

September 5, 2017

Alyssa Rafa and Jennifer Thomsen
arafa@ecs.org and jthomsen@ecs.org

Your Question:

You asked for an overview of states that offer a standard diploma or alternate diploma for students with IEPs. As you noted, Achieve and the National Center of Educational Outcomes released a report in November 2016 entitled [Diplomas that Matter: Ensuring Equity of Opportunity for Students with Disabilities](#) that analyzes the diploma options available in each state for students with disabilities. The report is the most recent analysis of diploma options for students with disabilities of which we are aware. The key findings of the report are summarized below. In the next section, you will find summaries of recent legislation related to diplomas for students with disabilities. The final section of the response contains links to other resources you may find to be helpful.

Our Response:

Earning a high school diploma is key to advancing college and career prospects for all students and unfortunately, students with disabilities receive high school diplomas at a much lower rate than their peers without disabilities. According to the [National Center for Education Statistics](#), only 65 percent of students served under IDEA in the 2012-2013 school year graduated with a regular high school diploma and 14 percent exited school with an alternative certificate. There are many variations in the types of graduation options available for students with disabilities across states. While some states only offer regular diploma options for students with disabilities, others offer additional diploma and/or alternate certificate options for students with disabilities. Below, we have summarized a report that offers specific information on this topic and provided additional resources for your review.

State Diploma Options

As you noted, Achieve and the National Center of Educational Outcomes released a report in November 2016 entitled [Diplomas that Matter: Ensuring Equity of Opportunity for Students with Disabilities](#) that analyzes the diploma options available in each state for students with disabilities. This report also compares the course and assessment requirements for earning a regular diploma in each state for students with disabilities and their peers without disabilities. Some of the key findings of the report include:

- Diploma Types:
 - Regular diploma—states can offer multiple regular diplomas and more rigorous ‘honors’ diplomas.
 - Some states offer a diploma option available only for students with disabilities who participate in the state’s general assessment.
 - Some states offer a diploma option available only for students with significant cognitive disabilities who take the state’s alternate assessment.
- **27 states** only offer the regular diploma option for students with disabilities.
 - These states were much more likely (18 of 27 states) to devolve control of coursework requirements to a local IEP team.
 - Note: We recognize that there are inconsistencies within the report regarding whether D.C. does or does not offer additional diplomas. According to the [D.C. Public Schools website](#), D.C. does offer an alternative certificate of IEP in addition to the standard high school diploma option. This information is consistent with the information presented in the table on page 3 of the report.
- **24 states (including D.C.)** offer additional diplomas available exclusively for students with disabilities.
 - These states may offer multiple diploma options including various certificates and types of occupational diplomas.

- Alaska, Louisiana, New York, North Carolina, Rhode Island and West Virginia have a diploma designated specifically for students with significant cognitive disabilities who participate in the state alternate assessment.
- **19 states and D.C.** have the same course requirements for students with and without disabilities to earn a regular diploma.
- **In 24 states**, the course requirements to earn a regular diploma were different for students with and without disabilities.
 - Students in these states often had to complete the requirements of their IEPs, and some were exempted from course requirements.

Recent State Legislation on Diploma Options for Students with Disabilities

A few states have enacted legislation in the past several years that touch provisions related to diplomas for students with disabilities. Although we do our best to capture every enacted bill, this list may not be all inclusive.

- **Mississippi SB 2432** (2017) specifies that the special Mississippi Occupational Diploma for students with disabilities will not be available to any student entering the 9th grade in the 2017-2018 school year or thereafter, pending State Board of Education approval of new graduation options. Further, the bill specifies that the career track program for students not pursuing a Baccalaureate degree will not be available to any student entering the 9th grade in the 2017-2018 school year or thereafter.

In addition to the legislation, the Mississippi State Board of Education voted in July to take public comment on a [proposal](#) aimed at ensuring that students with disabilities have the opportunity to earn a traditional diploma. The proposed diploma options include a traditional diploma for all students and an alternate diploma option for students with significant cognitive disabilities (the approximately 1 percent of students who have met the significant cognitive disability criteria). Students would be able to earn additional credits to qualify for a traditional diploma with a Career and Technical Education endorsement, an academic endorsement and/or a distinguished academic endorsement. The proposed diploma options would take effect in the 2018-2019 school year.

- **Indiana HB 1219** (2016) requires high schools to offer its students the opportunity to earn any type of state diploma approved by the state board of education. The bill provides that a student with a disability cannot be required to complete local requirements that exceed state requirements to receive a diploma unless otherwise required as part of the student's individualized education program.
- **Indiana HB 1194** (2015) provides that, beginning with the annual case review when a student with a disability is in the 8th grade, the student's individualized education program must include the type of diploma the student will seek, the courses necessary to obtain the diploma, employment and career options for the student, and the preparation required to achieve the employment or career. Further, the bill provides that, beginning in the 9th grade, the student's teacher must communicate with the student's parent at least one time each grading period to review the student's progress toward the diploma.
- **Nevada SB 13** (2015) revises the state definition of "student with a disability" to align with the federal definition. The bill removes reference to an "adjusted diploma," so that a parent who has been appointed to represent the student's educational interests may represent the child until he/she has received a standard high school diploma (rather than an adjusted diploma).
- **Virginia S.B. 1236** (2015) eliminates the term "special diploma" and specifies that students identified as disabled who complete the requirements of their individualized education programs and meet certain

requirements but do not meet the requirements for any named diploma will be awarded "Applied Studies" diplomas.

Further Resources

- In January 2017, the US Department of Education issued [non-regulatory guidance](#) on high school graduation rate calculations under ESSA that includes information on use of regular high school diplomas and state-defined alternate diplomas in graduation rates (see pages 13-15).
- A [2011 study](#) by the National Center on Educational Outcomes analyzes diploma options, graduation requirements and exit exams for youth with disabilities. The study provides information on the range and variation in state graduation requirements and diploma options across the U.S. for students with and without disabilities.
- The National Center for Learning Disabilities released a [report](#) in 2013 providing information on graduation rates and drop-out rates for students with specific learning disabilities.
- ECS [tracks state policy](#) on a wide variety of education-related issues including high school graduation requirements and diplomas. To view 2017 legislation related to diplomas, click "High School" and choose the "Graduation Requirements" sub-issue. The map will show which states have enacted or vetoed legislation on the topic, and below the map you will find a list of the bills. Click the arrow beside the bill title to see more information including a summary written by ECS staff and a link to the bill on the state legislature's website.