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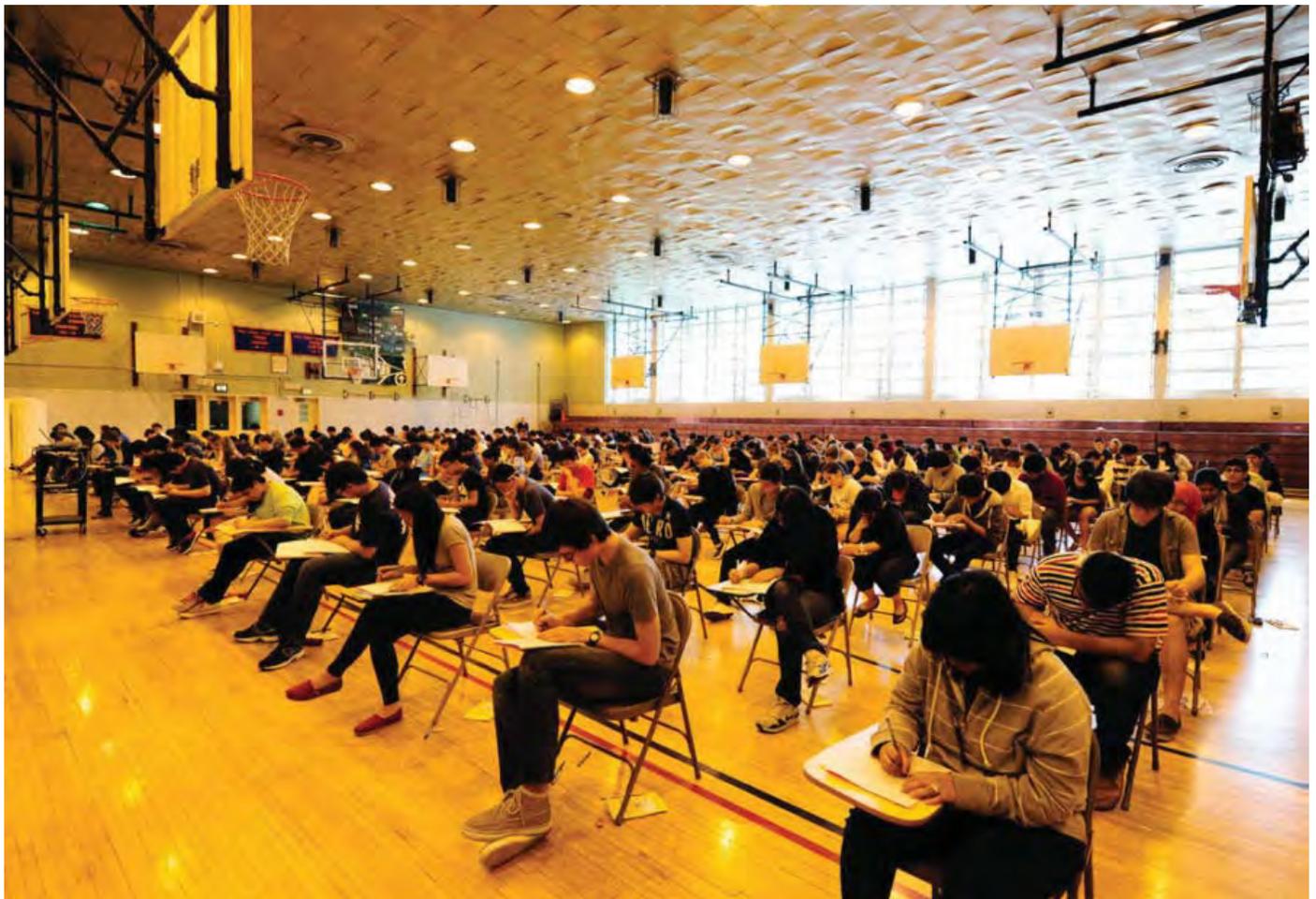
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New data show how few black and Hispanic students benefit from New York City’s specialized high school diversity program

BY ALEX ZIMMERMAN - AUGUST 14, 2018



Newark students who hope to attend one of the district's six magnet schools will have to take a new exam in January.



