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## High School Graduation Requirements and Students with Disabilities

By David R. Johnson, Martha Thurlow, Anna Cosio, and Christine D. Bremer

### Introduction

High school graduation requirements vary from state to state and district to district across the United States. These requirements establish criteria that students must meet in order to obtain diplomas or certificates of completion. An increasingly common graduation requirement is the achievement of a passing score on an exit exam, a practice often referred to as *high-stakes testing*. With the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2002, schools are required to test students to document their academic progress. Schools have also been mandated by this legislation to increase rates of graduation. To comply with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), states must include all students in achievement testing, including students with disabilities.

Policy makers hold varying opinions about what should be required for graduation from high school, whether the same requirements should apply to all students, and how these requirements should be determined. The area of high-stakes testing fosters debate, with individuals on both sides presenting reasoned arguments. Johnson and Thurlow (2003) conducted a study in which representatives from all states were asked how their state determines graduation requirements and the role that high-stakes testing played in those requirements. Information specifically pertaining to students with disabilities was also collected. The viewpoints of both proponents and opponents of high-stakes testing are presented in the study, and the findings of that study are summarized in this brief.

### What are Graduation Requirements, and Who Determines Them?

Graduation requirements are criteria set by states that students must meet in order to obtain diplomas or certificates of completion from their high schools. In most states, there are multiple requirements for graduation; these may include attendance, minimum grade-point average, minimum credits completed, and passing scores on high-stakes tests or other benchmark exams.

While some states set graduation requirements and allow for no alterations, others allow local education agencies (LEAs) to make modifications to the requirements. Some states provide guidelines but allow LEAs to exercise discretion in determining exact requirements. Other states allow LEAs to have complete control over graduation requirements. When LEAs are allowed to add to or create graduation requirements, school boards and/or district administrative staff typically set these require-

ments. In some cases, Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams play a role in determining graduation requirements for students with disabilities. Johnson and Thurlow found that it was most common for states (39 states of the 46 responding) to establish minimum requirements and give LEAs the option to add to those requirements.

### **Arguments For the Use of High-Stakes Testing as a Graduation Requirement**

Many believe that the use of high-stakes testing as a graduation requirement motivates students to work harder and focus on key learning goals that will help them succeed on such exams. These proponents also believe that high-stakes testing will motivate teachers to develop better instructional methods to help students achieve passing scores. Many proponents of high-stakes testing believe that students with disabilities are harmed by low expectations of others and will not learn to their fullest potential if they do not participate in high-stakes testing. It is argued that lower expectations and diminished standards will prevent students with disabilities from succeeding and being motivated to do well. Little is known about the effects, either positive or negative, of high-stakes testing as a graduation requirement. Research in this area has been inconclusive.

### **Arguments Against the Use of High-Stakes Testing as a Graduation Requirement**

Opponents of high-stakes testing believe this practice leads to multiple negative outcomes. These include increased dropout rates, particularly for students with disabilities, students of color, and students of low socioeconomic status; increased retention rates for students who do not pass the high-stakes tests; and more students referred to special education as a result of pressure on teachers and school administrators to increase the number of passing scores. Teachers are also likely to narrow curriculum and instruction in an effort to “teach to the test” so that students will be more likely to pass exit exams, or teachers may be likely to place limitations on curricular and program options for students needing extra assistance to pass exams. Furthermore, the impact of students receiving alternative diplomas in place of standard diplomas is unknown in terms of future higher education and employment options. Again, little research exists to support this position.

### **What is the Impact of Graduation Requirements on Students with Disabilities?**

Modifications in graduation requirements available to students with disabilities vary from state to state. While

some states make no allowances and hold all students to the same graduation standard, others allow for reduction in the number of credits required, offer alternative courses to earn needed credits, allow use of different standards for performance, and/or modify curriculum. Several states, including Louisiana, Mississippi, New York, Ohio, and West Virginia, as well as the District of Columbia, allow for no modifications, but the overall trend across the nation is to allow for some modification of graduation requirements for students with disabilities who might not otherwise graduate.

Modifications for students with disabilities are often proposed in states using high-stakes testing. Johnson and Thurlow found that 27 states required youth with disabilities to pass an exit exam in order to graduate from high school. Most of these states (23) used the same test, with the same minimum passing scores, for all students. One state used the same test for all students but had a different passing score for students with disabilities, and two states had different tests and different passing scores for students with disabilities. One state did not respond.

For those students with disabilities who initially fail high school exit exams, there are a variety of options available including retaking the test, using an alternative exam form, taking an entirely different exam, remediating specific objectives failed on the exam, petitioning for an exemption that will still allow receipt of a standard diploma, or granting of an alternative completion diploma.

Table 1 lists the consequences, both intended and unintended, that may occur when using high-stakes testing as a graduation requirement for students with disabilities.

### **Conclusion**

States are under increased pressure to improve graduation rates for students with disabilities, while ensuring that the high school diploma retains the meaning of a mark of academic achievement. States and schools are increasingly using high-stakes testing as a component of graduation requirements. The long-term consequences of this trend are unclear. Little research has been done to examine the effects, both negative and positive, of high-stakes testing. Johnson and Thurlow (2003) offer several recommendations to help states: (a) meet the challenge of having fair graduation requirements while remaining accountable for all students; (b) clarify the assumptions underlying state graduation requirements; (c) ensure that students with disabilities have an opportunity to learn the material they will be tested on in state and local assessments; (d) make high school graduation decisions based on multiple indicators of students’ learning and skills; and (e) conduct ongoing research on the intended and unintended consequences of state graduation requirements.

### **Table 1. Consequences of Requiring Students with Disabilities to Pass Exit Exams to Receive a Standard High School Diploma**

#### **Intended consequences:**

- More students with disabilities will participate in the general education curriculum and achieve results.
- Higher academic expectations will improve students' access to postsecondary education and employment.
- The differences between general education and special education students are reduced—all students are held to the same standards, are required to pass the same exams, and receive the same diploma.
- Exit exams signify a minimum standard for all students to achieve—holding all students to these standards gives clearer meaning and value to diplomas earned.
- Educators will use differentiated instructional strategies, including the use of accommodations, to assist students in meeting higher academic standards and passing exit exams.

#### **Unintended consequences:**

- Some students with disabilities will fail to receive standard diplomas.
- Higher dropout rates may result as students' frustrations rise amid difficulties in passing exit exams.
- Student self-esteem is lowered by repeated failures on exit exams.
- Dissatisfaction and conflicts with parents may sometimes result; possibilities for lawsuits may also occur.
- Some students may need to remain in school longer to meet the requirements of standard diplomas.
- States and LEAs may be forced to create alternative diplomas and pathways to ensure that students exit with some form of high school exit credential.

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#### **References**

Johnson, D. R., & Thurlow, M. L. (2003). *A national study on graduation requirements and diploma options for youth with disabilities* (Technical Report No. 36). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes. Retrieved February 9, 2005, from <http://education.umn.edu/nceol/OnlinePubs/Technical36.htm>

#### **Resources**

National Center on Educational Outcomes  
University of Minnesota  
350 Elliott Hall  
75 East River Road  
Minneapolis, MN 55455  
612.626.1530  
[nceo@umn.edu](mailto:nceo@umn.edu)  
<http://education.umn.edu/nceol/>

The Transition Center at the University of Florida  
G315 Norman Hall  
Transition Center  
University of Florida  
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<http://www.thetransitioncenter.org/>



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