

**Diploma Options,
Graduation
Requirements,
and Exit Exams
for Youth with
Disabilities: 2017
National Study**

NCEO Report 409



NCEO
National Center on
Educational Outcome:

**Diploma Options, Graduation Requirements,
and Exit Exams for Youth with Disabilities:
2017 National Study**

David R. Johnson, Martha L. Thurlow, Xueqin Qian,
and Lindsay Anderson

March 2019

All rights reserved. Any or all portions of this document may be reproduced and distributed without prior permission, provided the source is cited as:

Johnson, D. R., Thurlow, M. L., Qian, X., & Anderson, L. (2019). *Diploma options, graduation requirements, and exit exams for youth with disabilities: 2017 national study* (NCEO Report 409). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes.



The Center is supported through Cooperative Agreements (#H326G160001) with the Research to Practice Division, Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education. The Center is affiliated with the Institute on Community Integration at the College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota. The contents of this report were developed under the Cooperative Agreement from the U.S. Department of Education, but does not necessarily represent the policy or opinions of the U.S. Department of Education or Offices within it. Readers should not assume endorsement by the federal government.



Project Officer: David Egnor

In collaboration with:



NCEO Core Staff

Martha L. Thurlow, Director
Deb A. Albus
Linda Goldstone
Maureen Hawes
Erik Larson
Sheryl S. Lazarus
Kristi K. Liu

Charity Funfe Tatah Mentan
Michael L. Moore
Darrell Peterson
Christopher Rogers
Kathy Strunk
Terri Vandercook
Yi-Chen Wu

National Center on Educational Outcomes
University of Minnesota • 207 Pattee Hall
150 Pillsbury Dr. SE • Minneapolis, MN 55455
Phone 612/626-1530 • Fax 612/624-0879
<http://www.nceo.info>

The University of Minnesota shall provide equal access to and opportunity in its programs, facilities, and employment without regard to race, color, creed, religion, national origin, gender, age, marital status, disability, public assistance status, veteran status, sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.

This document is available in alternative formats upon request.

Executive Summary

States have employed numerous strategies over the past decades to improve student learning and academic performance, such as incorporating exit exams as a requirement for students to earn a high school diploma and changing educational policies and requirements aimed at raising standards for all students. The perceived link between successful completion of high school with a standard diploma and future opportunities is demonstrated by the federal and state attention paid to graduation rates. An ongoing challenge has been how to include students with disabilities in these policies and has resulted in variable practice across states. Questions concerning how best to include students with disabilities in state and local assessments and whether or not to grant different diplomas are central to state policy discussions. It is important to understand the intended benefits and unintended consequences of various policy approaches on students with disabilities.

To this end, it is important to continue to document graduation policies in relation to students with disabilities. The controversy over intended and unintended benefits and consequences continues, necessitating a clear understanding of the policies and requirements. To assist in thinking through the policy issues that need to be addressed, an examination of policies and requirements, as well as individuals' perspectives on potential effects of these on students with disabilities, is required.

The present study was undertaken to update what is known about the status of graduation policies across the nation. It follows up on previous work, the last such study having been conducted in 2011 (Johnson, Thurlow, & Schuelka, 2012). Three research questions served as the focus of this national study of high school graduation requirements and diploma options for students with and without disabilities:

1. What is the range and variation in state graduation requirements and diploma options across the United States for students with and without disabilities?
2. What are the intended and unintended consequences for students when they are required to pass exit exams to receive a high school diploma?
3. What are the intended and unintended consequences of using single or multiple diploma options for students with disabilities?

Responses were collected from states via an online survey that contained questions aligned to previous surveys. Respondents were state directors of special education or their designees in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and two territories, the Virgin Islands and Micronesia.

Results indicated some changes in graduation requirements and diploma options from the previous survey. Trends found include:

- There is a strong increasing trend in states providing diploma options exclusively for youth with disabilities.
- There has been a break in trend in states increasing graduation requirements.
- The exit exam requirement is becoming less common for students with disabilities.

Recommendations from this study are as follows:

- Clarify the assumptions underlying state graduation requirements and diploma options.
- Ensure students with disabilities have the opportunity to learn the material they will be tested on in state and local assessments.
- Make high school graduation decisions based on multiple indicators of students' learning and skills.
- Clarify the implications of developing and granting different diplomas for students with disabilities.
- Conduct ongoing research on the intended and unintended consequences of state graduation requirements and diploma options.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	iii
Introduction.....	1
Graduation Requirements and Exit Exams	3
Diploma Options	4
Overview of the Study	5
Method	6
Results.....	6
Graduation Requirements.....	6
Diploma Options	13
Exit Exams and “High Stakes” Testing.....	26
Discussion	39
Recommendations.....	42
Conclusion	43
References.....	45

Introduction

Over the past half century, America’s education system has been criticized for the number of students exiting high school without the skills and knowledge necessary to become productive citizens. Starting primarily from the report *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, which described America as falling behind its international counterparts in economic and educational growth, standards-based reforms and more rigorous graduation requirements have been implemented (Elmore & Rothman, 1999; Heubert & Hauser, 1999).

The standards-based reform movement focused on improving educational outcomes by raising academic standards for *all* students. In 2010, new college- and career-ready standards were proposed (Council of Chief State School Officers and National Governors Association, 2010) and adopted by most states. These standards were followed by Next Generation Science Standards (National Research Council, 2012), again with a number of states adopting them or incorporating them into their own standards. With increasing numbers of high school students needing to pursue postsecondary education, training, and jobs that required high school diplomas, high schools increasingly are being called on to prepare “college-ready” graduates, putting more pressure than ever before on high schools to prepare their students, including those with disabilities, so that all students can demonstrate college- and career-ready knowledge and skills.

Federal laws have played an important role in reinforcing the goal of having students graduate from high school college- and career-ready. In 2015, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was reauthorized as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). It requires states to have college- and career-ready academic standards for *all* students, and assessments that measure those standards in grades 3-8 and once in high school. Although states can set up their own accountability systems, ESSA requires that students’ academic performance be a major part of the accountability system, and that results be disaggregated for students with disabilities.

ESSA also requires that a specific measure of graduation be included in states’ accountability systems—the adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR). This rate is defined as the number of students who graduate from secondary school with a regular diploma in the standard number of years (i.e., four). States are required to track and report graduation rates for students with and without disabilities (as well as for other student subgroups).

For the first time, ESSA also recognized a state-defined alternate diploma as being appropriate for counting in states’ graduation rates (Thurlow, Test, Lazarus, Klare, & Fowler, 2016). This diploma is intended only for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities who participate in an alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards (AA-AAS). ESSA also limited participation in the AA-AAS in a subject area to 1% of the total number of all students tested in the subject area.

States' special education units have their own accountability system. They are held accountable for developing State Systemic Improvement Plans (SSIPs) with State Identified Measurable Results (SIMRs). Eleven states and two other entities (e.g., DC) have identified measures focused on graduation rates for students with disabilities. In addition, all state special education units are required to annually report on 17 indicators and submit their results (in relation to targets) each year in an Annual Performance Report (APR). Indicator 1 of this annual report is graduation performance. Based on this and other indicators, states are designated as Meets Requirements, Needs Assistance, Needs Intervention, or Needs Substantial Intervention by the Secretary of Education.

Although federal agencies are very interested in graduation rates and require states to report them both publicly and to the U.S. Department of Education, decisions about what students must do to graduate with a regular diploma are left to the states. Recent analyses have raised concerns about the differences in states' requirements for graduation with a regular diploma (Civic Enterprises, 2018) and differences in requirements for some groups of students, particularly students with disabilities (Achieve, 2016a, 2016b).

Data confirm that the concern about graduation rates and requirements for students with disabilities is justified. On average, there is a difference of more than 20 percentage points in graduation rates between students with and without disabilities. According to the most recent Building a Grad Nation report (Civic Enterprises, 2018), 26 states reported graduation rate gaps for students with disabilities and other students greater than the national average. Thirty-one states had graduation rates for students with disabilities below 70%. Four states had graduation rates of 50% or less. Although these rates are an improvement over those in past years (e.g., Civic Enterprises, 2017), the change is minimal, with gaps remaining.

States have experimented with an array of diploma options for their students over the past two decades (Guy, Shin, Lee, & Thurlow, 1999; Johnson & Thurlow, 2003; Johnson, Thurlow, & Shuelka, 2012; Johnson, Thurlow, & Stout, 2007; Thurlow, Ysseldyke, & Anderson, 1995). Diploma options are not all alike and vary from honors diplomas to certificates of completion/attendance, occupational diplomas and others. In addition to diploma options available to all youth, some diploma options are available exclusively to students with disabilities. Whether these diploma options are equivalent to the standard high school diploma has become a critical area of examination, in part because increasing graduation requirements tends to result in increased dropout rates among students with disabilities (Plunk, Take, Bierut, & Grucza, 2014).

This report examines the results of a national study on the current status of state graduation policies and diploma options for youth with disabilities. We examined state policies in relation to their intended benefits as well as possible unintended consequences and compared the find-

ings with the previous study by Johnson et al. (2012). The rationale for these studies is based on the following assumptions:

- State and local district graduation requirements for students with and without disabilities continue to evolve, and there is a need to follow these policy trends and examine their impact on youth with disabilities.
- States and local districts are also evolving a range of differentiated diploma options for students with and without disabilities, and these options need to be examined to assess their potential impact on youth with disabilities.
- As states and local districts proceed in implementing these policies and procedures, additional information is critically needed to examine both their intended and unintended consequences for youth with disabilities.