A program intended to diversify the city's elite specialized high schools continues to help far more white and Asian students than black and Hispanic ones, according to new data released Tuesday.

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The initiative, known as the Discovery program, aims to promote diversity at the eight elite high schools by offering admission to students from high-need families who score just below the entrance exam cutoff if they successfully complete summer coursework.

This year, Asian students represented 64 percent of students admitted through Discovery, (despite being 16 percent of the city's students), while black and Hispanic students combined make up just 22 percent (a group that represents nearly 70 percent of the city's students). Last year, 67 percent of students admitted through Discovery were Asian and 18-20 percent were black or Hispanic.

And while black and Hispanic students get more offers through Discovery than they do in the typical admissions process — where **just 10.4 percent of offers** went to black and Hispanic students this year — the program does not make a big difference because such a small share of students actually get admitted through Discovery. This year, 6 percent of ninth graders were admitted through the program.

Discovery has expanded under Mayor Bill de Blasio, from 58 students in 2014 to an expected 250 this coming school year. But despite the program's growth, it has **had little effect** on making the city's elite high schools more racially representative of the city's overall student population.

The preliminary numbers released Tuesday help show why the city is changing the program.

After years of these meager results, the city is expanding the program even further and tweaking its rules to include more black and Hispanic students — a key pillar of [de Blasio's controversial plan](#) to make the schools more racially representative of the city's students.

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[Read more: Fair and objective or useless and biased? A Chalkbeat guide to the case for and against New York City's specialized high school test](#)

By 2020, each of the specialized schools that determine admission based solely on a single exam will be required to reserve 20 percent of their seats for students in the Discovery program. (Stuyvesant High School, which is participating in the program for the first time this year, admitted 23 students through Discovery. Under the mayor's plan, the school will have to increase that number sevenfold.)

To ensure it helps more black and Hispanic students than it does right now, the program will be restricted to students at high-poverty schools, which tend to enroll more black and Hispanic students. (Currently, the program is only restricted to high-need students from any middle school in the city.)

By itself, that change is expected to have only a modest effect, increasing black and Hispanic student enrollment to 16 percent, up from about 9 percent today. But unlike the mayor's plan to get rid of the entrance exam entirely, which would have a more dramatic effect on diversifying the schools, expanding the Discovery program is something de Blasio can do without approval from the state legislature.

“By changing the Discovery eligibility criteria starting next year, we’ll support greater geographic, racial, and socioeconomic diversity at our specialized high schools,” education department spokesman Will Mantell wrote in an email.

By Alex Zimmerman @AGZIMMERMAN AZIMMERMAN@CHALKBEAT.ORG

IN THIS STORY: DISCOVERY PROGRAM, MAYOR BILL DE BLASIO, NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, SHSAT, STUYVESANT HIGH SCHOOL



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COLLEGE DREAMING

A new law is helping undocumented students in New Jersey attend college, but challenges remain

BY ASHLEY OKWUOSA - 7 HOURS AGO

PHOTO: *Courtesy photo/Chalkbeat*

Gloria, Nestor, and Sergio at Gloria’s graduation from Essex County College in Newark in 2018¹¹_{SEP}



This story was produced by the [Teacher Project](#), an education reporting fellowship at Columbia Journalism School, in partnership with Chalkbeat and [WNYC](#). Ashley Okwuosa is a reporting fellow with the Teacher Project.

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When New Jersey’s governor signed a law in May giving undocumented immigrant students access to state financial aid for college, Gloria Rodriguez was prepared. The 22-year-old Orange resident had been working toward this moment for nearly a decade — about the same time it had taken the law’s supporters to get the bill passed.

