

## DIPLOMAS THAT MATTER: ENSURING EQUITY OF OPPORTUNITY FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES



An estimated 85 to 90 percent of students with disabilities can meet the same graduation standards as all other students, as long as they receive specially designed instruction and the appropriate access, supports, and accommodations required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).<sup>i</sup> Yet the national graduation rate for students with disabilities<sup>ii</sup> has risen from 56.9 percent in 2006 only to 66.3 percent in 2014.<sup>iii</sup> In addition to these low graduation rates, questions persist as to whether students with disabilities are being given access to a rigorous course of study that will prepare them for college and career.<sup>iv</sup> States do a disservice to students with disabilities when they are not given the opportunity to earn a regular diploma with adequate supports or when they are held to lower expectations.

Further, a lack of clarity within and across states about what diploma options are available to students with disabilities and whether these diploma options count in the calculation of graduation rates makes it difficult to determine how well students with disabilities are being served and whether they leave high school prepared for next steps. If they do not know what diploma options exist for students with disabilities and the rigor of those options, students, parents, policymakers, postsecondary institutions, and employers alike are left to wonder, *"Have students with disabilities met the same standards as their peers without disabilities?" "How many students with disabilities graduate with a diploma that is available only to students with disabilities and not to all students, and what is the value of that diploma?" "If students with disabilities earn a regular diploma, does that mean that they are ready for postsecondary education or employment?"*

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To try to understand the diploma options available for students with disabilities, Achieve and the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) at the University of Minnesota partnered to analyze the diplomas available in each state for the graduating class of 2015. Achieve and NCEO also compared the course and assessment requirements for earning a regular diploma in each state for students with disabilities and their peers without disabilities.<sup>v</sup>

### Key Findings

In **26 states** and the **District of Columbia**, the only diploma available for students with disabilities was the regular diploma (in other words, no diploma options were available only to students with disabilities). In **24 states**, additional diplomas were available exclusively for students with disabilities.

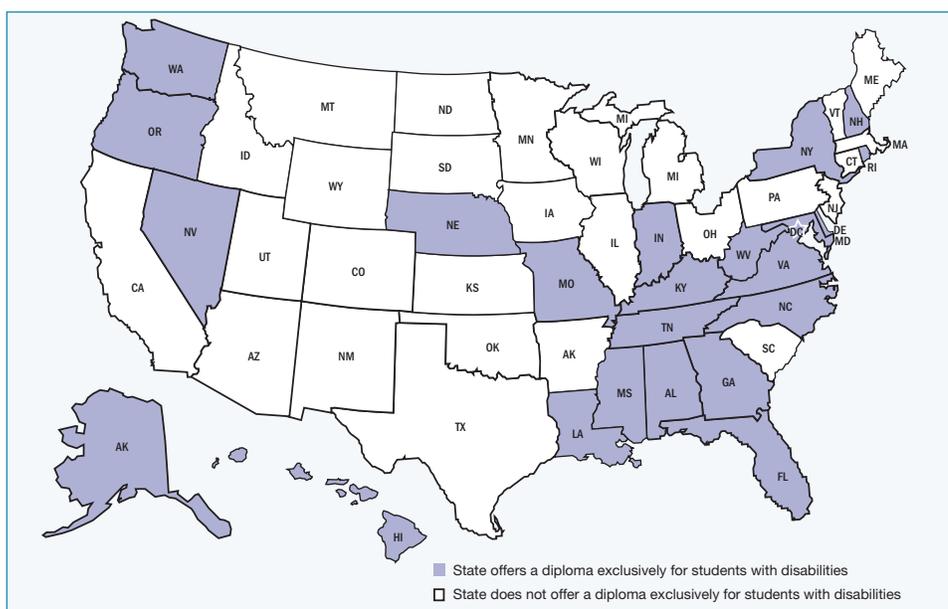
- **Course requirements:** When states offer diploma options that are exclusively for students with disabilities, they are more likely to require these students to complete the same coursework as their peers without disabilities to earn a regular diploma. However, in states where the only diploma option is a regular diploma, the course requirements for students with disabilities are likely to be less rigorous than the requirements for students without disabilities. As a result, students with disabilities can end up completing a different course of study from their peers without disabilities and still earn the same regular diploma.
- **Assessment requirements:** When states have assessment requirements for students to graduate, the expectations for students with disabilities are more likely to be similar to those for students without disabilities than coursework requirements. In **six states**, the assessment expectations for students with disabilities to earn the regular diploma are left to local Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams to decide; consequently, students with disabilities are not expected to meet the same assessment requirements as their peers without disabilities.
- **Graduation rate:** In states that have diploma options available exclusively for students with disabilities, the graduation rate is an average of 7.6 percentage points lower than in states where the only diploma option is the regular diploma. The graduation rates for students with disabilities are also lower when requirements are the same as for students without disabilities, but the students with disabilities who do graduate have been held to the same performance standards as other students and are more likely to be college and career ready.

## Diplomas Are Awarded to Students with Disabilities Differently across States

States may offer multiple diploma options for all of their students, both those with disabilities and those without disabilities. The focus of this analysis was on regular diplomas and diploma options available only to students with disabilities in 2014–15.<sup>vi</sup> This analysis found that in **26 states and the District of Columbia**, the only diploma available for students with disabilities was the regular diploma (no diploma options were available only to students with disabilities), and in 24 states, students with disabilities had the option to earn diplomas available exclusively to them.