Graduation Requirements and Exit Exams

Exit exams are one strategy used by states to determine a student’s eligibility to graduate from high school. These tests are considered to be “high stakes” because they are a single assessment used to determine a student’s eligibility to receive a high school diploma. Although the use of exit exams was on the rise for many years, with 16 states using exit exams as a condition of receiving a standard diploma in 1997 (McDonnell, McLaughlin, & Morison, 1997) and 24 in 2007 (Johnson et al., 2007), in recent years a number of states have repealed or delayed high school exit exams, bringing the current total down to 13 (Karp, 2017). As discussed above, this may have much to do with the passing of ESSA, which gives states the authority to determine whether exit exams or other requirements must be met for students to earn a diploma (Alvarez, 2016; Lee, n.d.; MN Department of Education, 2016; NEA, n.d.).

Although the adjusted graduation rate from 2013-14 demonstrated that more than half of all states were on pace to reach a 90% graduation rate by 2020 (Civic Enterprises, 2016), the graduation rate for students with disabilities continues to fall behind that of their peers. This may be due in part to the programming options available to students with disabilities. One study found that seven states offered no different routes to the diploma and only seven had routes specifically for students with disabilities (Thurlow, Cormier, & Vang, 2009). Even given these limited options, schools across the U.S. offered nearly 100 different kinds of high school diplomas in recent years (Gewertz, 2017).

Diploma Options

An array of high school diplomas exists; not all diplomas are alike and the diploma options available differ by state. Diploma options include the standard diploma, certificates of completion and attendance, honors degrees, General Educational Development (GED), and others. Diploma options range in their perceived prestige. While some diplomas reflect high academic achievement, others may be specifically for students receiving special education services (Guy et al., 1999). Johnson et al. (2012) found that some states offered as many as seven diploma options (Nevada) while 17 states only offered a standard diploma. Receiving a nonstandard diploma may impact students' future career and educational opportunities (Erickson & Morningstar, 2009; Hartwig & Sitlington, 2008).

It has been suggested that 85–90% of students with disabilities can meet the same graduation standards as students without disabilities, as long as they are given the supports and specific instruction to meet their unique learning needs (Achieve, 2013). However, the national graduation rate for students with disabilities has increased only 10% from 2006 to 2014, moving from 56.9% to 66.3%, and is on average 20 percentage points lower than their peers (Achieve, 2016).

The graduation rate for students with disabilities is affected by the diploma options available to them. The graduation rate for students with disabilities in states with no diploma option exclusively for them is 7.6% points higher, at nearly 66%, than in states with diploma options exclusively for students with disabilities, hovering around 59% (Achieve, 2016). With the passage of ESSA in 2015, the successful graduation potential of students began to change, as states were given permission to develop a state-defined alternate diploma for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities (Achieve, 2016).

States differ in their diploma options for students with disabilities. Some (26) states only offer the standard diploma while others (24) offer a diploma option exclusively for students with disabilities (Achieve, 2016). Eighteen that offer only the standard diploma option give the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team total control over the coursework required for graduation, which results in ambiguity in student achievement and inconsistency on outcome/achievement expectations. Only 13 of the 24 states that offer a diploma option exclusively for students with disabilities have set course requirements for graduation (Achieve, 2016).

Different diploma options for student with disabilities have their share of unintended consequences, including variation across states and repercussions in terms of eligibility for employment and postsecondary educational opportunities. Employers have reported unwillingness to hire individuals who have earned different diploma options because of a lack of understanding of what they mean and what expectations the student has met (Hartwig & Sitlington, 2008). In a qualitative study by Hartwig and Sitlington (2008), five employers of 25 interviewed reported they were unwilling to hire someone with a certificate of completion, attendance, or achieve-

ment, and six other employers were unsure whether they would hire that person. Results were similar for students who completed GED programs, with three employers reporting they would be unwilling to hire this individual and three employers being unsure (Hartwig & Sitlington, 2008). Of all the diploma options, occupational diplomas fared the best in this study, with 20 of the 25 responding employers reporting they would be willing to hire individuals who had been awarded this certificate (Hartwig & Sitlington, 2008).

Having a different high school diploma may also impact an individual's access to postsecondary educational opportunities. Erickson and Morningstar (2009) interviewed postsecondary representatives in two states and found that students with disabilities were admitted to each postsecondary institution using the same criteria as for all students. Standard high school diplomas or GEDs were favored over other certificates, which were treated the same as not graduating from high school. Even at schools with open enrollment policies, students who earned exit certificates were allowed to take classes but were ineligible to receive financial aid. Both states advocated for multiple measures to be used to demonstrate a student's ability to succeed in postsecondary education.

Overview of the Study

The present study builds on the earlier work of Thurlow et al. (1995); Guy et al. (1999); Johnson and Thurlow (2003); Johnson et al. (2007); and Johnson et al. (2012). These earlier studies examined state graduation policies and diploma options across all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The purposes of these earlier studies were to: (1) provide policymakers and state education agency personnel information on the current cross-state status of graduation requirements, and (2) create a database to track changes in policy as states develop and change their graduation policies. The present study was undertaken to update the status of states' graduation policies and to track changes in policy and attitudes over time. Three primary questions served as the focus of this national study of high school graduation requirements and diploma options for students with and without disabilities:

1. What is the range and variation in state graduation requirements and diploma options across the United States for students with and without disabilities?
2. What are the intended and unintended consequences for students with disabilities when they are required to pass an exit exam to receive a high school diploma?
3. What are the intended and unintended consequences of using single or multiple diploma options for students with disabilities?

Method

A survey was developed to obtain information on district and state graduation policies and practices, including respondent perceptions of the impact of these policies on students with disabilities. Survey questions were also developed to align, in part, with the five prior studies. The survey instrument was submitted for limited review to selected state and local special education directors for feedback on the appropriateness of the items included.

Respondents included state directors of special education or their designees in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. In several cases, the state directors of special education delegated the task of completing the survey to other knowledgeable persons, including state education agency transition specialists, state assessment personnel, and others. Respondents could complete the survey in one of three ways. Choices included completing an online survey, completing a written copy of the survey and returning the response by mail, or by requesting a phone interview with University of Minnesota research staff. Data collection occurred from May to October 2017. A total of 47 states responded to the survey, representing a 94% response rate. Three states (Alabama, Hawaii, and Missouri) and the District of Columbia did not respond to the survey. In some cases, states did not respond to all survey questions. All data gathered were summarized in tables.

Results

Survey responses are summarized in this section of the report. The data presented here represent the status of state graduation policies and diploma options at the time of data collection from state education agency personnel, May to October 2017. Given the dynamic nature of policy discussions across the U.S. concerning state graduation policies and diploma options, it is highly likely that changes in these policies have occurred since the time of data collection. Previous surveys (Guy et al., 1999; Johnson & Thurlow, 2003; Johnson et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 2012) provided evidence of the significant variation and ever-changing political environments of states regarding graduation requirements. Wherever possible and appropriate, the results of the current survey were compared to responses from past surveys.

Graduation Requirements

Regarding graduation requirements, we asked the following questions:

- How are high school graduation requirements for students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) established in your state?

- Has there been an increase in graduation requirements to receive a standard diploma in the past five years?

Participants were asked to choose from one of the following responses:

- State provides minimum requirements and LEAs (local districts) may add to them.
- State provides minimum requirements and LEAs cannot add to them.
- State provides guidelines and LEAs may set their own requirements.
- No state requirements exist—LEAs set their own requirements.
- No state requirements exist—requirements are established by IEP teams.
- State is in transition from local to statewide requirements.

Table 1 provides information on how graduation requirements are established by states. The most common practice across states is for the state to provide minimum requirements and allow LEAs to add to them. A total of 39 states currently have graduation requirements reflecting this practice. Five states (Florida, Kentucky, Nevada, Oklahoma, and South Carolina) set requirements for graduation and LEAs are not allowed to change them. Only two states, Iowa and Nebraska set guidelines for graduation requirements with LEAs having the final decision.

Table 1. Source of High School Graduation Requirements for Youth with Disabilities

	State provides minimum requirements and LEA may add to them	State provides minimum requirements and LEA may not add to them	State provides guidelines and LEA may set own requirements	No state requirements—LEA sets own requirements	No state requirements—Requirements are established by IEP Teams	State is in transition from local to statewide requirements
Alaska	•					
Arizona	•					
Arkansas	•					
Colorado	•					
Connecticut	•					
Delaware	•					
Florida		•				
Georgia	•					
Idaho	•					
Illinois	•					
Indiana	•					
Iowa			•			

Table 1. Source of High School Graduation Requirements for Youth with Disabilities (continued)

	State provides minimum requirements and LEA may add to them	State provides minimum requirements and LEA may not add to them	State provides guidelines and LEA may set own requirements	No state requirements—LEA sets own requirements	No state requirements—Requirements are established by IEP Teams	State is in transition from local to statewide requirements
Kansas	•					
Kentucky		•				
Louisiana	•					
Maine	•					
Maryland	•					
Massachusetts	•					
Michigan	•					
Minnesota	•					
Mississippi	•					
Montana	•					
Nebraska			•			
Nevada		•				
New Hampshire	•					
New Jersey	•					
New Mexico	•					
New York	•					
North Carolina	•					
North Dakota	•					
Ohio	•					
Oklahoma		•				
Oregon	•					
Pennsylvania	•					
Rhode Island	•					
South Carolina		•				
South Dakota	•					
Tennessee	•					
Texas	•					

