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Graduation Requirements and Diploma Options for Students with Disabilities: What Families and Advocates Need to Know

This InfoBrief explores the importance of making informed decisions about diploma options, understanding the consequences of graduating with different types of diplomas as well as the need for youth, families, and Individual Education Program (IEP) teams to consider these issues early.

Graduation requirements and alternative diploma options must be understood by youth and their families in order to chart a pathway to earning a diploma that will not only be consistent with how the young person envisions their future, but also meaningful to employers and postsecondary educators. Due to the high dropout rate of students with disabilities and the resulting limited employment opportunities, it's vital that youth with disabilities and their families have information about diploma options well before high school. Unfortunately, many times this issue isn't given adequate consideration in transition planning and/or the youth and his family may not fully grasp the impact that this decision may have on the young person's future education, earning potential, and employability.

In response to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act's mandate of increased accountability, and concerns expressed by the business community that the high school diploma had little or no credibility as an exit credential, states have implemented graduation policies and requirements that call for:

- increased academic standards for all students;
- state, and local district testing;
- development of exit exams linked to a student's eligibility to receive a high school diploma; and,
- a focus on increasing student graduation rates.

These strategies are intended to increase the level of student learning and achievement essential to entering future adult roles.

States are also experimenting with an array of diploma options ranging from honors diplomas, to the standard diploma, to certificates of completion or attendance, etc. Some states offer special diplomas to students who take rigorous course work, achieve a high grade point average, or post high scores on state exams. In addition, some diploma options and certificates are only available for students receiving special education services. Included among these alternative diploma options are certificates of completion, IEP/special education diplomas, and occupational/vocational diplomas.

Alternative diplomas, however, are generally viewed as being based on less rigorous academic standards than standard high school diplomas. Many employers and colleges and universities therefore, do not view these diplomas as equal to a standard diploma.



Diploma Option	Description
Honors diploma/diploma of high distinction	Students must achieve at a high academic level. Often this diploma requires a certain grade-point average (GPA).
Standard diploma	A student must complete a certain number of credits and obtain a minimum GPA to receive a diploma.
Certificate of completion/attendance	This option, for students who have not received the grades necessary to obtain a standard or honors diploma, demonstrates that a student completed a set number of classes or that a student qualifies for a diploma because of sufficient attendance in a set period of time.
Certificate of achievement	This option demonstrates that the student has achieved a certain level of performance. This type of diploma certifies that the student was present and performed to the best of his or her ability but did not attain the necessary grades and/or credits to obtain a standard or honors diploma.
IEP/special education diploma	This is an option for students receiving special education services and those who have an IEP. Requirements are usually set by the student's IEP team and are therefore unique to each student.
Occupational diploma	For students who are enrolled in vocational programs, this type of diploma certifies that a student has demonstrated a specific level of competence in an occupational area.

Source: NCSET Information Brief, Volume 4, Issue 1(2005)

Twenty-four states also require students to pass exit exams as a condition to receiving a standard high school diploma. Such tests are often referred to as “high stakes” since earning or not earning a high school diploma can directly affect an individual’s future economic self-sufficiency and well-being as an adult. Proponents of such tests believe they motivate both students and teachers to achieve, and that students such as those with disabilities and minority students, who may frequently be subject to low expectations, stand to benefit from having access to high quality instruction for all students. Critics claim, however, that high stakes tests may result in the following negative consequences:

- increased drop-out rate;
- retention of students within grades until they demonstrate improved performance on state and local district exams;
- increased referrals of general education students to special education, due to increased pressures to pass exit exams;
- narrowing of the curriculum and instruction to focus on specific learning outcomes assessed in state and local district tests;
- limitations in the range of curricular and program options students can participate in; and,
- receipt of an alternative diploma rather than a standard diploma, which may impact future postsecondary education and employment opportunities.



Given the controversy over high school exit examinations, 19 states have developed or are developing multiple measures of performance as the basis for graduation. Such measures may include not only state exit examinations, but also performance assessments and other indicators of student learning such as course grades tied to state standards or student exhibitions of learning. Although these states have tended to maintain higher and steadier rates of graduation, the effects of using multiple measures as part of the graduation process has not yet been studied extensively.

