




Senior Deputy Commissioner
Office of Education Policy

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To: School District Superintendents
School Principals
BOCES District Superintendents
Charter School Leaders
School Counselors
Organizations, Parents/Guardians and Individuals Concerned with College Access
and College, Career, and Civic Readiness

From: John L. D'Agati 

Subject: Supporting the Graduating Class of 2021

The New York State Education Department (NYSED) recognizes the extraordinary work that school and district administrators, teachers, school counselors, and other school personnel are doing daily to support the academic, social-emotional, and other essential needs of students during the COVID-19 pandemic, including high school seniors who are preparing to graduate in Spring 2021.

Leveraging the practices that many schools regularly implement in a typical academic year, this document builds on NYSED's school reopening guidance – [Recovering, Rebuilding and Renewing: The Spirit of New York's Schools](#) – to describe specific strategies and supports that schools should have in place to support graduating high school seniors under these unprecedented circumstances.

Background

High school seniors are in a unique position as a result of the pandemic. Their last year and a half of high school looked different than any of us could have imagined. While NYSED has taken important steps to ensure that they will be able to receive their diploma, seniors may experience difficulty making a successful transition to college and/or the workforce following graduation during the pandemic. They may also experience feelings of anxiety and loss as a result of missing out on many of the experiences typically associated with the last years of high school. These effects could impact students' futures.

In addition, the destabilizing effects of COVID-19 have had a particularly harmful impact on people of color, students with disabilities, English language/Multilingual learners, students in foster care, students experiencing homelessness, and economically disadvantaged students—in terms of health, employment, and their ability to receive a meaningful education. Based on

multiple research studies, it is clear that this period of remote learning may result in “learning loss” for many of our students—particularly the most vulnerable students identified above—being hit the hardest.¹

Consistent with [NYSED’s framework for school reopening](#), it is important that schools make every effort to provide enhanced support to all groups of graduating high school seniors so that they can successfully transition to college and/or the workforce. Many of the strategies and practices that high schools and school districts put in place before the pandemic remain essential. NYSED urges high schools and school districts to draw on these effective practices—such as an annual individual progress review plan conducted by school counselors²—to support high school seniors; modify and differentiate those practices as needed to meet the blended/hybrid and remote learning circumstances caused by COVID-19; and build on them to address the enhanced needs facing graduating high school students as a result of the pandemic.

Quality instruction during remote or hybrid/blended learning

High schools should continue to ensure instructional continuity for graduating high school seniors, since they will not be able to benefit from future school strategies to address instructional loss and academic acceleration after the completion of their senior year. NYSED’s school reopening teaching and learning guidance document reminds schools of the importance of “providing clear opportunities for equitable instruction for all students; ensuring continuity of learning regardless of the instructional model used; providing standards-based instruction; ensuring substantive daily interaction between teachers and students; and clearly communicating information about instructional plans with parents and guardians.”³

In addition, the flexibility to meet “unit of study” requirements provided by recent amendments to Commissioner’s regulation §100.1 specify that: “Instructional experiences shall include, but not be limited to: meaningful and frequent interaction with an appropriately certified teacher; academic and other supports designed to meet the needs of the individual student and instructional content that reflects consistent academic expectations as in-person instruction. Any alternative instructional experience should include meaningful feedback on student assignments and methods of tracking student engagement.”

Schools may also explore partnerships with their local community colleges and other universities, if applicable, to provide free online or on-campus courses for graduating seniors (and students who will be seniors next year).

¹ E. Dorn et al., COVID-19 and student learning in the United States: The hurt could last a lifetime” (McKinsey & Company, June 2020) <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-student-learning-in-the-united-states-the-hurt-could-last-a-lifetime>; L.S. Hamilton et al., “COVID-19 and the State of K–12 Schools: Results and technical documentation from the spring 2020 American educator panels COVID-19 Surveys” (Rand Corporation, 2020) https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA168-1.html; M. Kuhfeld et al., “Projecting the potential impacts of COVID-19 school closures on academic achievement” (2020).

² New York State Education Department, “Guidance Programs and Comprehensive Developmental School Counseling/Guidance Programs Commissioner’s regulation §100.2(j)” (p. 9).