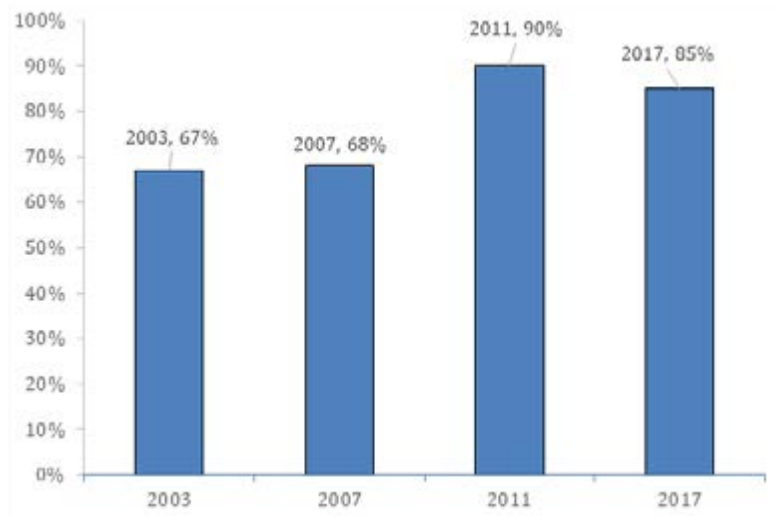
Table 1. Source of High School Graduation Requirements for Youth with Disabilities (continued)

	State provides minimum requirements and LEA may add to them	State provides minimum requirements and LEA may not add to them	State provides guidelines and LEA may set own requirements	No state requirements—LEA sets own requirements	No state requirements—Requirements are established by IEP Teams	State is in transition from local to statewide requirements
Utah	•					
Vermont	•					
Virginia	•					
Washington	•					
West Virginia	•					
Wisconsin	•					
Wyoming	•					
Total:	39	5	2	0	0	0

(Missing: California)

In comparing the 2017 results with the three previous surveys (Johnson & Thurlow, 2003; Johnson et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 2012), a significant trend can be observed, as seen in Figure 1. Over the period 2003 to 2017 there was a modest increase in states providing minimum graduation requirements with the possibility for LEAs to add requirements, shifting from 67% in 2003, to 68% in 2007, to 90% in 2011 and with some decline to 85% in 2017.

Figure 1. States Providing Minimal Graduation Requirements From 2003 to 2017



States were asked whether there had been an increase in graduation requirements to receive a standard diploma in the past five years. Data were obtained for 46 responding states. Table 2 shows that 29 states reported no changes to their graduation requirements. Seventeen states indicated that graduation requirements had increased for both students with and without disabilities. No states reported an increase in graduation requirements for only students with disabilities or for only students without disabilities.

Table 2. Increase in the Graduation Requirements to Receive a Standard Diploma

	No	Yes, just for students with disabilities	Yes, just for students without disabilities	Yes, for both students with and without disabilities
Alaska	•			
Arizona				•
Arkansas	•			
California	•			
Colorado	•			
Connecticut	•			
Delaware				•
Florida	•			
Georgia	•			
Idaho	•			
Illinois	•			
Indiana				•
Iowa	•			
Kansas	•			
Kentucky	•			
Louisiana	•			
Maine				•
Maryland	•			
Massachusetts	•			
Michigan	•			
Minnesota				•
Mississippi	•			
Montana	•			
Nevada				•
New Hampshire				•
New Mexico	•			

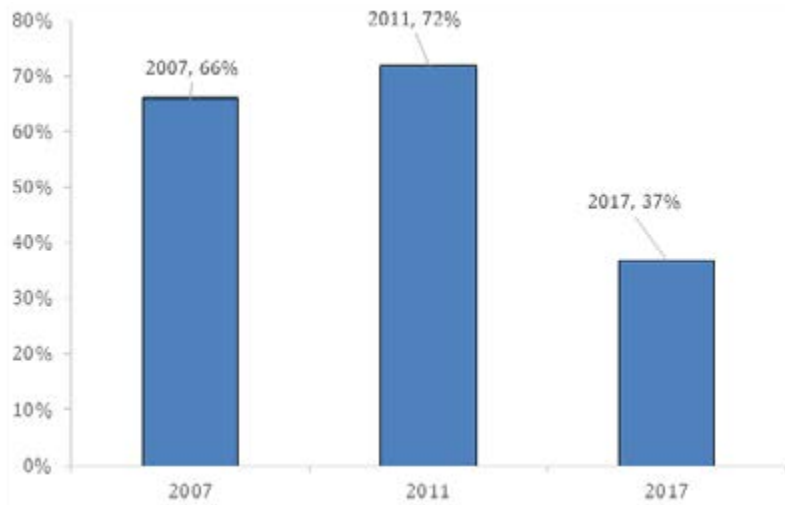
Table 2. Increase in the Graduation Requirements to Receive a Standard Diploma (continued)

	No	Yes, just for students with disabilities	Yes, just for students without disabilities	Yes, for both students with and without disabilities
New Jersey				•
New York	•			
North Carolina				•
North Dakota	•			
Ohio				•
Oklahoma	•			
Oregon				•
Pennsylvania				•
Rhode Island				•
South Carolina				•
South Dakota	•			
Tennessee	•			
Texas	•			
Utah	•			
Vermont	•			
Virginia				•
Washington				•
West Virginia	•			
Wisconsin				•
Wyoming	•			
Total:	29	0	0	17

(Missing: Nebraska)

In 2011, 33 states indicated that there had been an increase in the graduation requirements to receive a standard diploma for both students with and without disabilities, down from 36 states in 2007 (Johnson et al., 2007). As shown in Figure 2, there is a continuing trend in fewer states reporting increased graduation rates over time.

Figure 2. Percentage of States that Increased Graduation Requirements Over Time



Note: Data for year 2003 are not available.

Table 3 lists specific changes in individual states, as reported by the states. As would be expected, changes in graduation requirements varied by state. A general trend toward increased credits in specific coursework (e.g., math) was noted in several states reporting on this survey item.

Table 3. State Changes in Graduation Requirements for Youth with Disabilities

State	Comments
Arizona	"Increase in number and rigor of math courses."
Indiana	"Math"
Maine	"A change to proficiency-based which is a higher standard in our state than credit-based - currently transitioning into proficiency-based and not yet fully implemented."
Nebraska	"Some local districts have made changes"
Nevada	"Students are required to participate and pass End-of-Course Exams as well as a College and Career Ready Exam in order to graduate with a standard diploma."
New Hampshire	"Increased Math requirement from 3 to 4 years."
North Carolina	"For general ed. there has been a change in the math requirements and exceptional children has dropped an alternate diploma for our EC students in the Occupational Course of Study."
Ohio	"Increased coursework and end of course exams, addition of pathways to graduation through: coursework, end of course exams; WorkKeys and industry credential, ACT/SAT score of remediation free."
Oregon	"Inclusion of essential skills standards for regular diploma and addition of modified and extended diploma options."
Pennsylvania	"Effective May 17, 2016 requirements for meeting proficiency in statewide assessments was suspended."
Virginia	"CTE requirement, Virtual Course addition."
Washington	"Move from 18 to 24 credits."
Wisconsin	"Added mathematics credit and a civics exam."

Diploma Options

Diploma Options Available for All High School Graduates.

The survey asked the following question about diploma options available to youth:

- What types of high school diplomas are available to youth?

Response items for this survey question included:

- Regular/standard diploma
- Honors diploma
- IEP/special education diploma
- Certificate of attendance
- Certificate of achievement
- Occupational/vocational diploma
- Other

Table 4 illustrates the range of diploma options for high school graduates with and without disabilities across the 47 states responding to the survey. The diploma options include a standard diploma, honors diploma, IEP or Special Education diploma, certificate of attendance, certificate of achievement, occupational diploma, or others. Of these, 11 states offered an honors diploma, seven offered an IEP or Special Education diploma, 14 states offered a certificate of attendance, five states offered a certificate of achievement, and four states offered an occupational/vocational diploma. Nine states also offered other types of diplomas, such as academic or technical diploma or commissioner’s seal.

Table 4. Types of High School Diplomas Available to Youth

	Honors Diploma	Regular/Standard Diploma	IEP/Special Education Diploma	Certificate of Attendance	Certificate of Achievement	Occupational/Vocational Diploma	Others
Alaska		•					
Arizona		•					
Arkansas		•					•
California		•					
Colorado		•					
Connecticut		•					
Delaware		•		•			
Florida		•	•				•

Table 4. Types of High School Diplomas Available to Youth (continued)

	Honors Diploma	Regular/ Standard Diploma	IEP/ Special Education Diploma	Certificate of Attendance	Certificate of Achievement	Occupational/ Vocational Diploma	Others
Georgia		•	•	•			
Idaho		•		•			
Illinois		•			•		
Indiana	•	•					•
Iowa		•		•			
Kansas		•					
Kentucky		•			•		
Louisiana		•			•		
Maine		•					
Maryland		•		•			
Massachusetts		•		•	•		
Michigan		•					
Minnesota		•					
Mississippi		•	•	•		•	
Montana		•					
Nebraska	•	•					
Nevada	•	•	•			•	
New Hampshire	•	•					•
New Jersey		•					
New Mexico		•					•
New York	•	•					•
North Carolina		•		•			
North Dakota		•					
Ohio	•	•					
Oklahoma		•					
Oregon		•		•			•
Pennsylvania		•					
Rhode Island	•	•					•
South Carolina	•	•					
South Dakota		•					
Tennessee	•	•	•			•	

Table 4. Types of High School Diplomas Available to Youth (continued)

	Honors Diploma	Regular/ Standard Diploma	IEP/ Special Education Diploma	Certificate of Attendance	Certificate of Achievement	Occupational/ Vocational Diploma	Others
Texas	•	•	•				
Utah		•		•			
Vermont		•					
Virginia	•	•	•	•			
Washington		•					
West Virginia		•		•			
Wisconsin		•		•	•	•	•
Wyoming		•		•			
Total:	11	47	7	14	5	4	9

Twenty states offer only the standard/regular diploma to both students with and without disabilities. (We counted the honors diploma to be equivalent to the standard diploma.) The remaining 27 states offered multiple diploma options. The highest number of options offered by an individual state was five (Wisconsin) and three other states reported offering four diploma options (Mississippi, Nevada, and Tennessee).