Given the impact that this decision may have on the youth's future education, employability, and earning potential, youth with disabilities and their families should therefore consider the choice of a particular diploma path carefully. It is important that this decision be an informed one.

Some Things to Consider

The Importance of Education in Today's World

In the world today, access to a good job generally requires more training and education than at any other time previously. Fifty years ago, 73 percent of jobs were classified as unskilled, making these jobs more accessible without the need for post-secondary education, or even a high school diploma in some cases. In 2002, 70 percent of jobs were skilled or professional jobs, requiring higher levels of education and training. In the next decade, nearly two-thirds of the estimated 15.6 million net new jobs created in our country will be in occupations that require post-secondary education or significant on-the-job training.

Setting High Expectations

One of the best ways families can help youth with disabilities to prepare for their future is to set high expectations and standards, while keeping their individual needs in mind. Current research shows that family expectations play an important role in shaping the academic achievement of youth, regardless of the presence of disability, the nature of the youth's disability, or their levels of functioning. All other factors considered equal, youth with disabilities whose families expect them to go on to post-secondary education after high school will often achieve more in high school than youth whose families do not share that same expectation (Newman, 2005).

Start Graduation Planning Early

Students with disabilities with their families and other members of their IEP team need to begin to plan for graduation early. It is important that they begin to investigate their state and district graduation options by no later than middle school since the choices made may impact course selection even prior to the youth entering high school. It is also important to understand the potential ramifications of choosing particular types of diplomas and to explore how accommodations can be used to assist the student in earning a standard or other high school diploma or in successfully passing an exit exam.

The Graduation Requirements and Diploma Options Available in Your State

Because diploma options, credit and course requirements, and exit exams vary from state to state, and sometimes from district to district, it is essential to be aware of one's options. Families can start by asking their school district the following questions:

- What are the requirements for a standard diploma?
- What accommodations are allowed in the classroom while earning a standard diploma?
- Is an exit test required?
- What accommodations are allowed while taking the exit test?
- Will my child receive instruction that aligns with the test questions?
- Are alternative diplomas available? If so, what are the requirements, characteristics, advantages, and disadvantages of each?



- Are portfolios or other documents accepted as indicators of student learning and skills and as an optional pathway to a diploma?

With this knowledge, students with disabilities and their families will be better informed and prepared to determine the best option for their individual circumstances.

Types of Diploma Options

A 2007 survey of all 50 states and the District of Columbia shows the variations of diploma options across the country. All reported offering a standard or regular diploma for students with and without disabilities. Of these, sixteen states offered honors diplomas, six states offered IEP/special education diplomas, nineteen states granted certificates of attendance, ten states granted certificates of achievement, three states offered occupational diplomas, and ten states provided variations of these diploma options (see chart below). Eighteen states offer only a single diploma option, the regular/standard diploma, to both students with and without disabilities.

States vary, however, in the allowances they are willing to make for youth with disabilities to receive a standard diploma. Some states make no allowances at all. Others reduce the number of credits that a student needs, make available alternate courses that can be used to earn required course-credits, lower performance criteria, or permit the IEP team to make allowances, grant extensions, etc.

Arguments can be made for the use of both single and multiple diploma options. Those who favor the single, standard diploma contend that the use of a common diploma for all helps to maintain high expectations across diverse student populations. Proponents of multiple diploma options maintain that when students experience difficulties in passing state exit exams it is only fair and reasonable to create additional options with alternative or different performance expectations.

Advantages and Disadvantages of a Standard Diploma

Diploma Option/Policy	Advantages	Disadvantages
<p>Standard Diploma; Single Criteria. A standard diploma or a more rigorous option (e.g., honors diploma) is available to all students. All must meet the same criteria for earning the diploma.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides students the "key" to entry into postsecondary institutions or employment. • Meaning of earning a diploma is clear because there is only one set of criteria. • Maintains high expectations and a focus on the general education curriculum across all student groups. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not recognize the different learning styles of students with disabilities. • May result in a significant number of students not receiving any kind of exit document from high school. • May result in more students with disabilities staying in school to age 21.
<p>Standard Diploma; Multiple Criteria. Some students are allowed to meet one or more of the requirements in different ways from other students (e.g., different courses, meeting IEP goals, exemption).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizes that students have different learning styles and skills that may not align with typical graduation criteria. • Ensures that more students will get a diploma than would with a single set of criteria. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduces quality control on the knowledge and skills of students leaving schools. • Results in non-standard sets of knowledge and skills among students, all of whom have the same diploma.



