

THE REMEDIATION TAX

How a Failing K-12 System

Imposes \$63 Million in Hidden

Taxes on New York City Families

BILL TO NYC GRADS:
\$63,000,000

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mayor Bill de Blasio recently suggested a new tax on millionaires to fund mass transit improvements. The implication of this proposal is that the Mayor believes wealthy New Yorkers should bear a greater burden in supporting essential services. The problem is: Mayor de Blasio's own actions actually perpetuate the opposite. It is the poor and middle income in New York City who are saddled with a disproportionate burden – a hidden tax – imposed on them by a failing public school system. The Mayor has the power to change this inequitable situation, but is unwilling to do so.

Too many low and middle-income New Yorkers are forced to pay what can rightly be called a **“remediation tax”** when they get to college because the New York City public school system has done an inadequate job preparing them. **StudentsFirstNY calculates this remediation tax as costing New York City public school graduates \$63 million annually.**

This **remediation tax** is levied on students when they arrive at college only to find out they are unprepared for college-level coursework. Instead of enrolling in classes that will earn them college credit, these students are forced to take remedial classes designed to provide them with the skills and knowledge they should have acquired in high school. Students are forced to pick up the slack for a K-12 system that failed them – depleting whatever grants, scholarships, loans or personal resources they had planned to use to pay for college. The most shameful aspect of this hidden tax is that it impacts only the most committed students who are striving for a better life.

The **remediation tax** has far reaching implications. **StudentsFirstNY's analysis reveals that more than 21,000 New York City high school graduates must pay this remediation tax.**

\$63,282,432

**REMEDATION TAX ON
NYC GRADUATES**

21,094

**NYC GRADUATES MUST
PAY REMEDIATION TAX**

\$3,000

**AVERAGE REMEDIATION
TAX PER STUDENT**

StudentsFirstNY organizers spent the summer talking to City University of New York (CUNY) students about whether their New York City public high school experience prepared them for college, whether they are taking remedial courses, and how they feel about the remediation tax. This report includes some of their stories. It is crucial to hear from those impacted.

While CUNY is taking steps to reform its remediation process, Mayor de Blasio's plans for K-12 are entirely inadequate and underestimate the urgency of this crisis. Mayor de Blasio's College Access for All program is a half measure that does not help students be successful once in college. Until the Mayor takes dramatic steps to improve K-12 education, he will be perpetuating inequality and imposing an unfair remediation tax on low and middle-income New Yorkers.

The college remediation crisis is not new and it is not unique to New York City. Countless researchers and education groups have clamored for solutions. The Research Alliance for New York City Schools, Education Reform Now, the Center for American Progress, and Richard Whitmire's The Alumni series have all produced crucial insights. StudentsFirstNY is building on the research and advocacy already done by:

1. Calculating the total cost of NYC's remediation tax.

2. Determining the number of affected NYC students.

3. Elevating the personal stories of NYC college students both in person and on paper.

4. Defining the problem.

5. Holding Mayor de Blasio accountable for inadequate solutions.

BACKGROUND

In 2016, StudentsFirstNY released a report called *The Graduation Facade: How New York City's Diploma Mills Mask College Readiness Crisis*.¹ The report revealed that despite steadily increasing high school graduation rates, New York City students are not being prepared for success in college and beyond. Further exploration was needed to determine the full impact on families.

A recent *New York Times* piece explains the magnitude of the remediation problem: "20,000 new students arrived at public community colleges in New York City last fall only to be told they were not ready for college-level work."² In that same piece, a CUNY vice chancellor reveals that 80 percent of freshman entering community college in the CUNY system require remediation.³ One estimate by Education Reform Now (ERN) is that this remediation tax costs students \$3,000 on average across the country.⁴ The Center for American Progress (CAP) puts the national total at \$1.3 billion and \$48 million in out-of-pocket costs for students attending colleges in New York State.⁵ Notably, the CAP number does not include remedial costs for CUNY students, which would make it significantly higher.

StudentsFirstNY's analysis puts the cost of the **remediation tax** at \$63 million for New York City high school students each year. This cost is calculated by starting with New York City's 50,320 annual high school graduating class⁶ and assuming 80 percent (40,256) of them enroll in some form of college.⁷ Of those who enroll, 60 percent enroll in CUNY schools⁸ (24,154) and the remaining 40 percent (16,102) attend other colleges. Fifty-four percent of those attending CUNY (13,043)⁹ will require some form of remediation and for the purpose of this analysis StudentsFirstNY assumes 50 percent attending other colleges (8,051) require remediation, since the national average ranges from 40-60 percent.¹⁰ This means that 21,094 New York City high school graduates require remediation each year. Using ERN's number of \$3,000 per student, total costs for families would equal \$63,282,432.

Even if one did not use ERN's figure, each CUNY remedial course costs between \$630 and \$1995¹¹ and so an average remedial course costs \$1,300 and the students StudentsFirstNY surveyed reported taking multiple remedial courses.

Independent research confirms the impact of the failing K-12 system on student success in college. The Research Alliance for New York City Schools released an extensive study in June on college persistence rates of New York City high school students and found that while there have been some improvements in college access, those gains have been eroded by higher attrition rates in the first and second years of college.¹² These researchers also found that for every 100 ninth graders in the NYC public school system, only 21 attain bachelors degrees and 5 obtain associates degrees.¹³

NYC COLLEGE STUDENTS: A SNAPSHOT

StudentsFirstNY organizers spent the summer canvassing City University of New York (CUNY) two and four-year college programs and surveyed over 300 students at 21 colleges who attended over 200 different NYC high schools to see how students feel about the remediation tax. A majority of student respondents felt their NYC public high school experience did not prepare them for college and admitted they are taking remedial courses.