³ New York State Education Department, “Recovering, Rebuilding and Renewing: The Spirit of New York’s Schools” (p. 9).

Meeting students' social-emotional needs

NYSED's response to the pandemic has emphasized the importance of social-emotional well-being.⁴ Schools should consider strategies to provide tools for families and virtual real-time support to address the anxiety, uncertainty, and loss that high school students might feel as a result of school closures, remote or blended/hybrid instruction, and other pandemic-related impacts on their lives, including through connections to counseling and mental health services. Districts' school counselors should consider arranging small groups and more general forums with students to discuss the impact of COVID-19 and their feelings regarding their futures and loss of traditions. Students and educators should also be made aware that the New York State Office of Mental Health has launched an Emotional Support Helpline (1-844-863-9314), for individuals who are overwhelmed by the anxiety and loss caused by the COVID-19 crisis.

Educational progress and career plans for all students

Consistent with Commissioner's regulation §100.2(j)(2)(i)(b) and related guidance, school counselors should work with all seniors to develop individual educational progress and career plans as part of the comprehensive developmental school counseling/guidance program.⁵ Topics to consider include the student's college and career aspirations; skills; college and career exploration and selection processes; college affordability planning; and whether there are additional supports or follow-up that the high school and school district, higher education institutions, and business and community partners can provide to assist the student with successfully transitioning in these unique circumstances.

For students planning to attend college, "summer melt" – when students enroll in college but do not matriculate in the fall – may be an especially high risk this year. As part of a transition plan, school counselors and other school employees can help graduating seniors remember to complete the fall registration, financial aid, health, housing, and other forms required to stay on track.

Another important role for school counselors and other school employees supporting college-bound seniors by developing their transition plans is to avoid college "undermatch." Research has established that when high-performing students decide to attend institutions that are less selective than the student's qualifications, they are likely to have lower levels of college completion. This is particularly true for the high-performing students from low-income backgrounds. "Undermatch" is most likely to affect Black students, while Latinx students who

⁴ As the reopening guidance document states: "Along with physical health and well-being, schools and districts must also prioritize social emotional well-being – not at the expense of academics, but in order to create the mental, social, and emotional space for academic learning to occur. New York State Education Department, "Recovering, Rebuilding and Renewing: The Spirit of New York's Schools" (p. 8).

⁵ New York State Education Department, "Guidance Pertaining to Commissioner's regulation §100.2(j) Guidance Programs and Comprehensive Developmental School Counseling/Guidance Programs," Appendix C, <http://nyssca.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Guidance-document-100.2j-6-15-18.pdf> . See also New York State Education Department, "Recovering, Rebuilding and Renewing: The Spirit of New York's Schools" (p. 107) (school districts are asked to consider "utilizing school counselors and other school staff to facilitate and support career development and advisement within the district or BOCES").

“undermatch” have the worst college outcomes.⁶ The risk of “undermatch” is important for students who may be considering changing their college plans as a result of COVID-19.⁷

College financial aid

National research shows that 90% of high school seniors who complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) go to college immediately after graduation, compared to just 55% of seniors who do not complete the FAFSA.⁸ New York’s FAFSA completion for the 2020-21 school year is already falling behind last year’s FAFSA completion, with 14% fewer high school seniors finalizing the FAFSA as of November 20. In addition, schools that serve the greatest share of students from low-income backgrounds have significantly lower FAFSA completion rates than schools that serve fewer students from low-income backgrounds.

NYSED is committed to providing information and resources to assist high schools with FAFSA completion initiatives.⁹ High schools should support all eligible seniors and their families in completing FAFSA, TAP, NYS DREAM Act, and/or Excelsior Scholarship applications.

Each district and charter school has been asked to provide a contact email address to FinAidInfo@nysed.gov. NYSED sends financial aid updates to the email address provided, and districts and charter schools are responsible for pushing out these financial aid updates through their portals. In this way, high schools can get important NYS grant and scholarship information directly into the hands of students and parents.