Years of motivated, diligent schoolwork had enabled her to graduate as the valedictorian of her class at West Caldwell Tech High School in 2016. But without access to state or federal aid at the time, Gloria could only afford community college.

“That was my only plan,” she said.

She attended Newark’s Essex Community College and applied last spring, as she was wrapping up her associate’s degree, to four-year universities to continue her education. But while accepted to several, she had little hope of attending any of them. Money in her family, which includes her parents and four siblings, was too tight. Her father, who migrated from Puebla, Mexico 18 years ago, worked as a landscaper, earning roughly \$30,000 a year.

The new law suddenly gave Gloria hope. She immediately gathered her parents’ tax returns, proof of residency, and high school verification — all required for the application — and submitted them online in June. Then began a nervous wait.

New Jersey is the tenth state in the country to provide both in-state tuition discounts and state financial aid for college for undocumented students. As of 2016, New Jersey had about 60,000 undocumented residents between the ages of 18 and 24, according to data from the [Migration Policy Institute](#), who are potentially eligible for this new assistance.

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Just shy of a third of these residents are already enrolled in college — either two or four-year institutions. Another subset of students — no one knows exactly how many — are not high school graduates or haven't attended a New Jersey high school for at least three years, a requirement to receive aid under the law.

And then there are students like Gloria, one of 1,365 undocumented New Jerseyans who applied for the aid by the first deadline of September 15. The number is small owing partly to a bumpy rollout and to less-than-ideal timing, an experience that holds lessons for other states looking to expand access to higher education.

Among the biggest challenges have been simply spreading the word and gaining the buy-in of students and families that often have little familiarity with an already labyrinthine process of college admissions and financial aid. This is especially true at a political moment when distrust of the government is running high, due to high-profile roundups of undocumented workers across the country by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency, or ICE.

“I think today's national climate makes things a little bit trickier,” said Nicholas Ramjattan, assistant manager of financial aid at Rutgers University-Newark. “There are a lot more folks who are more fearful today than they were two years ago.”

Teachers and administrators say they have also received little to no information about the specifics of the new law, a task that has largely fallen to already besieged local immigrant groups and overworked college representatives.

“There's no mandatory training for [high school] counselors to have to know this stuff,” said Nedia Morsy, lead organizer at Make the Road New Jersey, an immigrant advocacy organization. And although educators and immigrant advocates say New Jersey should be applauded for how quickly it has tried to implement the program, more needs to be done if access to higher education is to expand in the ways the law's backers imagined.

A decade-long fight

The battle to provide this aid is partly a Newark story, beginning with Teresa Ruiz, a former pre-kindergarten teacher who grew up in Newark's North Ward and who in 2008 became New Jersey's first Hispanic woman elected to the state senate. In the years since, she has become a political powerbroker and a leading voice in state education policy. (Ruiz [reportedly played a critical role](#), for example, ensuring that Roger León, [a lifelong Newarker and the son of Cuban immigrants](#), would become

Newark's first Hispanic schools superintendent and the first to oversee the district after decades of state oversight.)

Three weeks after Ruiz was sworn into office, she and Democratic colleagues in the senate introduced a [bill](#) that would grant undocumented students access to in-state tuition rates. It also outlawed community colleges from [barring undocumented students](#) from enrolling.

The bill fell short of the necessary votes. Five years later, Ruiz tried again after Chris Christie, the state's former Republican governor, took office. Christie, however, was eyeing a Presidential run at the time and was leery of the proposal, worrying in 2013 to [one radio station](#) that he didn't want New Jersey becoming "a magnet state" for undocumented immigrants.

But citing the economic benefits to the state, Christie did eventually back Ruiz's original bill, giving it the support it needed to pass. He called it an opportunity for New Jersey to [maximize its investment](#) in undocumented students whom the state had already spent hundreds of thousands of dollars educating in grades K through 12. Starting in 2014, undocumented students became eligible in many cases for in-state tuition levels, which lowered the cost of higher education for their families. Actual aid, however, remained off the table.