The states that offer multiple diploma options for all students may offer various certificates (completion, attainment, attendance) and types of occupational diplomas (career and technical education) that may have less demanding expectations than a state’s regular diploma. Additionally, some states (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. For the purposes of this analysis, however, each state’s regular diploma was identified and used for comparison.

### WHICH STATES OFFER DIPLOMAS EXCLUSIVELY FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES?



#### What Is an IEP?

Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) define the specialized instruction and appropriate access, supports, and accommodations for students who are eligible for special education services. The IEP is developed by an IEP team made up of educators, school administrators, parents, English language development personnel (if the student is an English learner), and the student beginning as early as possible and appropriate (e.g., upper elementary grades).

#### What Can States Do?

- Students with disabilities should strive to earn the most rigorous diploma available — evidence suggests that the vast majority can and should earn a regular diploma by meeting the same requirements as other students, as long as appropriate supports and accommodations as required by IDEA are available.
- States should review their graduation requirements for students with disabilities and create a system that enables them to meet the same requirements as their peers without disabilities.
- To help ensure that students with disabilities are on track for graduation, they should be held to high expectations, beginning in the early grades.
- States should be more transparent about what diplomas are available for students with disabilities and what the requirements are for each option. Both regular diplomas and multiple diplomas can mask what individual students know and can do and what it took to earn the credential — potentially leaving students underprepared for their next steps and parents, employers, and postsecondary institutions without sufficient clarity and information about graduates.

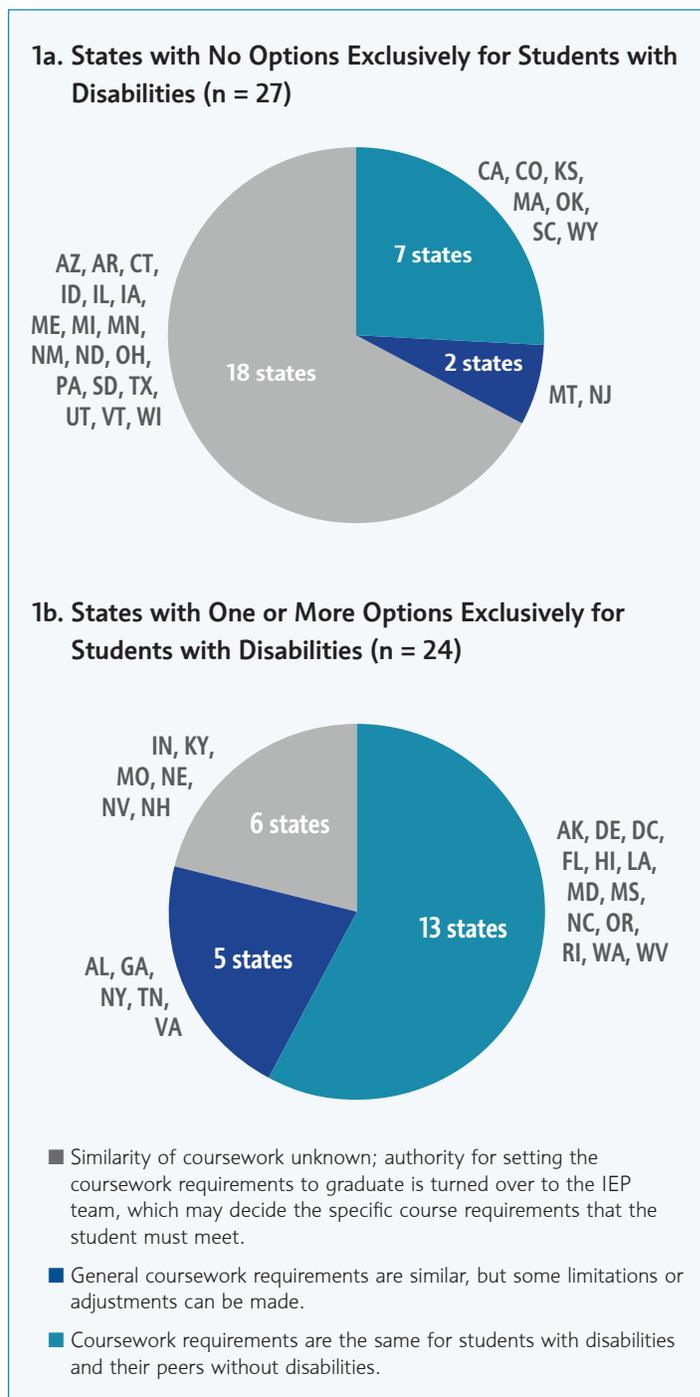
*Nearly Half of the States Allow Local IEP Teams To Determine with Little Oversight Course Requirements for Students with Disabilities*

For this part of the analysis, Achieve and NCEO looked solely at the course requirements for earning a regular diploma in each state to understand how expectations differed for students with disabilities and their peers without a disability. In states with only a regular diploma (no diploma options available only to students with disabilities), states are much more likely (18 of 27 states) to devolve control of coursework requirements to a local IEP team (Figure 1a).

