

Changing the Landscape: Including students with disabilities in high school graduation rates

Educators believe that all students can achieve when provided with appropriate services and programs. We cannot allow unreasonable high-stakes exit exams and limited diploma options to deny students with disabilities access to postsecondary education and successful employment.

—NEA President Dennis Van Roekel

The current system that most states use to award high school diplomas to students with disabilities does not serve students well, and it puts states at a disadvantage in a policy environment that is focused on increasing graduation rates. But ensuring that students with disabilities graduate from high school with a regular or standard diploma is a challenge—and a topic of interest to NEA, its affiliates, and members.

Graduation rates for students with disabilities are far too low. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that in 2005–06, 57 percent of students with disabilities exited high school with a regular diploma. While that is a 10 percent increase over a decade, it is still not where we need to be. In 14 states less than half of students with disabilities graduated with regular diplomas.¹

And far too often, students with disabilities who could have graduated with a regular diploma are either dropping out of high school or are receiving a nonstandard diploma or certificate. In 2005–06, approximately one-quarter of students with disabilities dropped out and 15 percent exited with a certificate of attendance, a percentage that increased from 1995–96 to 2005–06. In some states, students who have successfully participated in, and completed, the general education program and/or the career and technology program prior to their transition and exit from high school are denied regular/standard high school diplomas.

NEA believes that all students with disabilities should be counted as high school graduates, especially by earning a regular/standard diploma. While other diplomas and certificates are available to students with disabilities in many states, employers and institutions of higher education have questioned their value and rigor. Earning a high school diploma by completing district academic requirements and courses of studies is an alternative that is either in place, or could be added, to current, nontest-based alternative

routes (e.g., portfolios of student work, completing IEP requirements).

The time is right to explore these and other options to increase the number of students with disabilities who graduate from high school with a regular/standard diploma. The most recent data about the frequently changing landscape of state graduation policies indicate that the number of states requiring students with disabilities to take and pass a high school exit exam is not likely to increase.² This provides states with an opportunity to advance nontest-based policy options like the ones recommended in this brief.

The regular diploma route

NEA's recommendation. Require states to include satisfactory completion of course or academic requirements, or other allowances, so that students with disabilities can attain a regular/standard high school diploma.

In 22 states, students with disabilities are able to take advantage of allowances that can help them attain regular/standard diplomas. These students complete a specific or different curriculum (including an occupational curriculum) to demonstrate proficiency and meet the requirements of a regular/standard diploma. Other allowances include earning fewer credits to graduate; meeting lower performance criteria; taking more time to complete courses and meet academic standards; taking a different test (either in lieu of the high school exit exam or after failing the exit exam); obtaining a waiver from specific state requirements, especially high-school exit exams; compiling a competency portfolio in lieu of taking required state tests; and successfully completing the requirements of an Individualized Educational Program (IEP).

As of 2006–07, only three states (Indiana, Mississippi, and New Hampshire) did not permit allowances, while some, such as Iowa, Nebraska, and Washington, offered students a wide array. Still, the trend across states is toward fewer but more informed allowances, the most common of

which is providing students with allowances that are stipulated by their IEP teams.³

A landscape of multiple routes

NEA's recommendation: Require states to offer the same diploma options to all students with flexibility for how students with disabilities earn diplomas.⁴

States currently offer an array of high school diplomas and certificates, including an honors diploma, regular/standard diploma, IEP/special education diploma, certificate of attendance, certificate of achievement, and occupational diploma.

In a 2006–07 survey, 33 states reported offering students with and without disabilities multiple diplomas.⁵ In the remaining 18 states, students could only earn a single diploma, the regular/standard diploma. Of the states with multiple diplomas, 20 offered students three or more diploma options, and most provided allowances for students with disabilities. For example, students with disabilities might be required to complete the same coursework as other students, be excused from the high school exit exam, and still receive a standard diploma.

States that offer multiple diploma options to students with disabilities report the following positive outcomes: 1) more students receive some form of high school diploma; 2) more local school district flexibility in determining how students exit high school; and 3) fewer dropouts. In addition, the states reported they were better able to maintain high standards for their regular/standard diploma and to recognize students (typically nondisabled students) for high performance by awarding honors diplomas.

However, states also report several negative outcomes associated with offering students diploma options, including: 1) a perception that alternative diplomas are substandard; 2) problems associated with informing parents and students about the different options; 3) employer difficulty in evaluating students' skills and abilities associated with different diploma options; 4) limited access to post-secondary education for students who receive diplomas other than regular/standard diplomas because alternatives are viewed as watered-down or of little meaning to college admissions offices; 5) lowered expectations for some students with disabilities because diploma options are available; and 6) a perception that multiple diploma options result in a special curriculum "track" that students follow.

