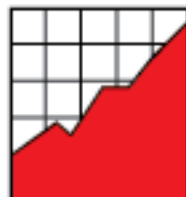


**Diploma Options, Graduation Requirements,
and Exit Exams for Youth with Disabilities:
2011 National Study**



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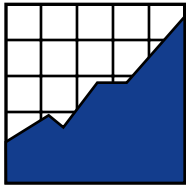
Diploma Options, Graduation Requirements, and Exit Exams for Youth with Disabilities: 2011 National Study

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April 2012

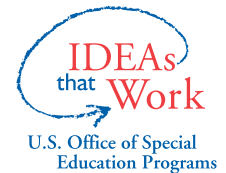
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Executive Summary

Changes in graduation policies and requirements that specifically call for raised academic standards for all students, as well as the development of exit exams linked to a student's eligibility to receive a standard high school diploma, are strategies that states have used increasingly over the past two decades to improve student learning. Both state and federal attention to graduation rates demonstrate the perceived link between completing school with a standard diploma and successful future adult roles. How to successfully include students with disabilities in these policies has been an ongoing challenge with significant levels of variation in practices across states. Questions concerning how best to include students in state and local assessment systems and whether or not to grant exit documents other than the standard high school diploma are central to policy discussion within states. It is important to better understand the positive as well as the unintended negative consequences of various policy approaches on students with disabilities.

Continuing to document high school graduation policies and requirements in relation to students with disabilities is important. The controversy about potential negative and positive consequences continues and, because of this, a clear understanding of what the policies and requirements actually are is essential. Examining not only the policies and requirements, but also individuals' perspectives on the potential effects of these on students with disabilities, assists in thinking through the policy issues that need to be addressed.

This is the fifth in a series of similar studies on state graduation policies and diploma options conducted by the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) at the University of Minnesota (Thurlow, Ysseldyke, & Anderson, 1995; Guy, Shin, Lee, & Thurlow, 1999; Johnson & Thurlow, 2003; Johnson, Thurlow, & Stout, 2007). The present study was undertaken to update the status of graduation policies across the nation. It follows up on previous work, the last study having been conducted in 2006-2007. 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 that result 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 and the District of Columbia. The return rate was 100%.

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

- State and local graduation policies and assessment practices continue to be modified and revised on a regular basis.
- Graduation requirements are increasing in rigor across states.
- States are continuing to experiment by making available a range of diploma options for students with and without disabilities.
- The participation of students with disabilities in high stakes exit exams is increasing and states are granting additional testing allowances and broader use of accommodations.

Recommendations produced from this study are as follows:

- Clarify the assumptions underlying state graduation requirements and diploma options.
- Ensure students with disabilities an 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 alternative diploma options for students with disabilities.
- Conduct ongoing research on the intended and unintended consequences of state graduation requirements and diploma options.

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Introduction

For the past 30 years, international comparisons of educational outcomes have highlighted an American education system that consistently ranks average or below-average among the countries in Asia and Europe (Miller & Warren, 2011; OECD, 2008). In response to growing public criticism that students exit America's high schools without the skills and knowledge required to be productive and competitive citizens, the standards-based reform movement has proliferated in state and local education agencies. This movement can be partially attributed back to the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 when Japanese economic and educational growth seemed to be on the verge of overtaking American leadership. This concern over American educational competitiveness was reinforced by subsequent international assessments such as the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Although standards-based reform focused on outcomes, other evidence suggested that equitable opportunities for students was on the decline (e.g., *The Forgotten Half* [Birdwell, Grist, & Margo, 2011] or *What Work Requires of Schools* [U.S. Department of Labor, 1991]). By the end of the twentieth century there seemed to be a general consensus that there were serious things wrong with American public education, that the problems were systemic, and fundamental structural changes were necessary for fixing them (Cobb & Johnson, 1997).

The major focus of standards-based education is graduation from high school. States implemented graduation policies and requirements that raised academic standards for all students, developed exit exams linked to a student's eligibility to receive a high school diploma, and increased attention on graduation rates. High schools are increasingly being viewed as preparation for higher education, with over 90% of high school graduates planning on attending college (Cahalan, Ingels, Burns, Planty, & Daniel, 2006) and over 70% of high school graduates entering post-secondary institutions (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). This is a remarkable shift in the last 100 years—in 1900 less than 1% of students graduating from high school entered higher education (Schofer & Meyer, 2005). This focus on developing the "college-ready" high school graduate may have displaced attention on those students who may not find the transition from high school to higher education easy or even applicable. All of this is occurring in an economic and social environment where individuals without a diploma earn approximately 19% less than their peers per hour and have greater rates of unemployment and incarceration (O'Neil, 2001). In other words, the pressure is higher than ever for high school students.