Advantages and Disadvantages of an Alternative Diploma

Diploma Option/Policy	Advantages	Disadvantages
<p>Certificate Options. Certificates for attendance, completion, achievement, etc. are available to all students. Requirements can vary considerably, and may or may not allow students with IEPs to meet them in different ways.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintains the integrity of the requirements for earning a standard diploma. • Provides other exit options for students not meeting the requirements for a standard diploma. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides exit document that may or may not be useful for entering post-secondary schooling or gaining employment. Little is known about the value of these options. • Flags those students receiving special education services.
<p>Special Education Diploma. Diploma or certificate available only to students with IEPs. This type of diploma typically is added to other options for non-IEP students.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizes that students with disabilities may be working on different standards from other students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not promote access to the general education curriculum.

Source: National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) Policy Direction, Number 10, Jan. 2000.

Accommodations

It is the responsibility of the IEP team to ensure that a student's course of study is consistent with their post-secondary goals and that the student plays a meaningful role in the IEP process to avoid assumptions that could eliminate future opportunities. All instruction and testing accommodations allowed within the general education area should be explored before deciding that a student may not be capable of earning a standard diploma.

Accommodations may include changes in materials or procedures that allow students with disabilities to learn and be tested without their disabilities putting them at a disadvantage. Accommodations enable students to show their knowledge and skills rather than the effects of their disabilities.

Examples of accommodations in instruction include:

- Alternative assignments
- Substitute materials with lower reading levels
- Fewer assignments
- Decreased length of assignment
- Copied pages so students can mark on them
- Early syllabus
- Tape-recorded versions of printed material
- Information presented in multiple formats
- Use of listening devices
- Use of student partners whenever reading or writing is required

Examples of testing and assessment accommodations include:

- Special lighting, separate room
- Extended time, frequent breaks, unlimited time
- Repeated directions, sign language presentation, magnification device
- Word processing writing example, use of reference materials (e.g. , dictionary)



- Special test preparation techniques
- Use of amplification equipment, a calculator, or manipulatives (objects used to explore mathematical ideas and solve mathematical problems)

For additional information about accommodations see the Job Accommodations Network, <http://www.jan.wvu.edu/>

Advocating for a Meaningful Diploma

During the past three years, twenty-eight states have increased graduation requirements for students with disabilities, according to a study by the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO).

As standards and options continue to change, families and advocates should examine if students with disabilities are provided the opportunity to earn a meaningful diploma. NCEO recommends that:

- Students with disabilities be given the opportunity to learn the material on an exit exam.
- States make graduation decisions concerning standard diplomas based on multiple indicators of student learning and skills, and not solely on an exit exam.
- States clarify the implications of alternative diploma options for students.

Summary

Graduation requirements and diploma options vary from state to state and district to district, making it vital for students with disabilities and their families to be proactive and informed when planning for the future. All parties involved must begin early to ensure that the student with disabilities' education is focused on the student's long-term goals for graduation and adult life. No later than middle school, students with disabilities and their families should begin investigating graduation requirements and diploma options in their state and mapping out an appropriate plan of action. By planning ahead, youth, families, and IEP teams can help to ensure that the youth is on the path to a bright productive future.



Resources

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The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth) is composed of partners with expertise in disability, education, employment, and workforce development issues. NCWD/Youth is housed at the Institute for Educational Leadership in Washington, DC. The Collaborative is charged with assisting state and local workforce development systems to integrate youth with disabilities into their service strategies. This Information Brief was written by Deborah Leuchovius of the PACER Center. To obtain this publication in an alternate format please contact the Collaborative at 877-871-0744 toll free or email contact@ncwd-youth.info. This Information Brief is part of a series of publications and newsletters prepared by the NCWD/Youth. All publications will be posted on the NCWD/Youth website at www.ncwd-youth.info. Please visit our site to sign up to be notified of future publications. This document was developed by the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth, funded by a grant/contract/cooperative agreement from the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment (Number #E-9-4-1-0070). The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U.S. Department of Labor. Nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply the endorsement by the U.S. Department of Labor. Individuals may produce any part of this document. Please credit the source and support of federal funds.

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