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Special Topic Area: Graduation Requirements for Students with Disabilities

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Frequently Asked Questions

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1. Do most states change graduation requirements for students with disabilities?

There is not a simple answer to this question because there is so much variability across states. Even when students must pass the same test to earn a standard diploma, their required coursework may be different. In some states, students may get a standard diploma for meeting IEP goals and objectives, yet there may be a notation to indicate that the diploma was earned at an individual level. Because of these variations, it is difficult and probably unwise to make generalizations. It is important not to assume what the policies and options are in any state or district, but instead to find out exactly what are the requirements and their consequences.

2. Are re-testing opportunities available for students with disabilities?

With graduation tests comes pressure to increase the number of opportunities for students to take the test, and to move the retest times closer to the time of instruction. If field test items are included in each administration of the test, there may be pressure to remove these items when students retake the test, thereby resulting in shorter forms of the test.

How re-testing interacts with disability issues should be considered. Re-testing must be available to students with disabilities just as often as it is to other students. This means that special editions of the test are needed, and accommodations must be provided during re-testing. Some states have found that decision makers request additional accommodations with each re-take, under the belief that more accommodations will give students the benefit needed to pass (or, perhaps, with the recognition that certain accommodations really are needed even though the student hoped not to need them). Changing rules about test format, administration

procedures, or testing accommodations for re-testing must be addressed.

3. Do states have an appeals process available?

Students who do not pass the graduation test, even after taking the test on repeated occasions, are likely to follow one of three pathways. First, they may drop out of school. Second, they may continue to re-take the test until they complete all their coursework. Third, they may bring a lawsuit. It is desirable to reduce the number of students doing either the first or the third of these options.

Dropout prevention strategies need to be addressed and implemented. In addition, an appeals process that ensures fair consideration of individual student needs may reduce the number of lawsuits. The nature of an appeals process should be defined before the need for the process arises. In some states or districts, alternative routes to earning standard diplomas have been available without having to first fail the graduation exam. This approach seems consistent with IDEA 2004 which requires states to have alternate assessments based on grade-level achievement standards for each state test.

4. What are some suggestions for inclusive and fair diploma options and graduation policies for students with disabilities?

There are several ways to make different types of diplomas fairer for all students. Four critical pieces are:

- (1) **Have the same diploma options available to all students.** This implies that there would be no diploma option designated just for students with disabilities.
- (2) **Recognize that not all students demonstrate high-level knowledge and skills in the same way.** This means that there must be other avenues to diplomas, such as an appeals process that is available for a small number of students. (It is advisable to obtain a good estimate of the possible number of students so that whatever is proposed for them is manageable.)
- (3) **Give names to diploma options that correspond to the knowledge and skills demonstrated by the student.** These options should recognize, but not necessarily encourage, diverse ways of demonstrating knowledge and skills. Consideration should be given to how these cases are handled. For example, a Comprehensive Diploma might be awarded if the student can gather a body of evidence showing acquisition of the breadth of knowledge covered in required coursework. Another diploma option, such as a Certificate of Mastery, might

be added to indicate completion of just the graduation test requirement.

(4) Use the media to explain the diploma options to the public. Develop brochures for schools to give to students and to forward with transcripts to post-secondary institutions and employers explaining the meaning of the various high school diploma options that are awarded.

5. Do different diploma options have different implications for continued special education services?

Students with disabilities who have graduated from high school with a standard diploma may not be eligible for special education services. State and local laws vary with respect to continued special education services, so it is important that these kinds of implications of diploma options policies be made public. Defining what constitutes a standard diploma is an important part of the clarification.

Related NCEO Publications:

- **[Alternative Routes to the Standard Diploma](#)** (Synthesis Report 54) / [PDF format](#)
- **[High Stakes Testing and College Admission: A Review of Admissions Policies in New Mexico](#)**
- **[Appeals Processes for Students Who Fail Graduation Exams: How Do They Apply to Students with Disabilities?](#)** (Synthesis Report 36)
- **[High School Graduation Requirements: What's Happening for Students with Disabilities?](#)** (Synthesis Report 20)
- **[A National Study on Graduation Requirements and Diploma Options for Youth with Disabilities](#)** (Technical Report 36) / [PDF format](#)
- **[State Graduation Requirements for Students With and Without Disabilities](#)** (Technical Report 24)
- **[Matching State Goals to a Model of School Completion Outcomes and Indicators](#)** (Technical Report 9)
- **[Diploma Options and Graduation Policies for Students with Disabilities](#)** (Policy Directions 10)

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