"It definitely helped a lot more people be able to go to college, and it made it affordable — but not affordable enough," said Giancarlo Tello, co-founder of UndocuJersey, which provides educational resources for the state's undocumented students. A 2015 [report](#) from the College Board listed New Jersey as the fourth most expensive state for college in a state where undocumented families make just under [\\$35,000 annually on average](#).

After Christie left office, Ruiz found a new ally in newly-elected Democratic Governor Phil Murphy, who campaigned on a promise to support New Jersey's undocumented population. Legislation to provide state aid for college for undocumented students advanced quickly after Murphy was sworn in last January. The bill passed both the senate and assembly by April, and moved off Murphy's desk the next month as law.

It had an immediate impact on Gloria Rodriguez.

A journey from Mexico — and a father's "biggest blessing"

Unlike some other states, under New Jersey's new law, students can use its financial aid at both public and private universities within the state. As a result, Gloria was able to accept admission to Bloomfield College, a private university not far from her family's home. She liked this proximity and how the campus' verdant lawn was surrounded by small bungalows. Most important, the college's education program was well-ranked. As early as elementary school, Gloria had dreamed of becoming a special education teacher.

PHOTO: Courtesy photo/Chalkbeat

The Rodriguez family at dinner

"It's something that I know that I have the patience for," she said. "I would do anything to help someone who needs my help."

For years, Gloria's family had been on a personal mission to get at least one of the family's five children — all undocumented — into a four-year college. Her father, Constantino, a farm worker, emigrated from Mexico on his own in 2000, hoping for better treatment for his severe asthma attacks. He quickly found work as a landscaper. His wife, Valentina, and oldest son, Sergio, joined him two years later.

In 2004, Gloria, her two older sisters, and younger brother, Nestor, followed. They traveled by car from Mexico. Gloria remembers very little about the trip other than it was long and uncomfortable. But the promise of being reunited with her family kept her spirits up.

"We couldn't think of anything else other than the fact that we were going to see my dad and Sergio," she recalled.

Her father, a devout Catholic, described having his family together in New Jersey as his "biggest blessing."

Sergio, the oldest Rodriguez son, had dreamed of attending university and studying to become an engineer or architect. But when he graduated from East Orange High School in 2012 near the top of his class, undocumented students were not yet eligible even for in-state tuition rates. Sergio, 25, says he did not get a welcoming reception from most of the community colleges and vocational programs he approached. They all asked if he had a green card or social security number.

"I used to say no," Sergio said. "And they were like, 'Oh, well, you have no chance to study.'"

Sergio decided to save for college by painting houses and doing other small jobs. But he quickly realized that paying tuition out-of-pocket wouldn't be feasible for years, if ever. "I gave up trying," he said. His two sisters, Rosa and Rufina, decided to go straight to work after high school to contribute to the family's income.

"An Ivy League School — or Essex County College"

After graduating high school in 2016, Gloria picked up the baton, applying to half a dozen schools in the state, including Rutgers, Montclair State University, and Fairleigh Dickinson. But she only received one scholarship offer, from Fairleigh Dickinson; at \$10,000, it barely made a dent in the more than \$30,000 sticker-price for tuition.

So Gloria decided to scale back her ambitions and enrolled at Essex, where she could receive a small scholarship from an organization called The Dream.US that helps recipients of the Obama-era DACA program attend college.

Jose Mercado, a guidance counselor at Newark's Science Park High School, says that Gloria's case is far from unique, even at a top public magnet school like Science Park, which has selective admissions. Before the new law, undocumented students with strong academic records in New Jersey typically had only two options: Get into an elite private school that could afford to offer a large scholarship — or community college.

Such students "either went to an Ivy League school — or Essex County College," he said. "There was no middle ground."