Here are some of their stories:



CRISTIAN CRUZ

College: NYC College of Technology

High School: Bronx International High School

Total Remedial Classes: 3

How he's paying for college: Financial Aid

*"It's really disappointing to learn that **the high school diploma I just received does me no good in college.** I have to redo do this work again, wasting four months of my life. I have to spend my financial aid to cover the extra cost of this remediation tax."*



JANAI HUFF

College: LaGuardia Community College

High School: Graduated August Martin High School, June 2014

Total Remedial Classes: 2

How she's paying for college: Partial Financial Aid

"I struggled during my first year in college because I had to take extra classes, remedial courses. I am one of six kids and I hate having to ask my mother to bear the burden for my failed high school education."



ERICK MATHUS

College: BMCC

High School: Queens Vocational and Technical High School

Total Remedial Classes: 2

How he's paying for college: Financial Aid

"I receive financial aid, but I know that won't last forever. With all the time I'm spending on remedial courses, I'm not earning any credit towards my major and reaching my dreams. There is no way I'll get my associate degree in two years."



MALIK ZIYAD

College: BMCC

High School: NYC Lab School Graduate

Total Remedial Classes: 2

How he's paying for college: Partial Financial Aid

*"NYC public schools failed me and cost me an on-time graduation. **I had to spend money on regular college courses because I spent my financial aid on remedial courses.** Those courses also forced me to spend an extra semester at BMCC. If I had been lucky enough to have effective teachers in high school, I wouldn't be struggling so badly today."*



CRIS SACKEY

College: New York City College of Technology

High School: City Polytechnic High School of Engineering, Architecture & Technology.

Total Remedial Classes: 1

How he's paying for college: Partial Financial Aid

*"I graduated high school in only three years, and **so I thought that I was ready for college.** It was disappointing to learn that even though I was on an accelerated track, I still needed to take a remedial course."*

SOLVING THE COLLEGE READINESS CRISIS

These students' stories are sadly the norm and not the exception. We must do them justice by taking the crisis seriously and adopting the recommendations laid out below. The college readiness crisis facing New York City students will not be solved by the usual half-measures and empty press conferences favored by the de Blasio administration. When 21,094 New York City high school graduates have to take remedial classes and pay a combined \$63 million annually, more must be done at the K-12 level.

The de Blasio administration would argue that its College Access for All initiative is the solution. Unfortunately, this program is a half-measure that spends a token amount of money to “build a college-going culture.”¹⁴ While StudentsFirstNY agrees that college visits and other supports are worthwhile endeavors, they are utterly insufficient to the task of ensuring that students are prepared to persist through graduation. By setting the goal of *access* to college and not *success* in college, Mayor de Blasio is failing to address the underlying college readiness crisis – allowing this remediation tax to persist.

As Richard Whitmire recently discussed in his series *The Alumni*, it is not enough to focus on “access” to college but, “We need to judge high schools by how many of their graduates earn college degrees within six years.”¹⁵ KIPP and other charter school networks, he points out, have raised their goals to incorporate college graduation as a metric for student success. As a result, this subgroup of students are graduating college at three to five times the national rate.

Mayor de Blasio must take a back-to-basics approach, and:

- 1. Get the most kids into the best schools as quickly as possible.** Mayor de Blasio should embrace school choice as an important piece of the solution. Every child stuck in a failing school is being condemned to pay a remediation tax.
- 2. Get the best teachers in front of the kids who need them the most.** The Mayor’s human capital policies must prioritize putting the best teachers in low-income neighborhoods. As part of this, Mayor de Blasio must reverse his plan to force place inadequate teachers from the Absent Teacher Reserve.
- 3. Set college completion as a goal instead of college access.** The Mayor needs to catch up to charter networks that are working backwards from what it takes for students to succeed in college.

CONCLUSION

New York City's public school system is imposing a hidden tax on low and middle-income students. This remediation tax threatens to cut the knees out from under the city's most vulnerable students just as they are making the leap to college. Rhetoric about access to college is not enough if schools aren't preparing students to succeed and ultimately graduate.

By failing to embrace school choice, address teacher quality and by limiting his focus to college access, Mayor de Blasio is ignoring a vast and growing body of evidence. Kids who are working hard and striving for a better life deserve better, and they should not be saddled with a disproportionate burden imposed on them by a broken system.

ENDNOTES

1. <http://www.studentsfirstny.org/gradfacade>
2. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/19/nyregion/cuny-remedial-programs.html?_r=1
3. Ibid.
4. <https://edreformnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/EdReformNow-O-O-P-Embargoed-Final.pdf>
5. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education/reports/2016/09/28/144000/remedial-education/>
6. <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/data/GraduationDropoutReports/default.htm>
7. http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/scmsAdmin/media/users/ks191/NYC_College_Executive_Summary.pdf
8. <https://philanthropynewyork.org/sites/default/files/Partnering%20for%20Educational%20Success%20in%20NYC.pdf>
9. http://www1.cuny.edu/mu/academic-news/files/2011/11/Testimony_AWL_10_24_111.pdf
10. <https://www.scribd.com/document/323744409/Remedial-Education-The-Cost-of-Catching-Up>
11. <https://www.bmcc.cuny.edu/collegenow/upload/cn-focus.pdf>
12. http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/scmsAdmin/media/users/ks191/New_York_City_Goes_to_College_Report.pdf
13. http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/scmsAdmin/media/users/ks191/NYC_College_Executive_Summary.pdf
14. <http://schools.nyc.gov/Offices/mediarelations/NewsandSpeeches/2015-2016/College+Access+for+All+-+High+School.htm>
15. <https://www.the74million.org/article/exclusive-data-shows-charter-school-students-graduating-college-at-three-to-five-times-national-average/>

LEARN MORE:

STUDENTSFIRSTNY.ORG