A continuing challenge in implementing rigorous high school graduation policies is how to include students with disabilities (Lehr, Clapper, & Thurlow, 2005; Zhang, 2009). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) amendments of 1997 and 2004 require that students with disabilities participate in state and district assessments and that their performance be reported. The 2004 reauthorization of IDEA made advances in a more coherent national policy on transition-planning for students with disabilities. Although states have begun implement-

ing these regulations, a significant level of variation in interpretation is occurring across states (Morningstar & Liss, 2008).

State special education units are held accountable for identifying targets for improvement in State Performance Plans (SPPs), with graduation rate as Indicator 1, and are reviewed for approval by the Secretary of Education. Each state subsequently submits an Annual Performance Report (APR) with graduation performance data and a comparison of performance to targets. The APRs are reviewed by the Secretary and each state is designated as Meets Requirements, Needs Assistance, Needs Intervention, or Needs Substantial Intervention. Additionally, the 2001 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (formerly known as the No Child Left Behind Act or NCLB) required that schools and school districts demonstrate that all students are making adequate yearly progress (AYP) as benchmarked by average test scores and other measures. Further, schools and districts that fail to show achievement gains among students with disabilities, English language learners, minority students, and low-income groups are subject to various district and state interventions.

Although ESEA does not require that such assessments be used for promotion or graduation, it does require that the graduation rate be an indicator that states use to determine whether districts are making AYP. The graduation rate is calculated as the number of students who complete high school in four years with a standard high school diploma, although states submit the specific way in which they calculate this rate for ESEA (Erpenbach, 2011; Forte & Erpenbach, 2006). States and districts are responding to these relatively new requirements, however Darling-Hammond (2007) suggested that ESEA punishes schools with low graduation rates rather than supports their reform effort. There is attention—through policy and administrative efforts—to address how all students, including students with disabilities, will be included.

At the writing of this publication, the Obama administration is pushing to reform the Elementary and Secondary Education Act during its reauthorization by Congress. In a policy document titled *A Blueprint for Reform* (United States Department of Education [USDoE], 2010), it is clear that education policy in the United States probably will continue to focus on standards, accountability, and assessment. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan would like to see in the next reauthorization of ESEA a call for every student to graduate from high school ready for college “regardless of their income, race, ethnic or language background, or disability status” (USDoE, 2010, p. 3). Graduation rates, whole-school and subgroup achievement scores are still used to assess schools. Schools with low graduation rates and academic growth are deemed “Challenge Schools” and can face one of four options: replacing school administration, replacing all of the school personnel, allowing the school to be run by a private education management organization (charter school), or closing the school completely (USDoE). This is essentially a continuation of the policy currently in place.

The U.S. court system has also been influential in shaping educational policy, especially for students with disabilities. The courts have ruled in favor of the participation of students with disabilities in state and local testing programs, including the use of high school exit exams. *Debra P. v. Turlington* (1981) established that a high school diploma is a property interest, which makes it subject to protection under the Fourteenth Amendment. Soon after, in *Brookhart v. Illinois State Board of Education* (1983), the court found that students with disabilities can be held to the same graduation requirements as students without disabilities. In the court opinion, it is the responsibility of the school district to ensure that students are adequately prepared for graduation standards, or that they be reasonably accommodated in “alternative educational assessments.” Although many educational agencies award certificates of achievement to students with disabilities, Rothstein (2000) suggests that a certificate is not the legal equivalent of a standard diploma, although case law is inconsistent. Still, regulations for ESEA clearly state that only honors diplomas and similar “advanced” diplomas can be considered equivalent to the standard diploma.

Many court cases pertaining to students with disabilities in the past 10 years have been focused on graduation exit testing requirements and the use of accommodations. In *A.S.K. v. Oregon State Board of Education* (2001), Oregon agreed in settlement that for its Certificate of Initial Mastery (CIM) and other state testing, it would first view all accommodations as valid, unless the state could prove that specific accommodations result in invalid scores (Disability Rights Advocates, 2010). In *Chapman v. California Department of Education* (2002), federal courts ordered California to allow accommodations in testing procedures for students with disabilities. The court also ordered the state of California to develop an alternative form of the state exit exam—the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE)—marking the first time a state has been ordered to adjust its high school exit exam for students with disabilities. In 2007, California’s board of education recommended that all students take and pass the CAHSEE and not develop alternative exit assessments (Samuels, 2007). This decision was reversed for 2009 and 2010, when students with disabilities were again able to seek a waiver as a way to earn a standard diploma. In 2011, California was developing an alternative route for students with disabilities to demonstrate that they had achieved to the same level as those students passing the CAHSEE. Other cases, such as *Noon v. Alaska Board of Education* (2004), have upheld the right for alternative portfolio assessments and accommodations to state exit exams.