So when the new law was approved late in the spring, immigrant families and advocates were elated. But the timing left little time for recent graduates to change course or benefit in time for the fall semester.

"At this point, students are already wrapped up," said Brian Donovan, vice principal of the bilingual program at Newark's East Side High School. "For someone who's a senior, and they're finding out this information at the end of the school year, it's kind of hectic."

The confusion was evident at a June event at the school, where about 100 undocumented students and parents gathered to learn about the change from school staff, recalled Donovan. They lobbed question after question about who was eligible for the aid, how to apply, and the status of DACA, given President Trump's stated desire to [rescind the program](#).

Donovan said that he struggled to enumerate the eligibility requirements and necessary documents — much less whether it was safe to apply at all. “It was like when a teacher needs to teach something, and they’re not prepared,” he said.

Like other teachers, Donovan noted that the school had never received guidance from the state — or anyone else — about how to communicate with students, a problem that has arisen in other states with similar programs. Instead, the process is often left **entirely to individual educators** to research if they wish to share their states’ laws regarding undocumented students and college access. (One undocumented student from Plainfield, for instance, said that her high school counselor suggested she attend college in Canada, because the counselor was unsure what options were available to the student in New Jersey.)

Even for those who did apply over the summer, uncertainty reigned. Nicole Romero, a 22-year-old undocumented student from Peru who lives in Paterson, said that although she applied in May as soon as the application appeared online, she didn’t hear back until after the new school year had started in August.

“I spent the whole summer stressing about whether or not I would get aid,” she said.

A coveted scholarship declined

Gloria Rodriguez was luckier. Because she had already applied to four universities and been accepted that spring, she was in a position to take advantage of the potential aid. She heard in August that she would receive an estimated \$12,000 from the state’s Tuition Aid Grant program in addition to a private scholarship from Bloomfield College. She was one of 665 students statewide who were approved for such assistance. As of November, 350 other applications were still pending, and 350 had been denied.

College “was one of my biggest dreams, and now it’s actually happening!” she said.

But Gloria’s brother, Nestor, the baby of the family, wasn’t so fortunate. He was a high school senior at West Caldwell Tech High School last school year and a soccer star on the school’s team. Not knowing that he was undocumented, the soccer coach at the College of St. Elizabeth in Morris Township last winter offered Nestor an athletic scholarship. But it still wasn’t enough, by itself, to make the college’s tuition affordable.

Given the uncertainty about whether additional aid would be available, Gloria encouraged Nestor to focus his sights on community college — as she had done.

“I told him go to Essex County College, make sure you do well in all your classes. And once you graduate, you might be able to transfer,” she said.

By the time Nestor learned he might qualify for state aid under the new law in addition to the sports scholarship, Nestor, who loved nothing more than playing soccer, had declined the coach’s offer.

“Are they going to take my parents away?”

The timing of the law has presented other challenges as well. Morsy, the lead organizer at Make the Road, says that with DACA in flux and a barrage of immigration-related dispatches from the federal government, it’s been hard for schools to stay on top of laws and policies affecting their immigrant students — much less win their trust in deeply uncertain times.

In 2017, President Trump signed an [executive order](#) stating that anyone living in the country illegally would be subject to arrest, detention, and possible deportation. This, coupled with [increased cooperation](#) between law enforcement officials and ICE in New Jersey reignited a fear among undocumented families who had lived in the state for years.

Yari Pares, a guidance counselor at Newark’s East Side High School, said some of his immigrant students feared applying for the new aid might lead to deportation. “They asked, ‘If I sign up for this, are they going to take my parents away? Are they going to come and get me?’”

Other states with similar programs have seen the numbers of undocumented applicants shrink since Trump’s election. In California undocumented students have qualified for state aid since 2013 but the [number of applicants plummeted](#) last winter.

“The headlines about immigration make people feel like they’re really in the spotlight,” Jane Slater, a teacher at Sequoia High School in Redwood City, Calif., told the Los Angeles Times. “Kids are more afraid for their families than they are for themselves.”