Compared to our previous studies (Johnson & Thurlow, 2003, Johnson et al., 2007, Johnson et al., 2012), diploma options have remained relatively similar. States and local school districts continue to experiment with different diploma options in response to changing graduation requirements and interests. This reflects the ongoing challenge of states and local school districts in creating meaningful exit credentials that signal the completion of the student’s educational career.

Diploma Options Available Only for Students with Disabilities

When exploring diploma options available exclusively to students with disabilities, the survey asked the following question: *Are there any high school diplomas that are available to students with disabilities only?*

Response items for this survey question included:

- No
- Yes, IEP/special education diploma
- Yes, certificate of attendance
- Yes, certificate of achievement

- Yes, occupational/vocational diploma
- State-defined alternative diploma
- Other

The survey requested states to indicate whether there were any high school diplomas that were available only to youth with disabilities. Our results show that the majority, 31 states, reported that they did not have diplomas that were available to youth with disabilities only. Of the remaining states where different diplomas were granted only to youth with disabilities, four states used the certificate of attendance, two states used the certificate of achievement, one state used an occupational/vocational diploma, and two states used a state-defined alternate diploma. As the term implies, the IEP/special education diploma was used by six states only for youth with disabilities. Full results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Diplomas Available Only to Youth with Disabilities

	No	Yes, IEP/Sp. Ed. Diploma	Yes, Certificate of Attendance	Yes, Certificate of Achievement	Yes, Occupational/Vocational Diploma	Yes, State-Defined Alternate Diploma	Other
Alaska	•						
Arizona	•						
Arkansas			•				•
California	•						
Colorado	•						
Connecticut	•						
Delaware	•						
Florida		•					•
Georgia		•					
Idaho	•						
Illinois				•			
Indiana	•						
Iowa			•				
Kansas	•						
Kentucky						•	
Louisiana				•		•	
Maine	•						
Maryland			•				
Massachusetts							•

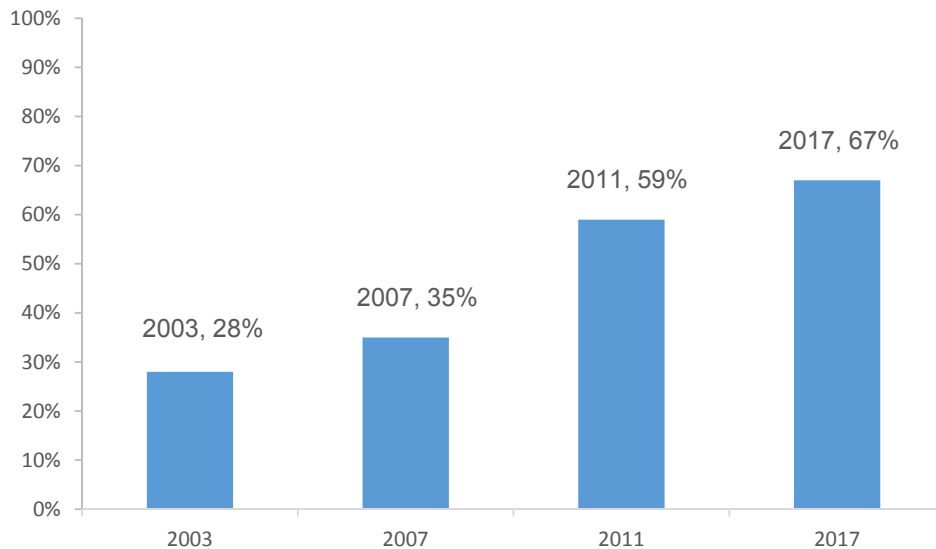
Table 5. Diplomas Available Only to Youth with Disabilities (continued)

	No	Yes, IEP/Sp. Ed. Diploma	Yes, Certifi- cate of Atten- dance	Yes, Cer- tificate of Achieve- ment	Yes, Occupational/ Vocational Diploma	Yes, State- Defined Alternate Diploma	Other
Michigan	•						
Minnesota	•						
Mississippi		•					
Montana	•						
Nebraska	•						
Nevada		•					•
New Hampshire	•						
New Jersey	•						
New Mexico							•
New York	•						
North Dakota	•						
Ohio	•						
Oklahoma	•						
Oregon	•						
Pennsylvania	•						
Rhode Island	•						
South Carolina	•						
South Dakota	•						
Tennessee		•			•		
Texas	•						
Utah	•						
Vermont	•						
Virginia		•					
Washington	•						
West Virginia			•				
Wisconsin	•						
Wyoming	•						
Total:	31	6	4	2	1	2	5

(Missing: North Carolina)

Figure 3 illustrates some variation over time in the use of only the standard diploma option available to only youth with disabilities. Overall, these trends show an increase over time.

Figure 3. Percentage of States with Only Standard Diploma Option Available to Youth with Disabilities



Allowances Made for Youth with Disabilities to Receive a Standard Diploma

The survey asked the following question about allowances to receive a standard diploma:

- What allowances are available for students with disabilities to enable them to earn a standard diploma?

Respondents were asked to select from the following items and check all that apply.

- None
- Number of credits may be reduced
- Alternative courses can be used to earn required course credits
- Course performance criteria may be lowered
- Test performance criteria may be lowered
- Addressed individually in IEP
- Extensions are granted
- Other

States varied in the allowances they made for youth with disabilities to receive a standard diploma. Table 6 reports on these state practices. Forty-one states reported offering at least one type of

allowance for youth with disabilities to receive a standard diploma. Several states, particularly Idaho, Minnesota, Montana, Oregon, Virginia, and Wisconsin, offered a wide range of allowances. Seventeen states (down from 23 in 2011) allowed alternate courses to be used to earn the required course credits to graduate with a standard diploma. Only three states—Montana, Washington, and Wisconsin—allowed the reduction of credits. Four states (Idaho, Minnesota, Montana, and Wisconsin), allowed the lowering of course performance, four states (Minnesota, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Virginia) allowed the lowering of test performance criteria, and four states (Idaho, Montana, New Hampshire, and Washington) allowed extensions. As shown in Table 6, the most common allowance was to permit the IEP team to address the issue (33 states). Only five states—Arizona, Delaware, Mississippi, Nevada, and South Carolina—allowed no exceptions to graduation requirements for students with disabilities.

Table 6. Allowances Made for Youth with Disabilities to Receive a Standard Diploma

	None	Number of credits may be reduced	Alternate courses may be used to earn required course credits	Course performance criteria may be lowered	Test performance criteria may be lowered	Addressed individually in IEP	Extensions may be granted	Other
Alaska			•					
Arizona	•							
Arkansas			•			•		
California								•
Colorado						•		
Connecticut						•		
Delaware	•							
Florida						•		•
Georgia			•					
Idaho			•	•		•	•	
Illinois			•			•		
Indiana						•		
Iowa						•		
Kentucky						•		
Louisiana						•		•
Maine						•		•
Maryland						•		•
Massachusetts								•

Table 6. Allowances Made for Youth with Disabilities to Receive a Standard Diploma (continued)

	None	Number of credits may be reduced	Alternate courses may be used to earn required course credits	Course performance criteria may be lowered	Test performance criteria may be lowered	Addressed individually in IEP	Extensions may be granted	Other
Michigan								•
Minnesota			•	•	•	•		
Mississippi	•							•
Montana		•	•	•		•	•	
Nebraska						•		
Nevada	•					•		
New Hampshire						•	•	
New Mexico								•
New Jersey			•			•		
New York								•
North Carolina			•			•		
North Dakota			•			•		
Ohio						•		
Oklahoma					•			•
Oregon			•		•	•		
Pennsylvania						•		•
Rhode Island						•		
South Carolina	•							
South Dakota			•					
Tennessee			•			•		
Texas						•		
Utah			•			•		
Vermont			•			•		•
Virginia			•		•	•		•
Washington		•				•	•	

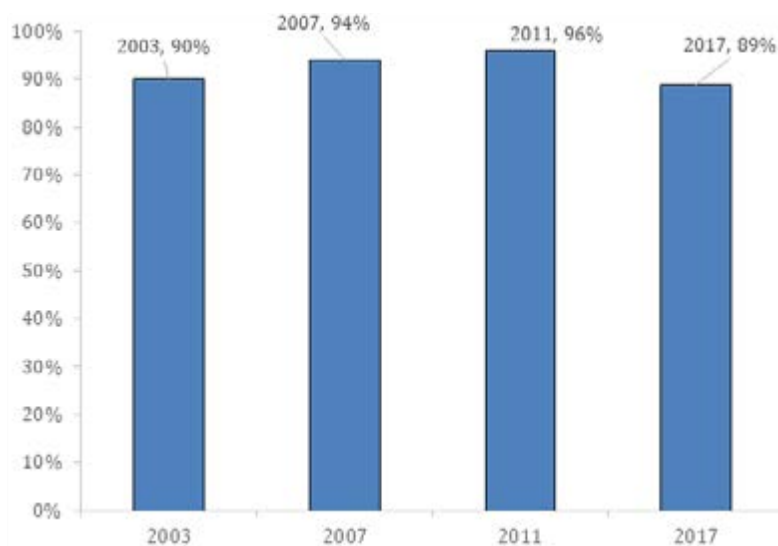
Table 6. Allowances Made for Youth with Disabilities to Receive a Standard Diploma (continued)

	None	Number of credits may be reduced	Alternate courses may be used to earn required course credits	Course performance criteria may be lowered	Test performance criteria may be lowered	Addressed individually in IEP	Extensions may be granted	Other
West Virginia						•		
Wisconsin		•	•	•		•		
Wyoming						•		
Total:	5	3	17	4	4	33	4	14

(Missing: Kansas)

When compared to the 2003, 2007, and 2011 survey results (Johnson & Thurlow, 2003; Johnson et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 2012), states granting extensions for youth with disabilities to receive a standard diploma had seen the most change. The number of states granting extensions decreased from 22 states in 2007 to 15 states in 2011 to just four states in 2017 (as shown in Table 6). However, the total number of states offering any allowances to youth with disabilities to receive a standard diploma has remained relatively constant at 90% of states in 2003; 94% of states in 2007, 96% of states in 2011, and 89% of states in 2017 (as shown in Figure 4).