All high schools should consider conducting regular and ongoing individual outreach – online, by phone, by email, and by mail if necessary – to all seniors who have not yet completed the FAFSA. To help with these efforts, high schools can also gain access from the New York State Higher Education Services Corporation (HESC) website to view the [FAFSA and TAP filing status](#) for their students, which high schools can use to provide regular follow-up to all students who have not yet completed their applications.

School counselors and other college access professionals in New York State have developed the [Financial Aid for College: High School Toolkit](#) to provide easy-to-use evidence-based practices and sample communications in English and Spanish to support seniors in completing their financial aid applications.¹⁰

⁶ Chungseo Kang and Darlene Garcia Torres, “College undermatching, bachelor’s degree attainment, and minority students,” *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* (September 2019).

⁷ Recent polling of parents of high school students by The Education Trust–New York reveals that parents say their child is more likely to attend a college nearby instead of going further away, more likely to attend college part-time instead of full-time so they can help support themselves and their family, and more likely to study a trade instead of pursuing a college degree as a result of the pandemic.

⁸ National College Attainment Network summary of research conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. See: <https://www.ncan.org/page/WhyInvestFAFSA>.

⁹ See, for example: <http://www.nysed.gov/news/2019/new-york-state-education-department-launches-interactive-online-fafsa-tracker>.

¹⁰ These evidence-based resources were created by The Education Trust–New York in partnership with the New York State Higher Education Services Corporation, New York State Council of School Superintendents, the Options

In addition, high schools should consider making students aware that they can appeal their college financial aid awards. Many students and their families have experienced increased financial insecurity as the result of the pandemic, including changes in income and job loss. Colleges have the ability to change financial aid awards due to special circumstances. Available resources to assist in this process include [SwiftStudent](#), an initiative supported by former First Lady Michelle Obama’s Reach Higher initiative and other partners.

Virtual office hours for school counselors and other school staff when in Remote Instructional mode

NYSED’s reopening guidance includes the requirement that “a district-wide and building-level comprehensive developmental school counseling program plan, developed under the direction of certified school counselor(s), is reviewed and updated to meet current needs.”¹¹ If in a remote instructional modality, school districts should consider reaching out to high school seniors personally and offering virtual office hours to support seniors with postsecondary transition planning. This provides an opportunity to assist students with finalizing their college plans, securing financial aid, and entering the workforce. When offered, virtual office hours should include at least online, telephone, and email options, recognizing that families have different levels of technology access. Districts and charter schools could also consider offering extended virtual office hours at flexible times during the school year and over the summer months, to meet the scheduling needs of students and families, consistent with collective bargaining provisions.

In addition, this support, when offered, should be made available to students and families in multiple languages, with interpretation and translation services where requested or needed.¹²

Engage parents as partners

As the NYSED school reopening guidance notes, “With all the uncertainty surrounding COVID’s spread and its impact on local communities, communication and family engagement will be more important than ever this year.”¹³

School districts should consider ways to communicate available academic, transition, and social-emotional resources and supports – including those described in this guidance document – to all graduating seniors and their families. Clear and consistent communication should always be provided in the multiple languages used by the school community.

Center at Goddard Riverside, Hispanic Federation, New York Immigration Coalition, New York State Association for College Admission Counseling, and New York State School Counselors Association.

¹¹ New York State Education Department, “Recovering, Rebuilding and Renewing: The Spirit of New York’s Schools” (pp. 65-66).

¹² School districts are required to “provide all communications to parents/guardians of ELLs in their preferred language and mode of communication to ensure that they have equitable access to critical information about their children’s education.” New York State Education Department, “Recovering, Rebuilding and Renewing: The Spirit of New York’s Schools” (p. 10).

¹³ New York State Education Department, “Recovering, Rebuilding and Renewing: The Spirit of New York’s Schools” (p. 16).

End-of-year traditions and ceremonies

Finally, while it may seem early to be planning for the celebrations that typically mark the end of the school year, schools may need to build in additional time to give students opportunities to participate in planning alternative ways to celebrate their accomplishments and successes.

Schools that are holding virtual graduation ceremonies or other online events should pay particular attention to the needs of students who do not have devices or internet access, particularly high school seniors experiencing homelessness.