### Differences in Diploma Types

1. A **regular diploma** is defined by the U.S. Department of Education as “the standard high school diploma awarded to students in a State that is fully aligned with the State’s academic content standards and does not include a GED credential, certificate of attendance, or any alternative award.”<sup>vii</sup> States can offer multiple regular diplomas and more rigorous “honors” diplomas, all of which are considered regular diplomas and count in a state’s adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) calculation. However, which diplomas are considered regular diplomas is rarely reported publicly. Consequently, Achieve and NCEO analyzed the requirements for earning each diploma in the state to determine which options were most likely included in the ACGR and which options were excluded (i.e., options available only to students with disabilities, certificates of completion).
2. Some states offer a **diploma option available only for students with disabilities who participate in the state’s general assessment**. This option generally requires less rigorous coursework to be completed prior to graduation and often falls short of eligibility requirements for postsecondary entrance or scholarship opportunities.
3. Some states offer a **diploma option available only for students with significant cognitive disabilities** who take the state’s alternate assessment rather than the general assessment. A relatively small group of students are defined as having significant cognitive disabilities; their number, relative to the general student population, is likely in the range of 0.5 to 1.0 percent (percentages vary considerably by state and district).<sup>viii</sup>

**FIGURE 1: SIMILARITY IN COURSE REQUIREMENTS FOR REGULAR DIPLOMA**



In these 18 states, the IEP teams determine what courses a student with disabilities must complete to graduate with the regular diploma; consequently, the state does not necessarily know whether students with disabilities are meeting the same expectations as their peers. For example, an IEP team may allow a student to take Intermediate Math instead of Algebra I to meet the Algebra I course requirement for graduating with a regular diploma. Without monitoring coursetaking patterns for students with disabilities, states likely do not know how different the course requirements set by the IEP team are from the requirements set by the state for students without disabilities. Therefore, students with disabilities may complete less rigorous course requirements and have lower expectations set for them while still earning the regular diploma.

On the other hand, the course requirements for students with disabilities to earn a regular diploma are more likely to be the same in states that also have diploma options exclusively available for these students (13 of 24 states compared to seven of 27 states) (Figure 1b).

Regardless of whether a state offers diploma options exclusively for students with disabilities, an open question remains about the rigor of the diploma earned by students with disabilities versus their peers without disabilities. Across the United States, only **19 states and the District of Columbia** had 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 very different for students with and without disabilities. In many of these states, students simply had to complete the requirements in their IEPs; in others, students were exempted from course requirements. When coursework decisions are made by IEP teams, questions emerge about which courses a student took prior to earning a diploma and how different or less rigorous those courses were from the ones specified for students without an IEP to earn the diploma.

### Course Expectations Differ by Diploma Type

In the 24 states that offer diplomas exclusively for students with disabilities, the course requirements to earn these diplomas may differ significantly from, and be less demanding than, the requirements for the regular diploma. For example, several states offer students certificates of completion when they complete the requirements of their IEP, but those requirements are not the same as for a state's regular diploma (and these certificates cannot be included in the graduation rate). Therefore, if students with disabilities pursue the regular diploma, they are likely to complete the same coursework as their peers without disabilities; however, if students with disabilities pursue an option available only for them, this option is likely to be less rigorous than the regular diploma. This less rigorous option often holds less value among postsecondary institutions and employers.

### Every Student Succeeds Act and the Future of Alternate Diplomas

The 2015 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), allows states to recognize another diploma for high school graduation accountability — the *state-defined alternate diploma* for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. This diploma, in addition to being defined by the state, has to meet three conditions: (1) It must be standards-based; (2) it must be aligned with state requirements for the regular diploma; and (3) it must be obtained during the Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) period for the state. ESSA regulations are likely to further clarify these conditions. As of May 2016, the U.S. Department of Education had not identified any states with an alternate diploma that meets these three conditions.<sup>ix</sup>

In **24 states**, the course requirements for students with disabilities to earn a regular diploma are very different from the requirements for students without disabilities.

### Half of States with Assessment Requirements Allow Local IEP Teams To Determine Expectations for Students with Disabilities

Beyond course requirements, some states also require students to achieve a score on an assessment or assessments to graduate, or require student scores on assessment(s) to be factored into course grades; therefore, Achieve and NCEO looked at how the assessment requirements differed for students with disabilities in the **22 states** with student stakes in place for the graduating class of 2015. In states where students with disabilities can earn only the regular diploma (no options are available exclusively for students with disabilities), states are more likely (four out of eight) to pass on control of stakes on assessments to a local IEP team (Figure 2). For example, a local IEP team may determine that a student may earn a score of 50 percent on the state assessment rather than the 70 percent required for all students to earn a regular diploma.

Students with disabilities living in states where a diploma option is available exclusively to them are more likely to complete similar or the same assessment requirements as their peers without disabilities if they are given the opportunity to earn a regular diploma (12 out of 14 states compared to four out of eight states).

