary options.