Even for undocumented students in New Jersey who have the courage to apply, the specifics of the process can still prove daunting, said Natalia Morisseau, director of financial aid at Rutgers University-Newark. The Higher Education Assistance

Authority, or HESAA, which administers the aid, often asks students to verify information, including tax forms, proof of income, or New Jersey residency. This can be difficult for students whose parents get paid under the table or live with relatives and don't have their names on apartment leases.

"It's a population of people who've lived under the radar for many, many years," she said. "When you live undocumented it's just that, undocumented."

"A pain in the butt"

New Jersey adopted an ambitious timeline for rolling out the aid: making the application available online immediately after Murphy signed the bill on May 9. In other states with similar laws, the legislation did not go into effect within the same academic year. David Socolow, executive director of HESAA, said his team began preparing months in advance out of a desire to serve as many students as possible as quickly as possible.

"Their motives were good," said John Gunkel, vice chancellor for academic programs and strategic partnerships at Rutgers-Newark. "But it was a very short timeline," which he suspected "made it difficult to think through and communicate through the issues."

Like California's, New Jersey's first iteration of the application form was an online PDF. Even officials from HESAA admit that this was inconvenient for both students and the agency, because students could not easily save partially completed applications. As a result, the agency often received multiple versions of the same application when students resubmitted it if they made an error.

PHOTO: Courtesy photo/Chalkbeat

Nestor and Gloria at his high school graduation in 2018

"It would be easier if it were a computer system where people could do ten questions, take a break, and come back a day later, but we couldn't get that up and running in time," said Socolow.

Romero, the student who spent the whole summer anxiously awaiting word about her application, said the process would have been "overwhelming and scary" without support from Make the Road. When she heard from the state in August, she learned she'd been approved for \$6,000 in aid, which she is now using to attend Montclair State University.

Another student who attends New Jersey City University said that he was told the state had three applications under his name, which delayed his receipt of funds. “That was my first experience with the application,” said the student, who asked that his name not be used given his immigration status. “I said if it’s going to be like this, that’s going to be a pain in the butt.”

Delays are normal for any student receiving state aid, not just those who are undocumented students, said Jennifer Azzarano, a spokesperson from HESAA. Students are often asked to submit additional tax and income forms, and colleges have to certify that students are attending or registered to attend.

“That’s for anyone,” she said. But the process is usually simpler, Azzarano added, for aid renewals.

On October 1, HESAA launched a new online application for the 2019 spring semester and the 2019-20 academic year. So far, students and advocates say it’s much more user-friendly. “It’s way easier and more understandable,” said the New Jersey City University student.

A role model: “I see her study every day”

In the meantime, in the absence of better guidance and support from schools, students have looked to immigrant organizations like Make the Road, which held weekly workshops over the summer when school was not in session for students to work on their applications. But no matter how user-friendly the process becomes, increasing undocumented students’ access in New Jersey could benefit from broader changes.

For example, undocumented students could be encouraged to apply for state aid as a matter of course, in the same way other students routinely fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA, (which is so ubiquitous that over 18,000,000 students applied in 2016-2017).

“We need to normalize it the way we’ve normalized FAFSA,” said Jennifer Ayala, director of the Center for Undocumented Students at St. Peter’s University.

The process went more smoothly for Gloria partly because she had practiced filling out the FAFSA forms as a high schooler. But even a sister’s coaching and concern did not prove strong enough to propel her younger brother Nestor to college, at least not this school year. Four days before the start of the semester, Nestor decided not to

enroll in community college because he wouldn't be able to play soccer. During the day, he now works as a cashier at a pharmacy not far from his family's home in Orange; in the evenings, he practices the game. The entire family was devastated — especially Gloria.

“It's unbelievable,” she said. “There are other students who wish they could go to college and don't have the opportunities that he has right now.”