Figure 4. Percentage of States that Have Allowances for Youth with Disabilities to Receive a Standard Diploma, 2003-2017



Involvement of Community Stakeholders

We asked the following questions about involvement of community stakeholders in decisions relating to diploma options:

- Does your state have multiple diploma options? If so, what is the involvement of stakeholders in discussing the implications of these options for policy?

We asked about the involvement of three types of stakeholders: postsecondary institutions, the business community, and the general community (parents, students, etc.).

Respondents were asked to provide information about the involvement of community stakeholders in discussions and decisions about the use of different diplomas. As states and local school districts adopt different diplomas, a pressing question is the extent to which they are valued by stakeholders in the community. Postsecondary education institution representatives, employers, and general community members (youth, parents, others) represent three critical groups of stakeholders that states or local school districts may engage on policy discussions about possible diploma options. Hartwig and Sitlington (2008) found general confusion among business community members and representatives of postsecondary institutions about the meaning and requirements of various diploma options.

Table 7 identifies states that involved community stakeholders in discussions of different diplomas. Involving stakeholder groups helps to ensure that diploma options are understood in terms of their meaning and rigor in relation to the states' standard diploma. With 22 states responding to these questions, Table 7 shows that 13 states reported involving postsecondary institutions, 13 states reported involving members of the business community, and 14 responding states reported involving the general community in conversations about alternative diploma options. When a state or local school district sought consultation from community stakeholders, they were more likely to seek such consultation from multiple stakeholders (postsecondary education institutions, employers, and general community members). There has been some increase in outside stakeholder involvement from 2003 to 2017 (Johnson & Thurlow, 2003, Johnson et al., 2007, Johnson et al., 2012), but this increase appears to be relatively small. Overall, only approximately one-half of the states with different diplomas engage stakeholders in discussion about different diplomas.

Table 7. Involvement of Community Stakeholders in Alternative Diploma Discussions

	State Involved Postsecondary Institution		State Involved Business Community		State Involved General Community	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Florida	•		•		•	
Delaware		•		•	•	
Georgia	•		•		•	
Idaho	•		•		•	
Illinois	•		•		•	
Indiana	•		•		•	
Iowa		•		•		•
Kentucky		•		•		•
Louisiana	•		•		•	
Maryland		•		•		•
Mississippi	•		•		•	
Nevada		•		•		•
New Hampshire	•		•		•	
New York	•		•		•	
North Carolina		•	•			•
Oregon	•			•	•	
Rhode Island	•		•		•	
Tennessee	•		•		•	
Utah		•		•		•
Virginia	•		•		•	
West Virginia		•		•		•
Wisconsin		•		•		•
Total:	13	9	13	9	14	8

Notes: Missing: Arkansas, Massachusetts. This question does not apply to the 29 states who reported that they do not have different diploma options for students with disabilities.

State Data on Students Receiving Different Diplomas

With regard to diplomas options, we asked the following question:

- Do states keep data on the number of students receiving each diploma option? If so, is this information available by disability category?

In this study, we sought to learn whether states maintain data on the number of students receiving each diploma option and whether they did so by disability category. Seventeen states were

omitted from this question because their previous response indicated they do not offer different diploma options. Only eight states responded to this question. Of these states, Mississippi was the only state that did not keep data on the number of students receiving each diploma option. Six states—Florida, Nevada, New York, Oregon, Tennessee, and Virginia—kept their data available by disability category. Results from this question are presented in Table 8.

Table 8. State Data on Students Receiving Different Diplomas

	Does your state keep data on the number of students receiving each diploma option?		Is the data on the number of students receiving each diploma option available by disability category?	
	YES	NO	YES	NO
Florida	•		•	
Indiana	•			
Mississippi		•		•
Nevada	•		•	
New York	•		•	
Oregon	•		•	
Tennessee	•		•	
Virginia	•		•	
Total:	7	1	6	1

Note: Data missing for Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, North Carolina, and West Virginia. This question does not apply to the 29 states who reported that they do not have alternative diploma options for students with disabilities.

General Education Development Diploma

We asked a question about the use of the General Education Development (GED) Diploma:

- Has a provision been made to use the GED as an alternate route to earn a standard diploma?

State data were collected to determine whether states used the GED as an alternate route for students to earn a standard diploma. Responses were received from 46 states (see Table 9). Of these respondents, 38 states reported using the GED as an alternate route for students to earn a standard diploma. Eight states reported that they do not allow students to use a GED as an alternate route to earn a standard diploma.

Table 9. State Data on Provisions to Use a GED as an Alternate Route to Earn a Regular Diploma

State	No	Yes
Alaska	•	
Arizona		•
Arkansas		•
California		•
Colorado		•
Connecticut		•
Delaware		•
Florida		•
Georgia		•
Idaho		•
Illinois	•	
Indiana	•	
Iowa		•
Kansas		•
Kentucky		•
Louisiana		•
Maine		•
Maryland		•
Massachusetts		•
Michigan		•
Minnesota		•
Mississippi		•
Montana		•
Nebraska	•	
Nevada		•
New Hampshire		•
New Jersey		•
New Mexico		•
New York		•
North Dakota		•
Ohio		•
Oklahoma	•	
Oregon		•

Table 9. State Data on Provisions to Use a GED as an Alternate Route to Earn a Regular Diploma (continued)

State	No	Yes
Pennsylvania		•
Rhode Island		•
South Carolina	•	
South Dakota		•
Tennessee		•
Texas		•
Utah	•	
Vermont		•
Virginia		•
Washington		•
West Virginia	•	
Wisconsin		•
Wyoming		•
Total:	8	38

(Missing: North Carolina)

Exit Exams and “High Stakes” Testing

In regard to exit exams and other “high stakes” testing, the survey asked the following questions:

- Does your state require a state exit exam in order to receive a high school diploma?
- Does your state require students with disabilities to pass an exit exam in order to receive a high school diploma? If so, how are the passing scores applied to the exam?
- Does your state require exit exams just for students without disabilities?

As noted earlier in this report, the passing of state exit exams increasingly has become a gateway for receiving a high school diploma. ESEA and other state standards-based reforms have centered on the use of exams as a means of benchmarking student performance and sometimes as a means for receiving a high school diploma. The term “high-stakes testing” has been associated with the use of exit exams. When the receipt of a high school diploma is contingent on passing certain exit exams, high-stakes testing applies.

Table 10, notes that 16 of the 47 states responding have exit exams and 31 do not. Johnson et al. (2011) reported that 25 states had exit exams in the previous survey, which was a slight increase from 24 states in the 2007 Johnson et al. survey. The 2017 survey shows a departure from this increasing trend as the number of states requiring exit exams to receive a high school diploma dropped to its lowest number (16 states) from its peak in 2003 (27 states). Of interest in Table 10 is that the 16 states with state exit exams did not maintain separate practices for students with and without disabilities in passing the exit exam in order to receive a high school diploma.

Table 10. States Requiring Youth to Pass a State Exit Exam in Order to Receive a High School Diploma

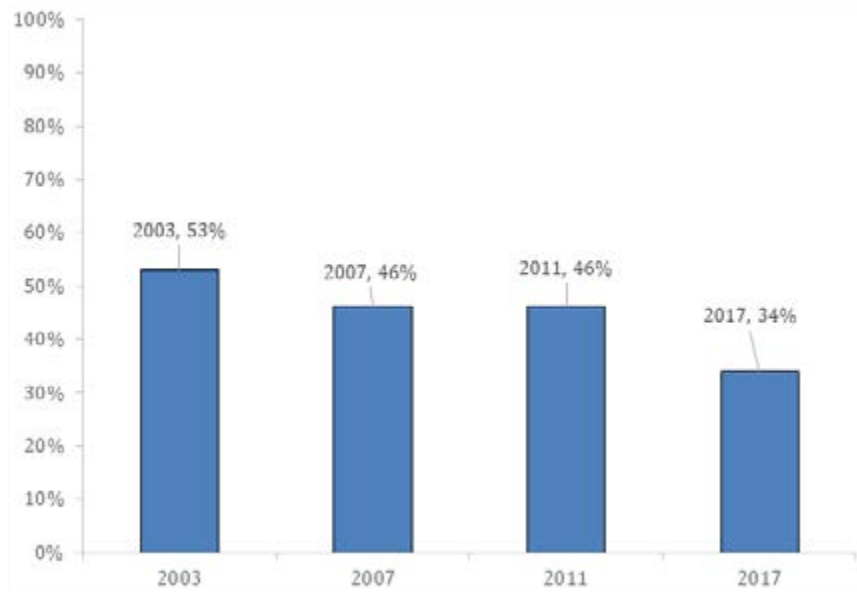
	No	Yes for students with disabilities	Yes for students without disabilities	Yes, for both students with and without disabilities
Alaska	•			
Arizona	•			
Arkansas	•			
California	•			
Colorado	•			
Connecticut	•			
Delaware	•			
Florida				•
Georgia	•			
Idaho	•			
Illinois	•			
Indiana				•
Iowa	•			
Kansas	•			
Kentucky	•			
Louisiana				•
Maine	•			
Maryland				•
Massachusetts				•
Michigan	•			
Minnesota	•			
Mississippi				•
Montana	•			
Nebraska	•			

Table 10. States Requiring Youth to Pass a State Exit Exam in Order to Receive a High School Diploma (continued)

	No	Yes for students with disabilities	Yes for students without disabilities	Yes, for both students with and without disabilities
Nevada				•
New Hampshire	•			
New Jersey				•
New Mexico				•
New York				•
North Carolina	•			
North Dakota	•			
Ohio				•
Oklahoma				•
Oregon				•
Pennsylvania	•			
Rhode Island	•			
South Carolina	•			
South Dakota	•			
Tennessee	•			
Texas				•
Utah	•			
Vermont	•			
Virginia				•
Washington				•
West Virginia	•			
Wisconsin	•			
Wyoming	•			
Total:	31			16

The decreasing trend for requiring an exit exam to earn a diploma is shown in Figure 5. The figure covers the time period from 2003 to 2017.

