



National Center on Secondary Education and Transition

Creating Opportunities for Youth
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Diploma Options for Students with Disabilities

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

Introduction

The high school diploma is a benchmark of success in the United States, but what the diploma represents has continued to change. The number and types of options for diplomas vary from state to state, with some states having as many as seven choices and others as few as one. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 has increased the pressure on schools across the country to improve graduation rates for all students, including students with disabilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Amendments of 1997 require that students with disabilities participate in state and district assessments and that results be reported. These requirements have had an impact on the states, affecting the range of diploma options offered to students. Many states offer multiple diploma options as a strategy to meet the requirements of NCLB and IDEA and to improve school completion rates for students, especially those with disabilities.

What are Diploma Options?

Diploma options represent alternative means of graduating from high school. While some schools offer only one diploma (e.g., a standard diploma), others have developed alternative diplomas in an effort to include more students and increase graduation rates. Of the 47 states that responded to the survey by Johnson and Thurlow (2003), 13 reported that they offered a single diploma for students with and without disabilities.

Each state has unique graduation requirements and diploma options. Across the country, several types of diplomas are offered. These include honors diplomas or diplomas of high distinction, standard diplomas, certificates of completion or attendance, certificates of achievement, Individualized Education Program (IEP) diplomas or special education diplomas, and occupational diplomas. For a further description of these diploma options, see the table on page 2.

Debate continues about the meaning of a high school diploma in today's society and whether multiple diploma options cause confusion for higher education institutions and employers who need to understand a graduate's qualifications. Some contend that having multiple diploma options hinders students, especially those with disabilities, because it can create confusion and doubt as to what the student has accomplished. Those in favor of a single diploma also cite a need to maintain high expectations for all students and to ensure that all students are taught the same curriculum for obtaining a standard diploma. In contrast, those who favor multiple diploma options feel that this approach is best suited for a wider range of students in order to increase graduation rates and help more students feel successful.

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 specified level of competence in an occupational area.

Instead of offering alternative diplomas, some states allow students with disabilities to receive a modified standard diploma. Modifications may include reducing the number of credits required to graduate, allowing completion of alternative courses to earn required course credits, lowering performance criteria, providing accommodations in coursework and on exit exams, and altering curricula.

Who Determines the Diploma Options Available?

Generally, decisions about diploma options are made at the state level. Some states allow local education agencies (LEAs) to determine what options a district can offer, although the state normally maintains an advisory role. Those involved in determining what diplomas options a state or district will offer include administrators, educators, and at times, members of the community, such as parents and concerned citizens. Some states have begun to involve postsecondary institutions and community businesses in the decision-making process concerning diploma options. Collaboration among stakeholders helps ensure that the diplomas awarded to students are understood and valued by the community into which these young adults will venture.

Benefits of Multiple Diploma Options for Students with Disabilities

Those who support the use of multiple diploma options say it benefits students, particularly those with disabili-

ties. Students who do not have a high school diploma are known to experience difficulties in finding jobs or continuing their education at the postsecondary level. Those in favor of multiple diploma options believe that offering several paths to graduation helps some students with disabilities stay in school rather than becoming frustrated and dropping out. In addition, the provision of multiple diploma options is considered by some to be a way to maintain high standards for the standard diploma, as these options reduce pressure to make the standard diploma attainable by more students. As states seek to increase graduation rates, they may feel compelled to reduce the rigor of standard diploma requirements. Multiple diploma options are thus seen as providing a reasonable and fair approach to accommodating the diversity in student abilities without diluting the standard diploma. Unfortunately, there has been little research on the affect of multiple diploma options on overall student achievement, employment, or participation in higher education.

Benefits of Single Diploma Options for Students with Disabilities

Proponents of a single diploma for all students, including students with disabilities, claim that the standard diploma helps maintain high expectations across the diversity of students who attend the nation's schools. As employers and higher education institutions voice concerns that high school diplomas do not mean what they once did, having a single diploma available in each state or district would

help to create a more consistent system and would reaffirm the traditional meaning of a high school diploma. Advocates for standard diplomas support giving recognition to students, both those with and without disabilities, who perform above the requirements for the standard diploma.

Conclusion

In response to NCLB, educators across the United States are searching for ways to increase graduation rates. Many students with disabilities find it difficult or impossible to meet the criteria in a standard diploma, and alternative forms of diplomas may be their only route to graduation.

In Johnson and Thurlow's study (2003), all states were asked to provide information about the types of diplomas offered to their students. It was found that many states have multiple diploma options with some states offering as many as seven; other states offer only one or two diploma options. Because students with disabilities have high drop-out rates and experience negative outcomes when they do not have a high school diploma, it is critical to understand the impact of diploma options on the postsecondary and employment outcomes of students with disabilities. Such research will help states meet the requirements of NCLB and support the goal of better outcomes for all students.

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References

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- 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 2, 2005, from <http://education.umn.edu/nceol/OnlinePubs/Technical36.htm>

Resources

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