Even a brief detour from an academic trajectory can be costly. Research shows that those who don't immediately go to college right after high school can lose “**academic momentum**” and are less likely to attend or earn a college diploma in the future. Rates of college attendance in Newark, for example, have risen in recent years. But many students, especially those from low-income households, have **still struggled to complete college within six years** or don't end up at more rigorous, four-year institutions. The prohibitive cost of tuition and the difficulty juggling necessary jobs and college coursework are among the potential barriers to completion.

With the help of state aid, Gloria has quickly acclimated to life at Bloomfield, where she's already a member of the honors college; her favorite class is Western literature. Ever prepared, she has already begun practicing to take a teaching certification exam called the Praxis and plans to spend as much of her winter break as possible studying.

At family dinners, she regales her siblings with tales of college life and what she's reading; she works on homework late in the night in a small home office littered with building plans from her brother Sergio's construction work.

“I see her study every day,” said Sergio.

As students see their siblings, classmates, and peers pursuing college degrees, this model may provide additional assistance to undocumented families. In Gloria's household, this is already proving to be the case. Inspired by his big sister's example, Nestor said recently that he plans to apply to college for next year.

Gloria's drive has reignited his passion and motivation (not to mention a small competitive streak). “I'm trying to be like her — if not better,” he said.

WNYC's audio version of this story can be accessed on the player below or directly [on the WNYC website](#).

04:52



By Ashley Okwuosa

IN THIS STORY: AFFORDING COLLEGE, DACA, ESSEX COUNTY COLLEGE, NEWARK, TERESA RUIZ, THE TEACHER PROJECT, UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS, WNYC



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MONEY MATTERS

In first meeting since November election results, the board of Regents eyes budget for New York schools

BY REEMA AMIN - 16 HOURS AGO

PHOTO: *Chalkbeat file photo*

New York State capitol



New York’s education policymakers, gathering in Albany this week, are expected to decide how much money they will request for school funding from the state legislature.

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Members of the state Board of Regents have spent the past several months discussing where state education dollars are most needed next fiscal year. And while their request will help guide lawmakers as they hash out a spending plan by the April 1 deadline, the final dollar amount is out of the hands of the Regents or other state education department officials.

Last budget cycle, the board requested a funding **increase of \$1.6 billion**, which was lower than what they had asked for the year before. State lawmakers subsequently passed a budget that included a **\$1 billion increase** for education — still significantly short of what the Regents had called for.

“So what they ask is really a matter of their public position, having nothing to do with what the ultimate delivery is going to be from the governor and the legislature,” said David Bloomfield, a professor of education, law and public policy at Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate Center.

Once again this year, a core priority for the Regents is increasing funding for “foundation aid,” which is a formula that sends extra dollars to high-poverty school districts and contributes about a third of the state education funding for New York City.

Other budget priorities include focusing on high-quality early childhood education, English language learners and the implementation of the state’s plan for the federal Every Student Succeeds Act, also known as ESSA, which will determine how the state will support and evaluate schools.

The meeting is the first since the results of November’s election, which shifted control of the New York state legislature to Democrats. Given that many newly-elected state senators are political progressives who campaigned on boosting school funding, the Regents could **see an opening** to press for more money for schools than they have in the past. But how quickly lawmakers can or will deliver on these promises remains to be seen.

In other business, the Regents will look at a proposal Monday to extend the moratorium that excludes state English and math test scores from metrics used to evaluate New York teachers. Chancellor Betty Rosa **announced last month** that state education officials want to continue speaking with teachers, principals, and others

who may wish to weigh in on the issue — which has long been politically charged — before making any final decisions about the state’s teacher evaluation system.

By Reema Amin RAMIN@CHALKBEAT.ORG

IN THIS STORY: 2019 BUDGET, BOARD OF REGENTS, BOARD OF REGENTS CHANCELLOR BETTY ROSA, GOVERNOR ANDREW CUOMO, STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



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