

Commentary

It's time that we rethink the high school diploma



By **Betty Rosa**
Regents Chancellor

The latest graduation rate figures are similar to the results we have seen in each of the last several years (see story, page 5). The graduation rate continues to slowly edge up, but stubborn gaps in achievement persist – gaps that separate students of color, students with disabilities,

English language learners, and low-income students from their peers who are white and attend school in low-need districts.

It was encouraging to see signs that we are moving in the right direction. On the other hand, the rate of improvement is far too slow by any objective measure. Simply put, the system is not working for everyone, and too many students – particularly our most vulnerable students – are leaving high school without a diploma.

Other states also are grappling with graduation rates that are improving too slowly, if at all, as well as achievement gaps that reflect pernicious and pervasive opportunity gaps. That's why policymakers in other states have begun the hard work of rethinking what a high school diploma means and what it ought to signify. Here in New York, we should do the same.

It will be a difficult conversation for

New Yorkers. But I and other Regents view it as essential. In recent years, the Board of Regents and the State Education Department tackled equally controversial issues when we revised the state's learning standards and adopted our plan to comply with the federal Every Student Succeeds Act. Those experiences point the way forward. In each case, the final product resulted from a lengthy process that was collaborative, deliberative and transparent. Each involved gathering input from many partners, including parents, teachers and school administrators, as well as representatives of higher education, the business community and the general public.

We all remember the strong push back that followed New York's rushed implementation of the Common Core standards, state assessments and teacher evaluations. We worked to avoid that experience when we revised the learning standards and when we adopted the ESSA plan, and we will be similarly deliberate and collaborative as we reconsider the high school diploma.

In June 2017, we created a Regents Research Work Group and tasked its members with overseeing work to promote greater diversity within New York's schools. In the coming months I will expand the mandate of that group, which is co-chaired by Regents Judith Johnson and Nan Eileen Mead. I will ask them to look at revising New York's graduation requirements.

I will ask them to focus on three areas: research, practice and policy. They will address key questions, such as:

- What do we want our children to know and to be able to do before they graduate?
- How do we want them to demonstrate such knowledge and skills?
- To what degree does requiring passage of Regents exams for a diploma improve student achievement, graduation rates and college readiness?
- What other measures of achievement (e.g., capstone projects, alternative assessments or engagement in civic and community activities) could serve as indicators of high school completion?

There are examples from other states to evaluate. The process of gathering public input, studying the research and examining others' practices will take time and resources. After that, the Board of Regents will be able to consider possible policy alternatives.

No doubt that there will be strong feelings on all sides of this issue. Regents exams have been the gold standard for over a century – and with good reason. But our systems must be continually reviewed, renewed and occasionally revised in order to best serve our students and the people of this great state. It is now time for us to begin the process of looking at our graduation requirements and what it means to hold a New York State high school diploma.