



EDUCATIONAL EQUITY & CORONAVIRUS: THE EXCELSIOR PROMISE A Commitment to the Class of 2020

New York State’s public schools enroll nearly 190,000 high school seniors, approximately half of whom are students from low-income backgrounds and including more than 100,000 students of color. These students have had their last year of high school interrupted by the coronavirus. But we cannot allow the pandemic to derail the aspirations and achievements of this next generation of New Yorkers.

Even in so-called “normal” times, students of color and students from low-income backgrounds are under-represented in college pathways. The pandemic is exacerbating the existing inequities in our education system, and there is an unacceptable risk that historically underserved groups of students will be even less likely to enroll in college, or that they will attend colleges that have particularly low rates of student success.

Governor Cuomo and his administration are leading an extraordinary response to the health needs resulting from the coronavirus pandemic, and the Board of Regents and State Education Department have

been supporting school districts in responding to this crisis. School and district leaders, teachers, and other school personnel are working incredibly hard in these challenging times, from addressing critical food access and other basic needs for students to distributing technology so more students can participate in distance learning.

New York State’s graduating seniors require a similar government-wide commitment to securing their future. Leveraging federal relief funding and the state’s regulatory power, we call on state leaders to put forward an “Excelsior Promise” to all high school seniors.

With school buildings closed for the remainder of the school year and support for historically underserved groups of students more important than ever, here are some of the priorities that the Excelsior Promise should include. While focused on the needs of the Class of 2020, these recommendations have important implications for other classes that are impacted by the long-term effects of the pandemic.

COMMITMENTS FROM THE STATE

Set clear expectations for how school districts should meet the needs of high school seniors during the pandemic.



We recommend that the state issue guidance to create consistent statewide expectations for how high school seniors will be supported for the remainder of this school year, based on these recommendations and other input from students, parents, educators, civil rights organizations, and employers. The state has significantly eased credit and graduation requirements, and that flexibility—while important—needs to be matched with immediate academic, socio-emotional, and transition support.

Address the unique needs of underserved students.



We recommend that the state hold high schools accountable for providing specific outreach, resources, and support to students who cannot participate in distance learning, students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, students with disabilities, Multilingual learners, and students experiencing homelessness. These groups are underserved under normal circumstances and are at even greater risk during this crisis.

Use data to ensure student success.



We recommend that the state commit to publicly release annual “to and through” data on the postsecondary pathways of high school seniors, including college matriculation, persistence, and completion, and wage and employment data, in order to determine how this year’s graduates are faring compared to prior cohorts. The state should use this data to identify additional interventions for students still in high school and to provide more support at the college level if needed. In addition, the state should provide tools for school districts to use “on track to graduation” data for current students in grades 9-11 as an early warning indicator to prevent students from dropping out.

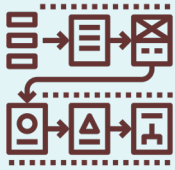
Communicate to all students and families.



We recommend that the state provide clear communication templates in multiple languages as rapidly as possible so school districts can quickly and consistently inform students and families about the supports and resources available for instructional continuity during the remainder of the school year and postsecondary transition.

COMMITMENTS FROM ALL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Help students transition to college and careers.



With the support of school counselors and other school personnel, we recommend that school districts help all students develop an Excelsior Promise plan that identifies the student’s aspirations, postsecondary plans, and the resources the high school and school district will provide the student to assist with the transition in these unique circumstances.

Support all seniors in completing financial aid applications.



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. We recommend that school districts support all eligible seniors and their families in completing FAFSA, TAP, NYS DREAM Act, and/or Excelsior Scholarship applications. All high schools should be expected to conduct regular and ongoing outreach to all seniors who have not yet completed the FAFSA. In addition, high schools should support students in appealing their financial aid awards if they have experienced increased financial insecurity as the result of the pandemic.

Provide personalized support to students and families.



We recommend that school districts offer virtual “office hours” to support seniors with postsecondary transition planning, which must include both online and telephone options. School counselors and other administrators should assist students with finalizing their college plans, securing financial aid, and entering the workforce. College “under-match”—when academically prepared students, typically from low-income backgrounds, attend less selective colleges or universities with lower completion rates than they are qualified for—is expected to be a particular problem this year due to financial insecurity and general uncertainty, and high schools should help all college-bound seniors select the best option in their transition plan. This support should be offered for students and families in multiple languages, with interpretation and translation services when needed.

Support families in meeting students’ socio-emotional needs.



We recommend that school districts should 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, including connections to counseling and mental health services.

Deliver instructional continuity to all students.



We recommend that school districts provide one-to-one instructional support for all high school seniors from their core subject teachers and other school personnel. While distance learning can be one option, students must receive instructional support in the manner that best meets their needs—which can include written communication, telephone, video chat, or other means.

COMMITMENTS FROM HIGHER EDUCATION

Improve support and communication for incoming students.



We recommend that colleges and universities use federal CARES Act and future federal relief funding to enroll all incoming first-year students from low-income backgrounds and first-generation college students in summer bridge programs that provide virtual or on-campus support—depending on the status of the pandemic—to students to help them transition successfully by addressing their academic and non-academic needs.

Address academic needs resulting from high school closures.



We recommend that colleges and universities commit that, to the greatest extent possible and drawing on CARES Act and future federal relief resources, incoming first-year students will be placed in co-requisite, credit-bearing courses that provide innovative and supportive alternative to remediations when necessary, instead of being enrolled in traditional remediation.

Expand access to evidence-based programs for student success.



We recommend that colleges and universities invest CARES Act and future federal relief funding in CUNY’s ASAP program and similar programs at SUNY, as well as statewide Educational Opportunity Programs, to acknowledge that next year’s incoming first-year students will be an especially vulnerable population that requires additional structure and robust support to achieve on-time graduation. New York City’s proposed budget cut to “delay” enrollment of a new cohort in ASAP should be reversed.

Provide wraparound services to support students.



We recommend that colleges and universities invest CARES Act and future federal relief funding to expand on-campus food support, child care, counseling services, and emergency grants that recognize the immense financial insecurity many students will be under as they begin their college experience. Students should also receive support accessing all available financial aid sources.