



Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Standards and Accountability | Graduation Requirements

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 regular diploma, their required coursework may be different. In some states, students may receive 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.

Can an IEP diploma or other special diploma lead to a good job or college entrance?

The outcomes of receiving a diploma other than a regular diploma are not well understood, in part because there is little research on the topic. Existing research findings do suggest that receipt of a diploma other than a regular or advanced diploma of some type puts students at a disadvantage in the postsecondary education environment and the job market. Additional research is needed.

The Every Student Succeeds Act provides an option for a state-defined alternate diploma for students with significant cognitive disabilities who participate in alternate assessments based on [alternate achievement standards \(AA-AAS\)](#). The alternate diploma must indicate that the student has completed an appropriately rigorous academic program. It must be standards-based, aligned with the state requirements for a regular high-school diploma, and obtained within the time period for which the state ensures a free appropriate public education (FAPE).

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

Students with disabilities, including ELs with disabilities, who have graduated from high school with a regular 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 be made public. Defining what constitutes a regular diploma is an important part of the clarification.

What challenges does social promotion create for students with disabilities, ELs, and ELs with disabilities who want to graduate with a regular diploma?

Social promotion refers to the practice of promoting students from one grade to the next even though they have not met the requirements to do so. This term often is contrasted with the term "retention" which refers to the practice of keeping a student in a grade due to not meeting requirements to move to the next grade. Both social promotion and retention raise concerns. Research has documented that retention is a concern because students retained in a grade may not receive the instruction they need and may be more likely to drop out of school. Social promotion, a practice that affects more students with disabilities than other students, also is a concern because students who have not demonstrated their knowledge and skills are less likely to end school with the knowledge and skills to graduate. This is particularly a problem when exit exams are used to certify skills before awarding a regular diploma because students who have been socially promoted are unlikely to pass the exam, and then either leave with a different exit document, or simply drop out of school.

Are retesting opportunities available for students with disabilities, ELs, and ELs with disabilities for graduation exams?

States typically provide students with a number of opportunities to re-take graduation tests. How retesting interacts with disability issues should be considered. Retesting must be available to students with disabilities, ELs, and ELs with disabilities just as often as it is to other students. This means that special editions of the test are needed, and [accessibility features and accommodations](#) must be provided during retesting. 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). In some states, the format of a retest may be different from that of the original assessment (e.g., computer-based rather than paper and pencil), or accommodation policies may change (to allow additional accommodations not allowed during the regular assessment). These types of changes must be considered when decisions are made about the participation of individual students in retesting opportunities.

Do states have an appeals process available for their exit exams?

States increasingly have options available to students who need an "alternative route" to show what they know and are able to do relative to graduation standards. These alternatives are designed to allow the student to earn a regular diploma, and are variously called waivers, appeals, options, variances, and a host of other terms. These options may be available to all students, or only to students with disabilities. They may or may not require that the student first fail the exit exam. States have a variety of criteria that must

be met for a student to enter a process to earn a regular diploma through avenues other than taking and passing the regular exit exam.

It is important to explore the options that are available and what the specific requirements are because they are different from state to state and sometimes change frequently within states. It is also important to distinguish routes that result in a regular diploma from those that result in other types of diplomas, such as a modified diploma, special education diploma, or other diploma option. It is essential also to consider the nature of the alternative route because it may change what is expected of the student – and this will have implications for the ultimate educational outcomes and future success for the student who pursues an alternative route process.

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 recommendations are:

1. **Have rigorous diploma options available to all students.** This means that for most students with disabilities that there would be no diploma option available designated just for students with disabilities. For students with significant cognitive disabilities who participate in alternate assessments based on [alternate achievement standards \(AA-AAS\)](#), a state-defined alternate diploma that is standards-based, aligned with the state requirements for a regular high-school diploma, and obtained within the time period for which the state ensures a free appropriate public education may be an appropriate option.
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.
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.