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NY Among Lowest Graduation Rates

Drop blamed on Regents exam requirements

By Ellen Yan
STAFF WRITER

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New York has one of the lowest high school graduation rates of any state in the nation, and it has plummeted in recent years, a Boston College professor of education told a state legislative committee yesterday in Manhattan.

The calculations were described by state education officials as flawed.

Testifying before the State Senate education committee, Walter Haney said only five states ranked below New York during the 2000-01 school year - Mississippi, Tennessee, Florida, Georgia and South Carolina.

"People have tried to undertake education reform on the cheap," Haney said. New York, he said, had a 57.9 percent graduation rate in the 2000-01 school year, compared with 66.3 percent in 1987-88. He blamed the decline on the Regents tests, which the state began phasing in seven years ago as a graduation requirement.

Aides to state Education Commissioner Richard Mills skewered Haney's calculations as "simplistic," because his graduation rate is a comparison of the number of ninth-graders in one year to the number of 12th-graders four years later. They said that counts students who transferred to other school districts and double counts students who are held back and take more than four years to graduate.

The data surfaced at the first of several hearings on Regents and graduation standards. The state Board of Regents plans to decide this fall whether to change the requirements for a diploma. Among the options: delaying plans to raise the passing grade to 65 for all five Regents exams, or reducing the number of Regents exams needed to graduate.

The state did not have graduation rates for past years because until last year, it had to report only dropout rates, which are not always reliable.

Deputy Education Commissioner Jim Kadamus said his department next year will issue every student an ID number, allowing the state to better track transfer and

dropout patterns.

But some students and educators who attended the hearing said the schools need more flexible graduation standards, since education is preoccupied with test scores.

In New York City, 28 schools have waivers from the Regents diploma requirements this school year. If the waivers are not renewed or the Regents do not loosen graduation criteria, the schools will have to abandon their own programs and focus on the exams.