The implications of the wide variation of state graduation requirements and diploma options is a critical area of examination. Many studies have found that students with disabilities experience significantly negative outcomes when they do not earn a high school diploma (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009; Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Johnson, McGrew, Bloomberg, Bruininks, & Lin, 1997; Newman, Wagner, Cameto, & Knokey, 2009). Data also suggest that stricter graduation requirements may be related to higher rates of dropping out of school among

students with disabilities, compared with the drop-out rates of students without disabilities (Holme, Richards, Jimerson, & Cohen, 2010; Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004).

Since the 1990s, students with disabilities have made improvements in postsecondary participation when compared to the past (Newman, Wagner, Cameto, Knokey, & Shaver, 2010). In general, however, students with disabilities are negatively impacted by inconsistent graduation requirements and misunderstood diploma options. Research shows that students with disabilities drop out of high school at twice the rate of their peers without disabilities; students with disabilities are less likely to complete a full secondary school academic curriculum; and students with disabilities were much less likely to be even minimally qualified for college admission (National Council on Disability, 2003; Newman, Wagner, Cameto, & Knokey, 2009).

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 finding with similar studies conducted by Thurlow and Thompson (2000), Johnson and Thurlow (2003) and Johnson, Thurlow, and Stout (2007). 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.
- State 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 state 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 ---

The 2001 Elementary and Secondary Education Act defines graduation as the number of students who graduate from secondary school with a regular diploma in the standard number of years (i.e., four years). Beginning in the 2010-2011 school year, states were also directed to report graduation rates in the aggregate and disaggregate for subgroups such as low income, minority, disability, and English language learners (Thurlow & Johnson, 2009). As mentioned

above, ESEA requires that graduation rates be used as one measure to assess schools and school districts on their adequate yearly progress.

Graduation requirements have taken many forms over the years. Requirements that states set for graduation can range from Carnegie unit requirements (a certain number of class credits earned in specific areas) to the successful passing of minimum competency tests, high school exit exams, or a series of benchmark exams (Guy, Shin, Lee, & Thurlow, 1999). States also vary in their use and application of these requirements for graduation.

Exit exams from high school are an increasingly popular form of educational accountability. These tests are considered “high stakes” because they often determine the earning of a high school diploma, which in turn directly affects an individual’s future economic well-being and self-sufficiency. In 1997, 16 states had exit exams in place as a condition for receiving a standard diploma (McDonnell, McLaughlin, & Morison, 1997). In 2000, this number had increased to 22 (Olson, Jones, & Bond, 2001) and in 2007 the number was 24 (Johnson et al., 2007). Today, the Center on Education Policy (2011) estimates that nearly 76% of all students in public schools are required to take and pass an exit exam.

Proponents of the use of high-stakes exit exams believe that such exams motivate students and teachers to work harder and focus more attention on important learning goals so that students will learn more and be better prepared for later life. The Obama administration has endorsed the Common Core State Standards which, along with exit exams, seeks to create more equitable educational attainment and standards across states (CEP, 2010, 2011). Although a more detailed discussion on exit exams and students with disabilities will follow, in general, participation and performance of students with disabilities in these exit exams has been increasing and has had some positive consequences on curriculum (Christenson, Decker, Triezenberg, Ysseldyke, & Reschly, 2007; Katsiyannis, Zhang, Ryan, & Jones, 2007; Ysseldyke, Dennison, & Nelson, 2004), and student outcomes (Weiner, 2004)

Although all high school students feel pressure to pass these exams, the amount of pressure is disproportional to certain groups of students. These groups include students with disabilities, minority students, English language learners, and economically disadvantaged students (CEP, 2005). Thus, critics of high-stakes exit exams believe that these exams create an inequitable and hostile educational environment that have particularly negative consequences for the most disadvantaged students (Holme, Richards, Jimerson, & Cohen, 2010). Jones (2007) suggested that the multi-dimensional aspect of education should not be parsed down to a singular measure of educational attainment. This is particularly relevant to students such as those with disabilities who struggle in certain academic areas. Dee and Jacob (2006) found that exit exams significantly reduced the probability of completing high school, particularly among minority students.

Interestingly, the increase of high-stakes exams and a competitive educational environment has led some parents to push their children to receive special education services. Demerath (2009), in an ethnographic study of Ohio schools, found that the stigma of being in special education had lessened in the face of mounting academic pressure to succeed. In order to receive accommodations such as extra time on end-of-course and exit exams, parents found ways to get their children individualized education programs (IEPs) that legally required schools to provide academic accommodations. There has also been an increase in the number of exit-exam-states that offer alternative exams or alternative routes to obtaining a standard diploma for students with disabilities. Thurlow, Cormier, and Vang (2009) found that 19 states offered such alternatives, but they also found that alternative routes complicated the meaning of the standard diploma because they varied greatly from state to state and did not necessarily require students to meet the same requirements.