Figure 5: Percentage of States Requiring Youth to Pass an Exit Exam to Receive a High School Diploma, 2003-2017



State Record Keeping and the Exit Exam

States were asked to provide information on record keeping and the exit exam, including the item:

- Does your state keep records on how students with disabilities perform on exit exams? If so, are records kept by disability category?

The survey requested information on whether states maintained records of the number of students taking the exit exam and, if so, whether this information was available by disability category. As shown in Table 11, of the 16 states with an exit exam, 11 answered this question with all but one reporting that they kept state records of the number of students taking the exit exam. (One state did not mark a response to the item.) Eight states made this information available by disability category. As most states indicated, these data and information are reported centrally and collected mostly in education information management systems. A passing score on the exit exam is explicitly determined by the state. When asked this question on the 2011 survey, no state reported that LEAs had control over determining passing scores for the exit exams. Also, in comparison with the 2007 and 2011 survey results, there was a general increase in the percentage of states that not only are maintaining records of students taking the exit exam, but also reporting by disability category.

Table 11. State Record Keeping on Students with Disabilities Taking the Exit Exam

	YES	NO	Data Available by Disability Category
Florida	•		Yes
Indiana	•		Not reported
Maryland	•		No
Massachusetts	•		Yes
Mississippi	•		Yes
New Jersey	•		Yes
New York	•		Yes
Oklahoma	•		Yes
Oregon	•		Yes
Texas	•		Yes
Virginia	•		Yes
Total:	11	0	9

Note: Data missing for Ohio, Washington, New Mexico, Louisiana, and Nevada. This question does not apply to 31 states that do not require exit exam.

Grade Students First Take the Exit Exam

We asked the following question about the grade in which students can first take the exit exam:

- In what grade can students first take the exit exam?

In the 2011 and 2017 surveys, several questions were added to better understand how exit exams functioned in each state. We wanted to better understand the grade at which a student is first able to take the exit exam. This is important because some students may need extended time to prepare for the exit exam while others may require additional opportunities to earn a passing score. Table 12 indicates that three states (Florida, Indiana, Washington) offered the exam in grade 10, two states (Maryland and Texas) in grade 8, one state (Louisiana) in grade 9, and one state (Oregon) in grade 11. A total of 2 states also used as an exit exam end-of-course tests that assess specific content knowledge and occur more frequently than a general exit exam as the exit exam. End-of-course exams may eliminate an “all or nothing” scenario but could also make graduation contingent on a single academic subject in which a student may struggle. These findings are consistent with data from the 2011 survey, with states most frequently allowing students to take the exit exam for the first time in 10th grade and at the end of each course (Johnson et al., 2012).

Table 12. The Grade in Which Students First Take the Exit Exam

	7	8	9	10	11	12	At end of each course
Florida				•			•
Indiana				•			•
Louisiana			•				•
Maryland		•					•
Massachusetts							•
Mississippi							•
Nevada							•
New York							•
Ohio							•
Oklahoma							•
Oregon					•		
Texas		•					
Virginia							•
Washington				•			•
Total:	0	2	1	3	1	0	12

Note: Data missing for New Jersey, New Mexico. This question does not apply to the 31 states that do not require exit exam.

Subject Content Tested on the Exit Exam

Survey items included:

- What subjects are students tested on in exit exams?

Next we asked whether states had separate exit exams for different content areas, or whether they used one comprehensive exit exam that covered multiple content areas. We asked every state that required an exit exam what content areas were tested. These results are reported in Table 13. Eight of the 15 states with exit exams responding to this survey question reported testing content in all five subject areas of inquiry (math, reading, writing, science, and social studies). Eight states reported including social studies as a required subject on their exit exam.

Table 13. Content Tested on the Exit Exam

	Math	Reading	Writing	Science	Social Studies
Florida	•	•	•		
Indiana	•	•	•		
Louisiana	•		•	•	•
Maryland	•	•	•	•	•
Massachusetts	•	•	•	•	
Mississippi	•	•	•	•	•
Nevada	•	•	•	•	
New Jersey	•	•	•	•	
New York	•	•	•	•	•
Ohio	•	•	•	•	•
Oklahoma	•	•	•	•	•
Oregon	•	•	•		
Texas	•	•	•	•	•
Virginia	•	•	•	•	•
Washington	•	•	•	•	
Total:	15	14	15	12	8

Note: Missing: New Mexico. This question does not apply to the 31 states that do not require exit exam.

Use of College Entrance Tests as Exit Exams

The survey asked two questions about the use of college entrance tests in place of the exit exam:

- Is the SAT or ACT the exit exam for your state?
- Can students use their SAT or ACT scores in place of the exit exam?

When asked whether they used the SAT or ACT as the exit exam in their state, nine of the 14 states responding to this question reported they did not. Five states (Florida, Mississippi, New York, Oklahoma, and Oregon) reported allowing SAT or ACT scores to substitute for the exit exam. These findings are similar to those from the 2011 survey (Johnson et al., 2012). Results are shown in Table 14.

Table 14. Use of the SAT or ACT in Place of the Exit Exam

	SAT acts as exit exam	ACT acts as exit exam	Neither ACT or SAT act as exit exam	SAT score can be used in place of the exit exam	ACT score can be used in place of the exit exam
Florida	•	•		•	•
Indiana			•		
Louisiana		•			
Maryland			•		
Massachusetts			•		
Mississippi			•		•
Nevada		•			
New Jersey	•				
New York			•	•	
Ohio			•		
Oklahoma			•	•	•
Oregon			•	•	•
Texas			•		
Virginia			•		
Washington			•		
Total:	2	3	11	4	4

Note: Data missing for New Mexico. This question does not apply to 31 states who do not have exit exam.

Scores Used for Exit Exams

The survey asked one question about how scores for passing the exit exam were determined:

- How are scores for passing the exit exam determined?

Although 16 states reported they required students to pass an exit exam in order to receive a high school diploma, not all states held youth with disabilities to the same passing score as youth without disabilities. Table 15 shows that eight states held both students with and without disabilities to the same passing score; however, three states with exit exams (New York, Oklahoma, and Oregon) reported that they used the same test for both students with and without disabilities but permitted different passing scores in order to receive a high school diploma. No responding state reported using different tests and different scores for students with disabilities to participate in the exit exam.

Table 15. Requiring Youth with Disabilities to Pass the Exit Exam

	If students with disabilities in your state are required to participate in the exit exam to receive a high school diploma, how are the passing scores applied to the exam?		
	The same test and same passing scores are used for students with and without disabilities	The same test is used for both groups, but different passing scores are permitted	Different tests and different scores are used with each group
Florida	•		
Indiana	•		
Maryland	•		
Massachusetts	•		
Mississippi	•		
New Jersey	•		
New York		•	
Oklahoma		•	
Oregon		•	
Texas	•		
Virginia	•		
Total:	8	3	0

Note: Missing: New Mexico, Louisiana, Nevada, Ohio, and Washington. This question does not apply to the 31 states that do not require exit exam.

Consequences of Failing the Exit Exam

States were asked about the consequences of failing the exit exam:

- When students fail an exit exam and need to retake it, what are their options?

For a student who failed the exit exam, 13 of the 14 states responding to this question allowed that student to retake part or all of the exit exam. Three states (Oregon, New Jersey, and Washington) permitted students to take a different form of the exam or section of the exam. Six states (Florida, Maryland, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Washington) allowed students to take a different exam altogether. Louisiana, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Virginia allowed students to petition for an exemption to the required exit exam and still receive a diploma.

Table 16. Consequences of Failing the Exit Exam

	Students can retake the same exam/section	Students can take an alternate form of the exam/section	Students can take a different exam altogether	Students can petition for exemption and still receive a diploma
Florida	•		•	
Indiana	•			
Louisiana	•			•
Maryland	•		•	
Massachusetts	•			•
Mississippi	•		•	
Nevada	•			
New Jersey		•		•
New York	•			
Ohio	•			
Oklahoma	•		•	
Oregon		•	•	
Texas	•			
Virginia	•			•
Washington	•	•	•	
Total:	13	3	6	4

Note: Missing: New Mexico. This question does not apply to the 31 states that do not require exit exam.

Intended and Unintended Consequences of State Graduation Requirements and Diploma Options

The survey asked states about the intended and unintended consequences of graduation requirements in three items:

- What are the intended and unintended consequences of having a single or multiple diploma options?
- What are the intended and unintended consequences of the exit exam?
- What are the intended and unintended consequences of not including students with disabilities in the exit exam?

As noted throughout this report, the range and variation in state graduation requirement policies and practices and the use of diploma options is extensive. Perceived intended and unintended

consequences of state graduation requirements and use of different diploma options for youth with disabilities were also examined in this national survey. State education agency personnel were requested to respond to several questions on the intended and unintended consequences of (a) requiring students with disabilities to pass exit exams to receive a standard diploma, (b) use of single diploma options, and (c) use of multiple diploma options. Respondents were presented a list of statements derived from findings of previous surveys and asked to check all that applied to their state. Tables 17-22 summarize states' responses in relation to these policies and practices.