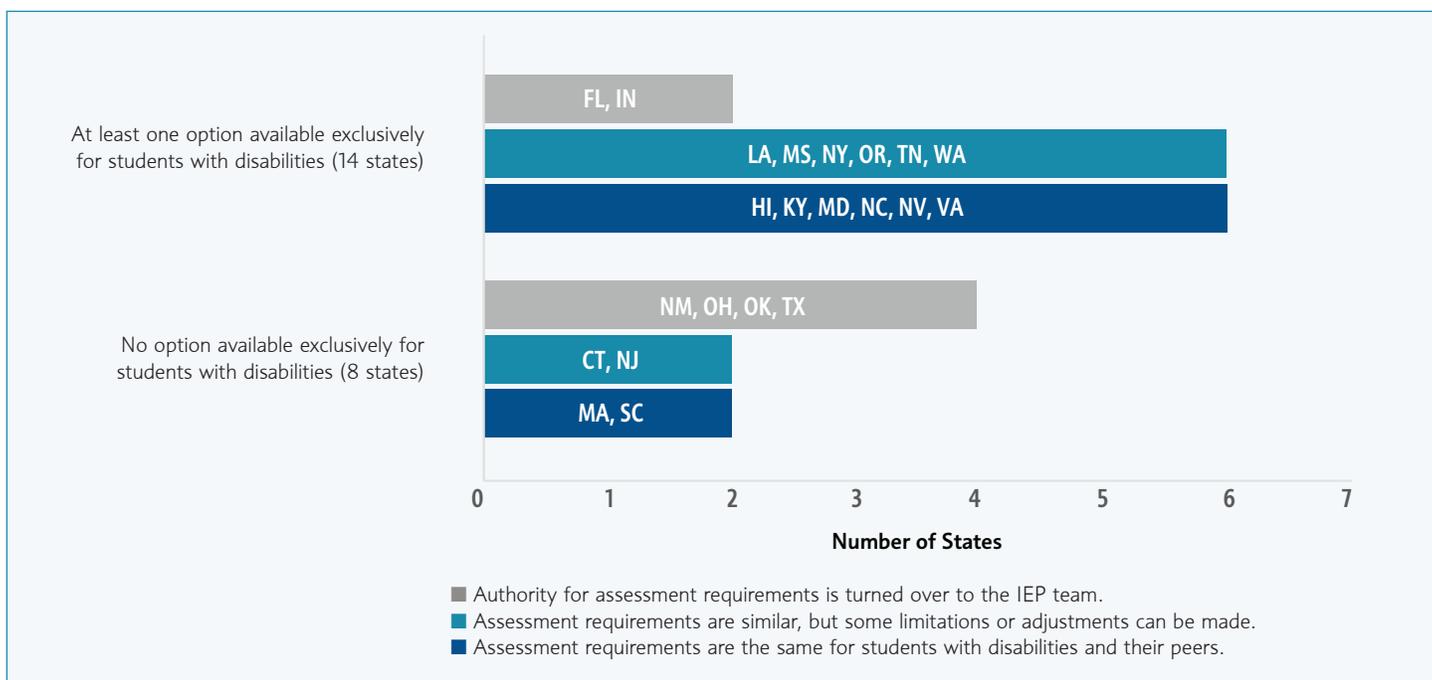
Regardless of whether they offer a diploma exclusively for students with disabilities, states may expect different levels of performance on exit exams from students with disabilities versus their peers without disabilities on exit exams. Only **eight** of the 22 states with assessment requirements for graduation had the same assessment requirements for students with disabilities. In **six** of the 22 states, the assessment requirements for students with disabilities to earn a regular diploma differed greatly from the requirements for students without disabilities.

#### Defining Student Stakes on Assessments

States take two approaches to student stakes on assessments:

- 1) Students are required to achieve a certain passing score on an assessment to graduate; or
- 2) Students' scores on an end-of-course assessment(s) are factored into their course grades.

**FIGURE 2: SIMILARITY IN ASSESSMENT REQUIREMENTS TO EARN A REGULAR DIPLOMA FOR STUDENTS WITH AND WITHOUT DISABILITIES BY DIPLOMA OFFERINGS**



### College- and Career-Ready Coursework Completion for Students with Disabilities

For the graduating class of 2015, 21 states and the District of Columbia set the expectation that all students will complete a college- and career-ready course of study prior to graduation. Only six (Delaware, District of Columbia, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Washington) of these 21 states and the District of Columbia had the same course expectations for students with and without disabilities to earn the regular diploma. However, five of these six states also offered a diploma exclusively to students with disabilities. Therefore, if students with disabilities earn a regular diploma in these six states, they are more likely to be prepared for the expectations of college and career. However, public reporting of student outcomes is needed to ensure that students with disabilities were not awarded the diploma available exclusively for them at disproportionately high rates — and consequently were not earning the regular diploma that required the completion of a college- and career-ready course of study.

### Graduation Rates Are Affected by Diploma Offerings

The discrepancies across states in course and assessment requirements for students with disabilities lead to the question of how these differences affect graduation rates. If students with disabilities are held to different, and often lower, expectations than their peers, is this difference reflected in graduation rates? What is the relationship among diploma options, course and assessment requirements, and graduation rates?

The average graduation rate for students with disabilities in states with no diploma option exclusively for them is 7.6 percentage points higher (66.8 percent) than in states with diploma options exclusively available for students with disabilities (59.2 percent); this pattern holds for graduation rates for all students as well (Figure 3). However, just because students with disabilities are earning the regular diploma does not mean that they are being held to the same course and assessment requirements. They may be earning a less rigorous diploma than their peers without disabilities but are still counted in graduation rates.

When diploma options exist that are only for students with disabilities in addition to the regular diploma, these students

are less likely to graduate with a regular diploma. (See Figure 4 for a state-by-state comparison of graduation rates.) Students with disabilities in these states most often earn a diploma that is less rigorous than the regular diploma, but because it is available only for students with disabilities, and the requirements for these diplomas vary greatly from a state’s regular diploma, students who earn these diplomas are not included in graduation rate.

In every state, graduation rates are lower for students with disabilities than their peers without disabilities: The average gap in graduation rate between students with and without disabilities is 20 percentage points. And in most states, as the overall graduation rate in the state increases, the graduation rate for students with disabilities also increases. But gaps in graduation rates vary considerably, from 3 percentage points in Arkansas to 51 percentage points in Mississippi. Figure 4 illustrates state by state the gaps between graduation rates for all students and students with disabilities and how those gaps are affected by whether or not the state offers diploma options exclusively for students with disabilities.