Given these negative outcomes, NEA's agenda is to increase the number of states that move from multiple diplomas to

a regular/standard diploma for students with disabilities, with allowances.

The modified diploma route

NEA's recommendation: Require states to include students with disabilities who earn a "modified diploma" as graduates, if, by earning this diploma, the students meet standards that were set for them.

In 2005, the National Governors Association (NGA) task force on state high school graduation recommended that, "in limited circumstances, students earning modified diplomas, such as a special education diploma, may count as graduates if the modified diploma is the appropriate standard that the state and school system set for the student in an IEP, for example."⁶

States exercising this option may wish to extend it to all students with disabilities rather than reserve it for "limited circumstances." As NGA explains, these students met the standards that were set for them, completed the prescribed program of study, and are entitled to graduate with a regular/standard diploma. However, if this approach is undertaken, it is important to clarify that the IEP is a program of study and was never intended to be used as an accountability measure for students with disabilities. Therefore, completion of the IEP should not be the sole criterion under this option. Other state or local graduation requirements, such as specific course completion or number of credits, also should be included to earn a regular/standard diploma.

As state requirements change, federal reporting requirements also would need to be modified if students received a modified diploma in this way. The Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education, currently requires states to report the number of students with disabilities who receive modified diplomas under "Received a Certificate" category.⁷

The alternate diploma route

NEA's recommendation: Require states to track and report on the future outcomes of students with disabilities who receive various kinds of diplomas.

There is limited research on the value of nonstandard diplomas (and certificates) in terms of students' future education and employment,⁸ and states that offer different diplomas report both positive and negative outcomes. Therefore, researchers agree that it is important to track and report on the future outcomes for students with dis-

abilities who graduate with a diploma other than a regular/standard diploma. Also, October 2008 Title I regulations issued by the U.S. Department of Education now require that graduation data be disaggregated for subgroups, such as students with disabilities. This information will let students and families know whether other kinds of degrees limit students' access to postsecondary education or entrée to meaningful employment.

Because of the limited number of studies on the value of different high school diplomas in terms of students' future education and employment, special education researchers recommend that states and school districts convene discussions among key stakeholders to reach consensus on the meaning and rigor of various diplomas. They urge states and districts to include employers, representatives from colleges and universities, teachers, union representatives, administrators, parents, individuals with disabilities and their families, and legislators in the discussions and consensus-building.⁹

Accommodations for the exit exam route

NEA's recommendation: Require states to offer students with disabilities testing accommodations to better enable them to demonstrate their skills and knowledge on high school exit exams.

The number of states requiring students to pass high-stakes exit exams to receive a high school diploma grew steadily for several years then leveled off in 2006–07. Currently, 23 states have exit exams, while some 26 states and the District of Columbia do not.¹⁰ It is expected that only two additional states will have exit exams by 2012.¹¹

Some 18 states set the same passing score on their exit exams for students with and without disabilities; the remaining 6 provide allowances for students with disabilities. Arizona and Idaho administer different tests to students with disabilities as do New York and Washington, which also allow students with disabilities to take the same test as other students, but with a different passing score. This latter practice also is used in Minnesota and New Mexico.

A synthesis of recent studies on test accommodations found that accommodations related to the use of time generally had a positive effect on students' test scores on a variety of assessments (excluding high school exit exams).¹² The most common accommodations were extended time (the student may take longer than the time typically allowed) and testing with breaks (time away from the test is allowed, sometimes with conditions about when this can occur and how long it can be).

Other timing (and scheduling) accommodations used by various states include breaking assessments that are generally administered in a single session into multiple sessions, administering the assessment over several days instead of on a single day, and administering the assessment at a time during the day that is most advantageous to the student.

Additional accommodations in use across states are: 1) presentation accommodations, e.g., reading test directions or questions aloud, interpretations in sign language, use of additional visual cues such as arrows or stickers; 2) response accommodations, e.g., recording students' verbal responses, using a computer, writing in the test booklet rather than on a separate sheet of paper; and 3) setting accommodations, e.g., student is assessed in a separate room, in a quiet environment, or individually.¹³

Eighteen states also allow students to retake the test, although the number of retakes is often limited to one to three. A handful (Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Louisiana, and Massachusetts) allow students with disabilities to petition for a testing exemption and/or take an alternate or equivalent exam (Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, and Washington). In a few states, students can petition for an exemption from the test (available in Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Maryland, and Massachusetts).¹⁴

The GED route

NEA's recommendation: Change state requirements so that students with disabilities can pursue a GED without dropping out of school.

