

# How school districts responded to NYS Regents exam exemptions & the effect on students

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## Research Questions

**RQ1:** Analyze graduation rates and other longitudinal data to determine the distribution and demographics of increased graduation rates.

**RQ2:** Using Buffalo Public Schools as a case study, we will analyze policy documents and interview teachers to understand whether and how the district's formal and informal practices changed to maximize student graduation rates.

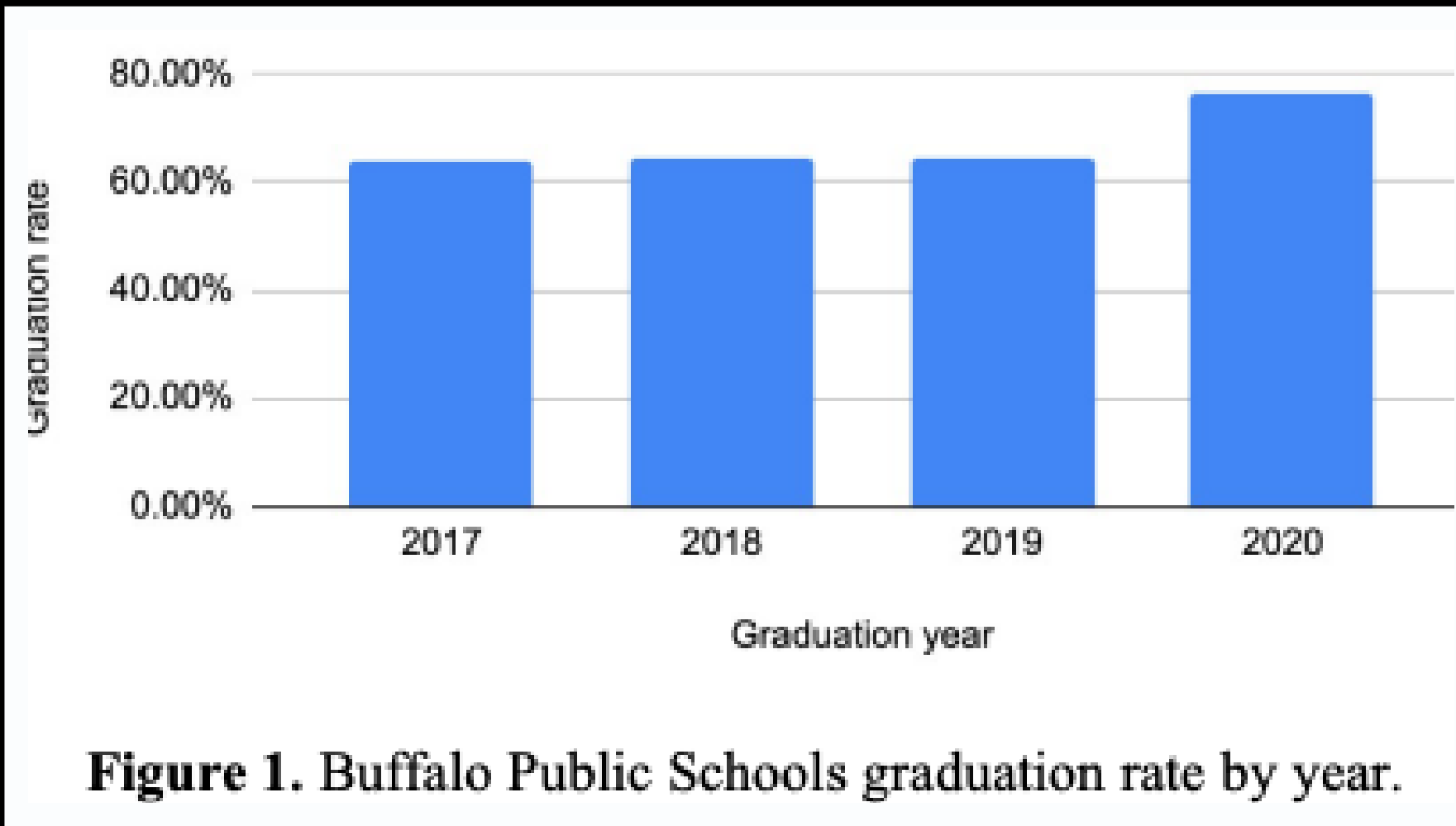
**RQ3:** Compare postsecondary outcomes for students who dropped out in previous years to those of graduates from the class of 2020 who might have dropped out but for the Regents exam exemptions

## Project Significance

Final accountability for student achievement was passed from the state to the school district. In Buffalo, the graduation rate jumped 12% in one year despite COVID-19's impact on the city's schools and families. It seems highly unlikely that the 2020 jump in the BPS graduation rate reflects a dramatic increase in student learning. Rather, it's believed that a substantial portion of students who might have dropped out in an ordinary year were instead able to graduate when the rules suddenly changed.

## Conceptual Framework

Public schools are viewed as contested sites whose multiple stakeholders often have conflicting interests (Labaree, 1997). If schools responded to Regents exam exemptions by pushing as many students through the loophole as possible, we did not expect this to follow from coherent rationale or explicit strategy. Prior research has shown that teachers and schools respond strategically to changes in high-stakes testing regimes (Jacob, 2005), so it will not be surprising to find systemic changes in schools following the 2020 Regents exam exemptions. Furthermore, we understand US education to play a sorting role in socioeconomic outcomes. Taylor, et al. (2021) found this to be particularly true in Buffalo, our focus city; Black residents of the city tend to earn very low wages or to live in poverty unless they graduate from college.



## Importance of a High School Diploma

Youth who drop out of high school face a range of serious challenges (Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, and Palma, 2009), so for students not on track to graduate, the unexpected exemption from the Regents exams may have allowed some a second chance to access jobs and future education requiring a diploma. However, prior research suggests that a high school diploma holds little signaling value aside from the knowledge and skills gained along the way. For example, when Clark & Martorell (2014) found little difference between the earnings of students who just barely passed graduation exams and those who just barely failed. Taylor and colleagues (2021), studying the long-term progress of Black Buffalo residents, found that the most without a college education continue to earn less than a living wage, regardless of high school graduation. Despite the fact that 2020's unexpected graduates will likely continue to face adversity, they at least do not have the additional barriers associated with lacking a diploma.