**FIGURE 3: AVERAGE ADJUSTED COHORT GRADUATION RATE (ACGR) GAPS BY DIPLOMA OFFERING TYPE**

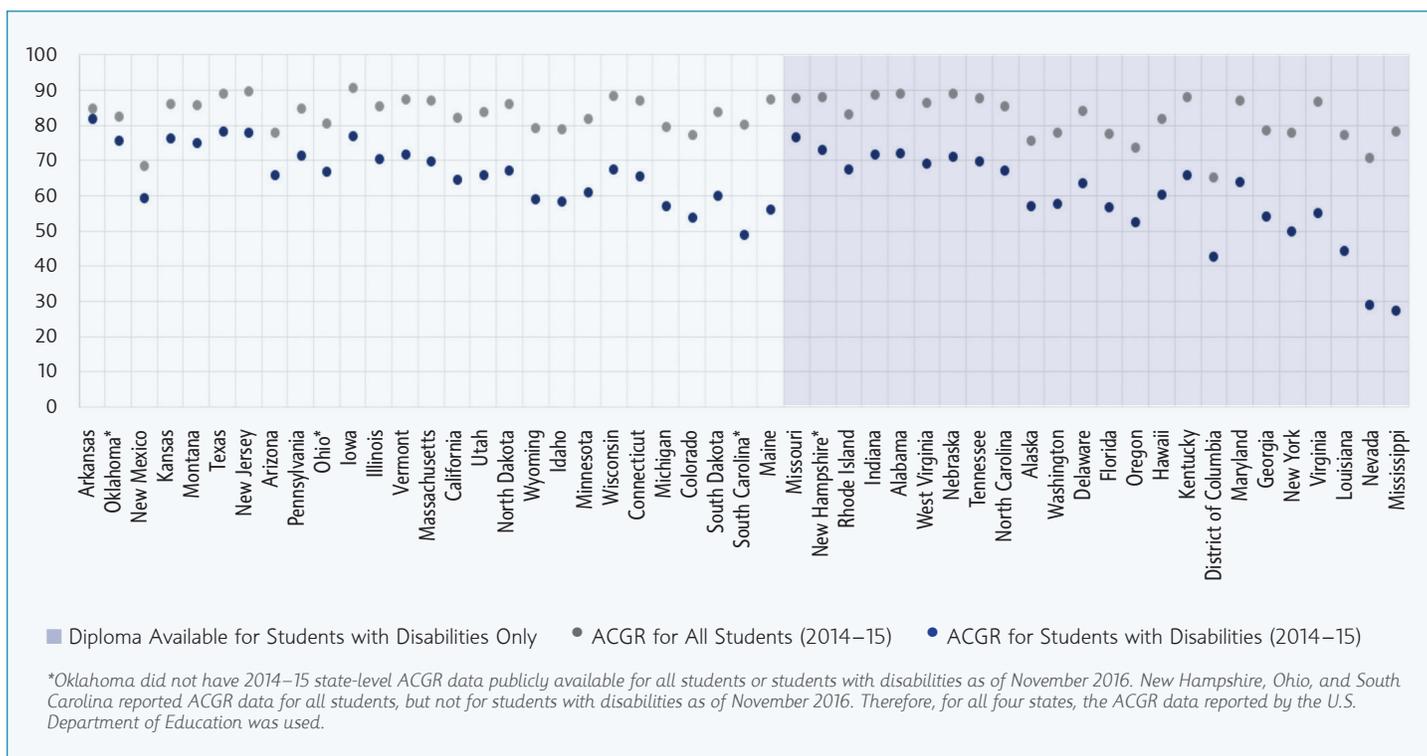
	Average ACGR	Average ACGR for Students with Disabilities	Average Gap
No diploma options specific for students with disabilities (27 states)	83.7%	66.8%	16.9%
One or more options available for students with disabilities (24 states)	82.0%	59.2%	22.8%

### What Do These Findings Suggest?

Students with disabilities, parents, educators and counselors, policymakers, and the public:

- Lack clarity about how diploma options vary, what criteria are used to place a student in a specific diploma “track,” and how some options may not support postsecondary plans.
- Have little guidance about how to help IEP teams, teachers, parents, and students decide which diploma option is appropriate for a student to pursue.
- Are not aware that 85 to 90 percent of students with disabilities can earn a regular diploma by meeting the same requirements as their peers without disabilities, as long as they receive the specially designed instruction and appropriate access, supports, and accommodations required by IDEA.
- May not know that a state’s reported graduation rate may mask how, or whether, students with disabilities are included in the measure. When graduation requirements for students with and without disabilities vary greatly, a diploma may mean different things for different students. Additionally, in states where a diploma option exists exclusively for students with disabilities, students earning this diploma may not be counted in the graduation rate at all.
- May not understand that in one state the graduation rate may mean that students with disabilities are meeting the same expectations as their peers but in another state it may mean something very different. States with only one diploma option available to all students are more likely to have higher graduation rates for students with disabilities (and overall graduation rates) than states that have options available exclusively for students with disabilities. However, states with only one option available are less likely to hold students with disabilities to the same requirements for earning the diploma than are states that have options available exclusively for students with disabilities.

**FIGURE 4: HOW GRADUATION RATES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES DIFFER FROM THE ALL STUDENTS GRADUATION RATE**



- Should know that earning a regular diploma without being given adequate supports or with lower expectations does a disservice to students with disabilities.