Another diploma option available to students with and without disabilities is the General Educational Development (GED) degree, but states vary in the way they make this degree available. In some, students can only receive a GED after they drop out of school, while others allow students to receive a GED without dropping out of school by jointly enrolling in secondary education *and* a GED program. These states are able to report GED recipients as graduating with a diploma.¹⁵

Implications for states

Increasing the number of students with disabilities who earn a regular/standard diploma can be accomplished through a variety of routes. Some states already have in place critical elements—providing students with disabilities the same diploma options as other students and coupling the availability of a regular/standard diploma with flexibility for how students obtain it; putting various allow-

ances in place that help students with disabilities obtain a regular/standard diploma; and enabling students with disabilities to graduate with a regular/standard diploma if they have successfully completed the general education program and/or career and technology program prior to their transition and exit from high school.

Even though only about half of the states are expected to continue requiring students to take high school exit exams to graduate, it is vital that they ensure that students with disabilities have all the accommodations necessary to demonstrate their skills and knowledge on these exams.

Because nonstandard diplomas and certificates will continue to be available, it is important for states to report on future employment as well as education outcomes for students with disabilities who receive various kinds of diplomas. As part of this data collection, states are now required by Title I regulations to report on outcomes for students with disabilities who earn a regular/standard high school diploma.

In summary, states should:

- Offer regular/standard diplomas to students with disabilities who satisfy course completion, academic requirements, or other allowances;
- Offer the same diploma options—including the regular/standard diploma—to students with disabilities as they offer to other students;
- Count students with disabilities who receive a modified diploma as graduates if these students meet all the standards that were set for them;
- Track post-graduation outcomes of students with disabilities for each kind of diploma that they offer;
- Offer more testing accommodations on exit exams to students with disabilities;
- Allow students with disabilities to earn a GED while they are enrolled in high school.

References

¹ National Center for Education Statistics, *The condition of education*, NCES 2008-031, Washington, DC. Author, June 2008, <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2008/2008031.pdf>.

² Center on Education Policy, *State high school exit exams: A move toward end-of-course exams*, Washington, DC: Author, 2008.

Resources

The National Center on Educational Outcomes, University of Minnesota, was established in 1990 to provide national leadership on the participation of students with disabilities in national and state assessments, standards-setting efforts, and high school graduation. www.cehd.umn.edu/NCEO

³ D.R. Johnson, M.L. Thurlow, and K.E. Stout, *Revisiting graduation requirements and diploma options for youth with disabilities: A national study (Technical Report 49)*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes, December 2007.

⁴ This option was recommended by M.L. Thurlow and S. Thompson, *Diploma options and graduation policies for students with disabilities (Policy Directions No. 10)*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes, 2000.

⁵ D.R. Johnson, M.L. Thurlow, and K.E. Stout, December 2007.

⁶ National Governors Association, *Graduation counts: A report of the National Governors Association task force on state high school graduation data*, Washington, DC: Author, 2005, 15.

⁷ This information is from www.ideadata.org.

⁸ D.R. Johnson, M.L. Thurlow, and K.E. Stout, December 2007.

⁹ M.L. Thurlow, and S. Thompson, *Diploma options and graduation policies for students with disabilities (Policy Directions No. 10)*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes, 2000.

¹⁰ D.R. Johnson, M.L. Thurlow, and K.E. Stout, December 2007.

¹¹ National Governors Association, *Graduation counts: A report of the National Governors Association task force on state high school graduation data* Washington, DC: Author, 2005, 15.

¹² A.L. Zenicky, and S.G. Serici, *A summary of the research on the effects of test accommodations: 2005–2006 (Technical Report 47)*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes, 2007. This report summarized studies published in 2006–2007. The assessments were state criterion-referenced assessments, survey/case study/interview protocols, miscellaneous standardized achievement/intelligence measures, norm-referenced achievement tests, and researcher-developed academic measures.

¹³ S.S. Lazarus, M.L. Thurlow, K.E. Lail, K.D. Eisenbraun, and K. Kato, *2005 state policies on assessment participation and accommodations for students with disabilities (Synthesis Report 64)*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes, 2006.

¹⁴ D.R. Johnson, M.L. Thurlow, and K.E. Stout, December 2007.

¹⁵ The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA) requires states to report to the U.S. Department of Education the number of students served under IDEA, ages 14–21, who exit from special education programs each year and the reasons they stopped receiving special education and related services (Section 618). The reasons include “dropped out,” a category under which states must report students who receive a GED unless students in the state can receive a GED without dropping out of school.