Table 17. Possible INTENDED Consequences of Having Multiple Diploma Options

Possible INTENDED Consequences of Having Multiple Diploma Options	Number of state responses agreeing with statement
Increase in the number of students within the state receiving some form of a high school diploma	7
Local school districts have more flexibility in determining the manner of student exit	4
Ability to create options that are viewed as motivating and engaging for students with disabilities reduces the dropout rate	4
Increased ability to recognize students for high performance	5
States are better able to maintain "high" academic standards for their regular or standard diplomas when alternate diplomas are available	5
Other	1

Table 18. Possible UNINTENDED Consequences of Having Multiple Diploma Options

Possible UNINTENDED Consequences of Having Multiple Diploma Options	Number of state responses agreeing with statement
Different diploma options are viewed as substandard	5
Perceptions that the use of multiple diplomas will result in developing "special" tracks for students to follow	5
Communicating different options to parents and students is problematic	7
Access to postsecondary education programs for students with diplomas other than the standard diploma is limited if the different diplomas are viewed as watered down in content or of less value to postsecondary admissions staff	6
Gauging the meaning of different diploma options in terms of students skills and abilities is confusing for employers	6
IEP teams fail to hold students with disabilities accountable for passing high school exit exams or certain courses—expectations are lowered for some students with disabilities	4
Other	1

Table 19. Possible INTENDED Consequences of a Single Diploma Option

Possible INTENDED Consequences of Single Diploma Option	Number of state responses agreeing with statement
More students with disabilities earn a standard diploma	28
High expectations for all students, including students with disabilities, are maintained	31
Having a single diploma option helps build consistency regarding the meaning of the requirements associated with the diploma--all students work on the same state standards	30
The single option provides future employers and postsecondary education institutions with a clearer and more detailed record of the student's performance	21
The single option creates an important sense of equity--all students are extended the same options, tested on the same standards, and viewed by school personnel, as well as community members, as equally participating	24
Other	4

Table 20. Possible UNINTENDED Consequences of a Single Diploma Option

Possible UNINTENDED Consequences of Single Diploma Option	Number of state responses agreeing with statement
As graduation requirements increase, fewer students (both general education and special education) actually receive the standard diploma	9
The dropout rate may increase if students who cannot meet high standards or who cannot pass statewide tests opt to drop out	14
The standard diploma may be perceived as too general and watered down	9
In order to help students with disabilities meet the requirements for a standard diploma, states may lower their overall standards for general education students	3
The number of special education students remaining in school up through age 21 may increase because they cannot meet all of the requirements for the standard diploma earlier	24
Other	6

Table 21. Possible INTENDED Consequences of the Exit Exam Requirement

Possible INTENDED Consequences of the Exit Exam Requirement	Number of state responses agreeing with statement
More students with disabilities participate in the general education curriculum and achieve good results	8
Preparation for adult life and future independence is improved by accessing postsecondary education and employment	7
The “differences” between general education and special education students are reduced--all students are held to the same standards, are required to pass the same exams, and receive the same diploma	7
Other	0

Table 22. Possible UNINTENDED Consequences of the Exit Exam Requirement

Possible UNINTENDED Consequences of the Exit Exam Requirement	Number of state responses agreeing with statement
Some students with disabilities fail to receive a diploma	8
Higher dropout rates	3
Student self-esteem is lowered by repeated failures on exit exams	7
Dissatisfaction and conflicts with parents sometimes result	6
Some students may need to remain in school longer to meet the requirements of the standard diploma	7
States and local school districts are forced to create different diplomas and pathways to ensure that students exit with some form of a high school exit credential	2
Other	2

Two additional questions were asked on the survey, including:

- If no exit exam is used, what factors played a role in your state’s decision not to require an exit exam in order to receive a high school diploma?
- What discussions are currently taking place in your state about the graduation exam and/or diploma options?

States without an exit exam were asked to indicate factors that played a role in the state’s decision to not require an exit exam. The responses are shown in Table 23. Responses to this question varied extensively. The primary response was identified as “State’s political climate is not favorable to exit exams.” It should be noted, however, that 13 states reported other factors as contributing to their decision not to require exit exams.

Table 23. Factors that Played a Role in the Decision Not to Require an Exit Exam

Factors that Played a Role in the Decision Not to Require an Exit Exam	Number of state responses agreeing with statement
We had an exit exam, but it did not have the intended results	3
An exit exam does not accurately measure student performance	5
State's political climate is not favorable to exit exams	12
Exit exams are unfair to low socioeconomic students and schools	2
Exit exams are costly	1
Other factors	13
Not Applicable	3

States also were asked to indicate discussions taking place about exit exams and diploma options. Responses are shown in Table 24. A total of 42 states responded to this question with 25 reporting that there is no apparent change anticipated in discussions about exit exams. Sixteen states reported that their states were considering adding diploma options, seven states would be adding exit exams, and other states noted either eliminating or decreasing both exit exams and different diploma options. These trends reflect the ongoing discussions and changes states are engaged in regarding graduation requirements and diploma options.

Table 24. Discussion Currently Taking Place About Exit Exams and Diploma Options

Discussion Currently Taking Place About Exit Exams and Diploma Options	Number of state responses agreeing with statement
Adding diploma options	16
Reducing diploma options	3
Adding exit exam	7
Removing exit exam	3
Increasing course requirements	2
No change in the nature of assessment is anticipated in the next year	25

Discussion

Accountability has been the cornerstone of educational policy since the mid-1980s, with legislation such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) raising the stakes. This focus on accountability has been critical in driving quality education for all children. However, developing and implementing policies to support educational opportunities for students with disabilities remains a challenge to states and local school districts. ESSA advances equity by upholding protections for students with disabilities

and requires, for the first time, that all academic standards must be in place to prepare students to be successful in college and careers.

This iteration of the survey illuminated many educational practices that directly impact educational opportunities for youth with disabilities. Major findings include:

There is a strong increasing trend in states providing diploma options exclusively for youth with disabilities

All 47 states offer the standard diploma. Twenty states, however, reported providing only the standard diploma, with the remaining states offering multiple diploma options to students with and without disabilities. This is an increase from 2011, when 17 states offered just the standard diploma, and 2007, when 18 states offered just the standard diploma (Johnson et al., 2012; Johnson et al., 2007). The 2011 and 2017 versions of the survey added to this finding by asking states if they offer diploma options available only to students with disabilities. The number of states offering such diploma options increased from 22 states in 2011 (Johnson et al., 2012) to 32 states in 2017. Of responding states, only five states that offered a diploma option exclusively to students with disabilities in 2011 did not again offer such an option exclusively to students with disabilities in 2017. Seventeen states reported providing a diploma option exclusively for students with disabilities in both the 2011 and 2017 survey iterations, and 15 states reported offering a diploma option exclusively for students with disabilities for the first time in the 2017 survey. This finding demonstrates an increasing trend toward providing alternate routes to graduation for students with disabilities.

Proponents of offering youth with disabilities a diploma option exclusive to them claim that it helps increase the number of students receiving a diploma and helps motivate and engage students with disabilities, leading to reduced dropout rates. However, others argue that providing different diploma options may lead to many unintended consequences including difficulty communicating options to parents and students, limiting access to postsecondary education programs and employment opportunities, and wider perceptions that a different diploma is substandard. What will remain a challenge to states and local school districts will be ensuring that diploma options are recognized as having the same social and economic value as the standard diploma so postsecondary educational and employment opportunities are available to youth who pursue these diplomas.

There has been a break in the trend in states increasing graduation requirements

While states still report increasing requirements for graduation, the number of states reporting increasing requirements has been steadily declining since the survey first asked the question in 2007. In 2007, 28 states reported increasing requirements for graduation, falling to 20 states in

2011 and just 17 states in 2017. Two of the 17 states—Delaware and Indiana—reported increasing requirements for graduation on all three iterations of the survey (2007, 2011, 2017); 3 states of the 17—Nevada, New Hampshire, and North Carolina—reported increasing requirements in both 2011 and 2017 iterations of the survey; and 3 states—Alabama, South Carolina, and Virginia—reported increasing requirements for graduation for the first time in the 2017 survey. Ten states reported their state had not increased requirements for graduation on any of the three survey waves, in 2007, 2011, or 2017.

Exit exam requirements are decreasing for students with disabilities

In the 2017 survey, the number of states reporting requiring students to pass an exit exam as a condition of graduation was the lowest it has been since the first iteration of this survey in 2003. In this latest iteration of the survey, just 16 states reported requiring students with disabilities to pass an exit exam as a condition of graduation, down from 23 states in 2011, 20 states in 2007, and 27 states in 2003. Of these 16, 12 states reported requiring an exit exam on the 2003, 2007, and 2011 surveys as well. One state of the 16—Washington—reported using exit exams on the 2017, 2011, and 2007 surveys; two states of the 16—Ohio and Tennessee—reported using exit exams on the last two survey iterations (2017 and 2011), and only one state of the 16—Oregon—reported using exit exams for the first time on this iteration of the survey. This demonstrates a trend away from states implementing exit exams as a requirement for graduation and a consistency in practice among states that require students to pass an exit exam.

Requiring students to pass an exit exam as a condition for graduation has many intended and unintended consequences that impact students both during and after high school. Proponents of the exit exam note that requiring students to pass an exit exam leads to increased participation of students with disabilities in the general education curriculum, decreased “differences” between general education students and special education students as all students are held to the same standard, and improved access to postsecondary education and employment opportunities, leading to students’ improved preparation for adult life. However, many point out the unintended consequences of the exit exam requirement for students with disabilities, including failure to receive a diploma, increased dropout rates, lowered student self-esteem, increased dissatisfaction among parents and family members of students with disabilities, and delayed graduation, as students may remain in school longer to meet the requirements of the standard diploma.