## Recommendations

### **States should review the requirements they have in place for students with disabilities to earn a diploma.<sup>x</sup>**

Diplomas available only to students with disabilities require students to meet different standards from their peers. Students with disabilities are placed at a disadvantage when they are tracked into different requirements because the education system may not attend to preparing them for college and career.

However, when a state has only one diploma option available to all students, the specific course requirements for students with disabilities are often determined by a local IEP team, lessening the state's understanding of which requirements students complete. Safeguards should be in place to ensure that students with disabilities are being held to the same expectations as their peers.

Students with disabilities should be provided alternate routes, with appropriate access, supports, and accommodations, to earn a diploma that is based on the same content and performance expectations required for a regular diploma.

**Expecting less of students with disabilities, through a less rigorous diploma offering, does them a disservice because they leave school thinking that they are ready for college or career when they are likely not prepared.**

### **Greater transparency and public reporting is needed.**

Whether a state has a single regular diploma or a regular diploma plus other diploma options available for students with disabilities, there is a lack of transparency about the standards that students with disabilities have met when they receive a regular diploma. States should provide data to the public on the numbers of students with disabilities (and their peers) who earn a diploma other than a regular diploma. Postsecondary education institutions and employers also need to know whether students with disabilities are earning a regular diploma without meeting the same standards as other students.

## Suggestions for IEP Teams

From the time that a student is identified as eligible for special education services, IEP teams should be thinking about the services and supports the student needs to stay on track toward earning a regular diploma and meeting the same requirements as the student's peers. Helping students stay on track to meet this goal means that even if a student is in elementary school, the team knows what the student needs to know and be able to do in subsequent grades — and in middle school and high school — to stay on track to meet college- and career-ready standards. School leaders can assist in ensuring that IEP teams are able to meet this goal by providing training to all educators on standards-based IEPs and critical skills for students with disabilities to move from one grade to the next successfully.

## Earning a Regular Diploma in More Than Four Years

To be counted in a state's adjusted cohort graduation rate, students must graduate with a regular high school diploma within four years of beginning 9th grade. However, in most states, education for students with disabilities can continue through age 21, which may increase the opportunity for students with disabilities to graduate from high school having met the same course expectations for the regular diploma as their peers without disabilities. IEP teams should work to keep students with disabilities on track to graduate within four years with a regular diploma based on the same expectations as their peers but should also acknowledge that some students with disabilities may need additional time to complete the requirements.

**TABLE 1: STATES' 2015 DIPLOMAS, GRADUATION RATES, AND ASSOCIATED REQUIREMENTS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

Legend: ■ assessment requirements are the same; ● assessment requirements are similar, but some modifications/adjustments are allowed; ◆ unknown, determination made by IEP team

	State	Diploma(s) Available Only for Students with Disabilities	Default College- and Career-Ready Diploma	ACGR for All Students (2014–15)	ACGR for Students with Disabilities (2014–15)	Percentage of Students with Disabilities (Fall 2014)	Similarity of Assessment Requirements for Regular Diploma
<b>Coursework requirements are the same for Students with Disabilities and their peers without disabilities</b>	Alaska	Yes	No	75.6%	57.0%	12.0%	
	California	No	No	82.3%	64.5%	10.1%	
	Colorado	No	No	77.3%	53.8%	9.1%	
	Delaware	Yes	Yes	84.3%	63.7%	13.6%	
	District of Columbia	Yes	Yes	65.4%	42.9%	14.6%	
	Florida	Yes	No	77.9%	56.8%	11.9%	◆
	Hawaii	Yes	No	81.9%	60.5%	9.2%	■
	Kansas	No	No	86.1%	76.4%	11.9%	
	Louisiana	Yes	No	77.5%	44.3%	9.8%	●
	Maryland	Yes	No	87.0%	63.9%	10.5%	■
	Massachusetts	No	No	87.3%	69.9%	16.1%	■
	Mississippi	Yes	Yes	78.4%	27.5%	11.8%	●
	North Carolina	Yes	Yes	85.6%	67.3%	11.6%	■
	Oklahoma*	No	Yes	82.5%	75.6%	14.3%	◆
	Oregon	Yes	No	73.8%	52.7%	12.8%	●
	Rhode Island	Yes	No	83.2%	67.6%	14.7%	
	South Carolina*	No	No	80.3%	49.0%	12.2%	■
	Washington	Yes	Yes	78.1%	57.9%	11.2%	●
	West Virginia	Yes	Yes	86.5%	69.1%	14.2%	
Wyoming	No	No	79.4%	59.1%	NA <sup>1</sup>		
<b>General coursework requirements are similar, but some adjustments can be made</b>	Alabama	Yes	Yes	89.0%	72.0%	10.2%	
	Georgia	Yes	Yes	79.0%	54.4%	10.4%	
	Montana	No	No	86.0%	75.2%	10.7%	
	New Jersey	No	No	89.7%	78.0%	13.9%	●
	New York	Yes	No	78.0%	50.0%	15.8%	●
	Tennessee <sup>2</sup>	Yes	Yes	87.8%	70.0%	11.6%	●
	Virginia	Yes	No	86.8%	55.4%	11.5%	■

<sup>1</sup> The number of students in special education was not reported by Wyoming for 2014–15.

<sup>2</sup> In Tennessee, S 285/HB 36 of 2015 removed the requirement for grading policies of local boards of education to include student scores in a Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) subject area as part of the student's grade in that subject area; the state permits a local school board to have such policy if it so desires.

\* Oklahoma did not have 2014–15 state-level ACGR data publicly available for all students or students with disabilities as of November 2016. New Hampshire, Ohio, and South Carolina reported ACGR data for all students, but not for students with disabilities as of November 2016. Therefore, for all four states, the ACGR data reported by the U.S. Department of Education was used.

**TABLE 1: STATES' 2015 DIPLOMAS, GRADUATION RATES, AND ASSOCIATED REQUIREMENTS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES** (continued)

Legend: ■ assessment requirements are the same; ● assessment requirements are similar, but some modifications/adjustments are allowed; ◆ unknown, determination made by IEP team

State	Diploma(s) Available Only for Students with Disabilities	Default College- and Career-Ready Diploma	ACGR for All Students (2014–15)	ACGR for Students with Disabilities (2014–15)	Percentage of Students with Disabilities (Fall 2014)	Similarity of Assessment Requirements for Regular Diploma	
<b>Similarity of coursework unknown; authority for coursework requirements is turned over to IEP team</b>	Arizona	No	Yes	77.7%	65.6%	10.5%	
	Arkansas	No	Yes	84.9%	81.9%	11.1%	
	Connecticut**	No	No	87.2%	65.6%	12.1%	●
	Idaho	No	No	78.9%	58.4%	9.2%	
	Illinois	No	No	85.6%	70.5%	12.4%	
	Indiana	Yes	Yes	88.7%	71.8%	14.9%	◆
	Iowa	No	No	90.8%	77.0%	11.5%	
	Kentucky	Yes	Yes	88.0%	66.0%	11.9%	■
	Maine	No	No	87.5%	56.2%	15.3%	
	Michigan	No	Yes	79.8%	57.1%	11.7%	
	Minnesota	No	Yes	81.9%	61.1%	12.9%	
	Missouri	Yes	No	88.0%	76.9%	11.8%	
	Nebraska	Yes	Yes	88.9%	71.3%	13.6%	
	Nevada	Yes	No	70.8%	29.0%	10.1%	■
	New Hampshire*	Yes	No	88.1%	73.0%	13.9%	
	New Mexico	No	Yes	68.6%	59.3%	12.8%	◆
	North Dakota	No	No	86.3%	67.4%	11.7%	
	Ohio*	No	Yes	80.7%	67.0%	13.5%	◆
	Pennsylvania	No	No	84.8%	71.5%	15.2%	
	South Dakota	No	Yes	83.9%	59.9%	12.6%	
Texas	No	Yes	89.0%	78.2%	7.9%	◆	
Utah	No	Yes	84.0%	66.0%	10.7%		
Vermont	No	No	87.6%	71.9%	13.8%		
Wisconsin	No	No	88.4%	67.5%	12.2%		

\* Oklahoma did not have 2014–15 state-level ACGR data publicly available for all students or students with disabilities as of November 2016. New Hampshire, Ohio, and South Carolina reported ACGR data for all students, but not for students with disabilities as of November 2016. Therefore, for all four states, the ACGR data reported by the U.S. Department of Education was used.

\*\* In Connecticut, participation in and satisfactory completion of high school mastery tests is required for graduation. Local policy determines passing cut scores for these assessments.



Definitions and Methodology	
<b>Diploma(s) Available Only for Students with Disabilities</b>	Information on whether or not diploma options, or other exit documents, existed only for students with disabilities in the state in 2014–15. These data were gathered from state department of education websites.
<b>Default College- and Career-Ready Diploma</b>	Information on whether states have a college- and career-ready diploma that is the default option. Achieve considers states' mathematics and English language arts/literacy high school graduation requirements to be at the college- and career-ready level if students are expected to complete a course of study aligned with state-adopted college- and career-ready standards, which typically includes at least three years of mathematics (through the content generally found in an Algebra II or an integrated third-year math course) and four years of rigorous, grade-level English.
<b>ACGR for All Students (2014–15)</b>	State four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) for 2014–15 as publicly reported by states on state websites. If state-reported data were not available, data supplied by the U.S. Department of Education were used.
<b>ACGR for Students with Disabilities (2014–15)</b>	State four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) for students with disabilities for 2014–15 as publicly reported by states. If state-reported data were not available, data supplied by the U.S. Department of Education were used.
<b>Percentage of Students with Disabilities</b>	The percentage of students who have disabilities was calculated using the total number of students with disabilities who receive special education services as the numerator and total enrollment for the denominator. For the number of students with disabilities, fall 2014 Child Count data were used ( <a href="http://www2.ed.gov/programs/osepidea/618-data/index.html">http://www2.ed.gov/programs/osepidea/618-data/index.html</a> ). For total enrollment, the fall 2014 projections from the National Center for Education Statistics Projected Enrollment (Table 203.20. Enrollment in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools, by Region, State, and Jurisdiction; Selected Years, Fall 1990 through Fall 2023, available at <a href="https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/data/ipedsdatacenter/data/tables/dt13_203.20.asp">nces.ed.gov/ipeds/data/ipedsdatacenter/data/tables/dt13_203.20.asp</a> ) were used.
<b>Similarity in Course Requirements for Regular Diploma</b>	<p>Color Coding for Similarity in Course Requirements</p> <p><b>Light Blue:</b> <i>Same</i> — The coursework requirements are the same for students with disabilities and their peers without disabilities.</p> <p><b>Dark Blue:</b> <i>Close to</i> — The general coursework requirements are similar, but some limitations or adjustments can be made. For example, although the same number of credits may be required, the specific courses needed to earn those credits may be different for students with disabilities.</p> <p><b>Gray:</b> <i>Far from</i> — Authority for the coursework requirements to graduate is turned over to the IEP team. For example, the IEP team may decide the specific course requirements that the students must meet. Coding based on Thurlow, Albus, and Lazarus (2015).</p>
<b>Similarity in Assessment Requirements for Regular Diploma</b>	<p>Color Coding for Similarity in Assessment Requirements</p> <p>■: <i>Same</i> — The assessment requirements are the same for students with disabilities and their peers without disabilities.</p> <p>●: <i>Close to</i> — The general assessment requirements are similar, but some limitations or adjustments can be made. For example, another test may be used that is at a lower grade level than the assessments used for students without disabilities.</p> <p>◆: <i>Far from</i> — Authority for determining the assessment requirements to graduate is turned over to the IEP team. For example, the IEP team may decide that a student can be exempt from the requirements held for students without disabilities.</p> <p><b>Blank cell:</b> State has no assessment requirements for graduation.</p> <p>Coding based on Thurlow, Albus, and Lazarus (2015).</p> <p>Assessment requirements are defined as students being required to achieve a passing score on an assessment to graduate and/or the score on an end-of-course assessment being factored into students' course grades (as a percentage of the final course grade). States that require students only to participate in an assessment, and not achieve a certain score, were not counted as having an exit exam for the purposes of this analysis. This analysis also looked at only the general assessments for students in each state. Additionally, this analysis looked at student stakes only on English language arts/literacy and mathematics assessments — some states have stakes for students on social studies and science assessments as well.</p>