When asked about discussions currently taking place about exit exams, 25 of 42 responding states said there was no anticipated change in assessment in the next year, while 3 states were discussing removing the exit exam requirement and 7 states were discussing adding an exit exam policy. Twelve states reported they would not require an exit exam because the political climate in their state does not support exit exams.

Recommendations

This study found great variability in state graduation requirements for students with and without disabilities. As educational policies and practices continue to evolve, examination of their consequences for students, families, professionals, and schools must be prioritized. Offered below are several recommendations that may help to guide state and local district decision making when implementing state graduation requirements and different diploma options for students with disabilities.

Clarify the assumptions underlying state graduation requirements and diploma options.

Many policies and practices discussed in this study were derived from general education, without much consideration of their appropriateness for students with disabilities or the consequences of their application to students with disabilities. It is important to ask what is required for students with disabilities to participate in high-stakes exit exams and what consequences different alternative diploma options may have on students' ability to earn a high school diploma and pursue postsecondary educational and employment opportunities. Questions about the rationale, specific requirements, and criteria used for each diploma option, and who receives them, must be fully addressed.

Ensure students with disabilities an opportunity to learn the material they will be tested on in state and local assessments.

Ensuring students an adequate opportunity to learn the skills and knowledge required to participate in state and local assessments is at the heart of the debate over testing policies and practices. In order to learn the material covered on these assessments, many students with disabilities will need access to special services and supports, including effective instruction by highly qualified teachers and support services personnel, a curriculum aligned with state standards, accommodations (extra learning time, special teaching methods, etc.), and other resources and supports (Johnson et al., 2012; Johnson et al., 2007).

Make high school graduation decisions based on multiple indicators of students' learning and skills.

State requirements for graduation range from Carnegie units to competency tests, exit exams, or end-of-course exams, or some combination thereof. Due to the limited content areas covered on exams, students may jeopardize their graduation if they struggle in any particular subject. Although this study showed states' use of exit exams to be declining, continued efforts to measure student learning and skills in multiple ways are necessary.

Clarify the implications of developing and granting different diploma options for students with disabilities.

There is a lack of research on the impact a student's high school diploma may have on their post-graduation opportunities (Gaumer, 2003). States and local districts need to thoroughly discuss and reach consensus on the meaning and rigor of different diplomas, with the involvement of community employers and representatives from postsecondary educational institutions. Consistently since the first iteration of the survey in 2003, states have reported minimal involvement of community stakeholders in defining and implementing diploma options, resulting in confusion about the meaning and value of different diplomas. Students and families need to know whether graduating from high school with a document other than a standard diploma grants them access to postsecondary education programs. This issue is not the same as concerns about the meaning of grade point averages or class ranks earned by students to meet postsecondary enrollment criteria. Employers also need to be consulted and engaged in discussions about the meaning of different diplomas. If they are not, they may view different diplomas as a convenient screening mechanism for new employees.

Conduct ongoing research on the intended and unintended consequences of state graduation requirements and diploma options.

There is a critical need for research that examines the current and future implications of varied state requirements and diploma options for students with disabilities. Several unintended negative consequences of such policies have been documented and reported in the past (Johnson et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 2012), including high failure rates on state and local assessments, potentially unnecessary grade-level retention of students, increased dropout rates, students not receiving a standard diploma at the end of their high school education, and other difficulties. Despite the apparent potential for unintended consequences, there are also intended benefits to students and others. The impact of these policies on students and families, teachers and schools, and communities needs to be more fully understood as states and local districts proceed to implement or repeal graduation requirements and varied diploma options. Further work based on observation of the effects of these policies and practices is needed.

Conclusion

The consequences and implications of graduation policies and practices for students with disabilities, particularly the use of tests as a requirement for graduation, are not well understood and little research has been done to document their impact. This survey aimed to shed light on the educational policies of states as well as national trends relating to these issues. The difficulties that students experience in passing state exit exams or meeting minimum criteria required

for the receipt of a standard diploma should not result in lowered expectations, the narrowing of program options, or removal of the student from the general education curriculum.

References

Achieve. (2013). *Graduation requirements for students with disabilities: Ensuring meaningful diplomas for all students*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <https://www.achieve.org/publications/graduation-requirements-students-disabilities-ensuring-meaningful-diplomas-all-students>

Achieve. (2016a, October). *How the states got their rates, class of 2015*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from www.achieve.org/how-the-states-got-their-rates-2015-graduates

Achieve. (2016a, November). *Diplomas that matter: Ensuring equity of opportunity for students with disabilities*. Retrieved from <https://www.achieve.org/publications/diplomas-that-matter-achieve-nceo>

Achieve. (2016b, October). *How the states got their rates, class of 2015*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from www.achieve.org/how-the-states-got-their-rates-2015-graduates

Alvarez, B. (2016, June 30). *Promising changes for special education under ESSA*. Retrieved from <http://neatoday.org/2016/06/30/special-education-essa>

Civic Enterprises. (2016). *Building a grad nation: Data Brief: Overview of 2013-2014 high school graduation rates*. Retrieved from <http://www.americaspromise.org/report/2016-building-grad-nation-data-brief>

Civic Enterprises. (2017). *Building a grad nation: Progress and challenge in raising high school graduation rates*. Retrieved from <http://gradnation.americaspromise.org/report/2017-building-grad-nation-report>

Civic Enterprises. (2018). *Building a grad nation: Progress and challenge in raising high school graduation rates, Annual update 2018*. Retrieved from <http://gradnation.americaspromise.org/2018-building-grad-nation-report>

Council of Chief State School Officers & National Governors Association. (2010). *The common core state standards*. Washington, DC: Author.

Elmore, R. F., & Rothman, R. (Eds.). (1999). *Testing, teaching, and learning: A guide for states and school districts*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Erickson, A. S. G., & Morningstar, M. E. (2009). The impact of alternate high school exit certificates on access to postsecondary education. *Exceptionality*, 17(3), 150-163. doi: 10.1080/09362830903028465

Gaumer, A. S. (2003). *High stakes testing and college admission: A review of admissions policies in New Mexico* (Draft paper). Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas

Gewertz, C. (2017, August 1). Who gets hurt when high school diplomas are not created equal? *Education Week*. Retrieved from http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/high_school_and_beyond/2017/08/who_gets_hurt_when_high_school_diplomas_are_not_created_equal.html

Gomperts, J. (2016, May 17). Graduation rates are better, but we're not there yet. *Education Week*. Retrieved from <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2016/05/18/graduation-rates-are-better-but-were-not.html>

Guy, B., Shin, H., Lee, S. Y., & Thurlow, M. L. (1999). *State graduation requirements for students with and without disabilities* (Technical Report 24). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes. Retrieved from <https://nceo.info/Resources/publications/OnlinePubs/archive/Technical/Technical24.html>

Hartwig, R., & Sitlington, P. (2008). Employer perspectives on high school diploma options for adolescents with disabilities. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies, 19*(1), 5-14. Retrieved from 10.1177/1044207308315279

Heubert, J. P., & Hauser, R. M. (1999). *High stakes: Testing for tracking, promotion, and graduation*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Johnson, D. R., & Thurlow, M. L. (2003). *A national study on graduation requirements and diploma options for youth with disabilities* (Technical Report 36). Minneapolis, University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes. Retrieved from <https://nceo.info/Resources/publications/OnlinePubs/Technical36.htm>

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. Retrieved from <https://nceo.info/Resources/publications/OnlinePubs/Tech62/default.htm>

Johnson, D. R., Thurlow, M. L., & Stout, K. E. (2007). *Revisiting graduation requirements and diploma options for youth with disabilities: A national study* (Technical Report 49). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes. Retrieved from <https://nceo.info/Resources/publications/OnlinePubs/Tech49/default.html>

Karp, S. (2017). Trapdoors High school exit testing in the age of “college and career readiness.” *Rethinking schools, 31*(3). Retrieved from <https://www.rethinkingschools.org/articles/trapdoors>

Lee, A. M. I. (n.d.). Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA): What you need to know. Retrieved from <https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/your-childs-rights/basics-about-childs-rights/every-student-succeeds-act-essa-what-you-need-to-know>

McDonnell, L. M., McLaughlin, M. J., & Morison, P. (Eds.). (1997). *Educating one and all: Students with disabilities and standards-based reform*. Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press.

MN Department of Education. (2016). *Transitioning to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA): Frequently asked questions*. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/faq/essa-faqs.pdf>

National Education Association. (n.d.) *About alternate assessments and the Every Student Succeeds Act*. Retrieved from <http://myschoolmyvoice.nea.org/alternate-assessments-students-disabilities>

National Research Council. (2012). *A framework for K-12 science education: Practices, cross-cutting concepts, and core ideas*. Washington, DC: Author.

Plunk A. D, Tate W. F., Bierut L. J., & Grucza R. A. (2014). Intended and unintended effects of state-mandated high school science and mathematics course graduation requirements on educational attainment. *Educational Researcher*, 43(5), 230-241.

Thurlow, M., Cormier, D., & Vang, M. (2009). Alternative routes to earning a standard high school diploma. *Exceptionality*, 17(3), 135-149. Doi: 10.1080/09362830903028424

Thurlow, M., Test, D., Lazarus, S., Klare, M., & Fowler, C. (2016). *Considerations for developing state-defined alternate diplomas for students with significant cognitive disabilities*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes.

Thurlow, M. L., Ysseldyke, J., & Anderson, A. (1995). *High school graduation requirements: What's happening for students with disabilities?* (Synthesis Report 20). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes. Retrieved from <https://nceo.info/Resources/publications/OnlinePubs/archive/Synthesis/Synthesis20.html>

U.S. Department of Education. (2017). Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Retrieved from: <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/index.html>

INSTITUTE *on* COMMUNITY INTEGRATION

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

NCEO is an affiliated center of the Institute on Community Integration