## Endnotes

- i Thurlow, M. L. (2010, April 28). Written testimony before the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee (HELP), United States Senate. Available at <http://www.cehd.umn.edu/NCEO/Presentations/ThurlowTestimony2010.pdf>
- ii Students with disabilities in this analysis refers to those students who receive special education services and have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). It does not include students with disabilities who are served through 504 accommodations plans.
- iii Graduation with a regular diploma is documented by the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services for students ages 14–21. Rates over time were calculated using data at <https://ideadata.org/> (for Exiting: 2005–06 and 2013–14). Graduation with a regular diploma was calculated using the total number of students with disabilities exiting school (e.g., graduation with regular diploma, graduation with certificate, dropping out, and reaching maximum age) as the denominator. Data on students transferring from special education to regular education, students moving and known to be continuing, and students who died were not included in the calculation. The percentages of the four variables were: for 2005–06, regular diploma 56.9 percent, certificate 15.4 percent, dropout 26.3 percent, and maximum age 1.4 percent; for 2013–14, regular diploma 66.3 percent, certificate 13.6 percent, dropout 18.5 percent, and maximum age 1.5 percent. This calculation is not the same as the ACGR, which is bound to a four-year cohort. The national adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) for students with disabilities in 2014 was 63.1 percent, an increase from 61 percent in 2011–12 (the first year that data were available). See <http://eddataexpress.ed.gov/data-element-explorer.cfm>.
- iv For more information about college- and career-ready coursework completion by states, see *How the States Got Their Rates*, <http://www.achieve.org/how-the-states-got-their-rates>.
- v The results of analyses presented in this report are different from earlier reports by NCEO due to both the year of focus (which is 2015 in this report) and different criteria for identifying states with assessment requirements for graduation.
- vi States define diplomas differently, including offering only one diploma, multiple diplomas, and a variety of other documents (such as certificates of attendance). Some diplomas may be offered with endorsements. We use the term *diplomas* here as an umbrella term to refer to all types of exit documents, even though states might not refer to them as diplomas. In some states, the designation of types of diplomas is made at the local level; these diplomas generally are not tracked.
- vii U.S. Department of Education. (2008, December). High school graduation rate: Non-regulatory guidance, p. 13. <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/hsguidance.pdf>
- viii Students with the most significant cognitive disabilities are a diverse group, but they have several consistent characteristics that help in understanding their needs. For example, most of the students in this group (but certainly not all) have intellectual disabilities, multiple disabilities, or autism. Their numbers, relative to the general student population, are small, perhaps in the range of 0.5 to 1.0 percent (these percentages vary considerably by state and district). See <http://www.cehd.umn.edu/NCEO/OnlinePubs/Synthesis97/default.html>.
- ix U.S. Department of Education. (2016). Draft ESSA regulations, p. 82. <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/nprmacountabilitystateplans52016.pdf>
- x An exception to consider is the diploma option created under ESSA — the state-defined alternate assessment — for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. If this diploma option is established in states, it would be aligned with the state requirements for earning the regular diploma and be standards based.

## References

- Johnson, D. R., Thurlow, M. L., & Schuelka, M. J. (2012). Diploma options, graduation requirements, and exit exams for youth with disabilities: 2011 national study (Technical Report 62). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes. Available at <http://www.cehd.umn.edu/NCEO/OnlinePubs/Tech62/TechnicalReport62.pdf>
- Thurlow, M. L., Albus, D. A., & Lazarus, S. S. (2015). Graduation policies for students with disabilities who participate in states' general assessments (Synthesis Report 98). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes. Available at <http://www.cehd.umn.edu/NCEO/OnlinePubs/Synthesis98/SynthesisReport98.pdf>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2008, December). High school graduation rate: Non-regulatory guidance. Available at <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/hsguidance.pdf>
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**Achieve**

### About Achieve

Achieve is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit education reform organization dedicated to working with states to raise academic standards and graduation requirements, improve assessments, and strengthen accountability.



### About the National Center on Educational Outcomes

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