Alternative Diploma Options

The array of diploma options ranges from honors diplomas, to the standard diploma, to certificates of completion or attendance, and others. Some diplomas reflect high academic achievement, while some certificates may be specifically for students receiving special education services (Guy et al., 1999; Martinez & Bray, 2002). Johnson et al. (2007) found that some states offered as many as five different diploma/certificate options, while 21 states only offered a standard diploma. Research on the effects of these alternative diplomas/certificates on post-educational outcomes continues to grow, with preliminary findings indicating wide variation of interpretation of these differentiated graduation documents (Gaumer-Erickson, Kleinhammer-Tramill, & Thurlow, 2007; Gaumer-Erickson & Morningstar, 2009; Hartwig & Sitlington, 2008).

A standard diploma is complicated by a myriad of different requirements and alternative options that vary from state to state and also within states themselves. Research has shown that an increase in exit exams has had a direct impact on the proliferation of alternative diploma options as well. Gaumer-Erickson and colleagues (2007) found that all students were statistically more likely to receive nontraditional exit certificates in states with high school exit exams than in states without an exit exam requirement for graduation.

The use of the General Educational Development (GED) as a substitute route to a standard diploma appears to be increasing. This alternative route is unique in that it avoids the inability to count the GED toward the calculation of a graduation rate. By using the GED as an alternative route to the standard diploma, which counts toward the ESEA graduation rate requirement, the GED essentially has become a legitimate way to earn a diploma and be considered a

graduate (Thurlow et al., 2009). However, several studies have demonstrated that completing school with a GED diploma or other alternative exit credential does not produce comparable career and income outcomes to those of a standard high school diploma (Amos, 2008; Hartwig & Sitlington, 2008; Khatiwada, McLaughlin, Sum, & Palma, 2007; Wolpin, 2005). Wolpin (2005) reported that students with a GED earned about \$120,000 less over a 15-year period than a high school graduate with a regular diploma. Those earning a GED also received twice as much in welfare payments as those students who earned high school diplomas and were significantly less likely to own a home and pay property taxes (Khatiwada et al., 2007).

Hartwig and Sitlington (2008), in a qualitative study of employers' understanding of alternative diploma options, found that employers were more likely to hire a graduate with an alternative diploma that indicated a tie to occupational skills than they were to hire a student with a GED. Prospective employees with a GED were more likely to be stereotyped as unskilled and harder to train. Employers were most unsure of certificates of completion, attendance, or achievement and were the least likely to hire persons with these certificates or, at best, would likely assign them more menial jobs.

These findings from Hartwig and Sitlington and others support a growing body of research that suggests that students with disabilities, who disproportionately receive these nontraditional exit certificates, may have poorer post-secondary educational options as compared to those who receive a standard diploma. Allowing students to exit public education with a nontraditional exit certificate decreases the number of students who meet the requirements associated with the diploma (Gaumer-Erickson, Kleinhammer-Tramill, & Thurlow, 2007). Research has also shown that although there are varying qualifiers for certificates in each state, all certificate options are considered inferior to the standard diploma (Thurlow & Johnson, 2009). Post-secondary institutions place little value on alternative exit certificates and, in general, treated students who earned these alternative certificates as though they had dropped out of school (Gaumer-Erickson & Morningstar, 2009).

Overview of the Study

The present study builds on the earlier work of Thurlow et al. (1995); Guy, Shin, Lee, and Thurlow (1999); Johnson & Thurlow (2003); and Johnson et al. (2007). 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 proceed to develop and change

graduation policies. The present study was undertaken to update the status of states' graduation policies and to track changes in policy and attitude 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. These questions are:

1. What is the range and variation in state graduation requirements and diploma options across the United State for students with and without disabilities?
2. What are the intended and unintended consequences that result for students with disabilities 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?

Method

A survey was developed to obtain information on individual state graduation policies and practices, including respondent perceptions of the intended and unintended consequences or impact of these policies on students with disabilities. Survey questions were also developed to align, in part, with the four 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 the 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. Three options were extended to respondents for completing the survey. Choices included completing an online survey, completing a written copy of the survey and returning the response by mail, or requesting a phone interview from University of Minnesota research staff. Data collection occurred from May 2010 to May 2011. A total of 50 states and the District of Columbia responded to the survey, representing a 100% response rate. In some cases states did not respond to all survey questions. Summaries of all data gathered were compiled and transposed into tables.

Results

Survey responses from the state directors of special education or their designees 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 the survey was completed by state education agency personnel. Given the dynamic nature of policy discussion across the United States concerning state graduation policies and diploma options, it is possible 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) provided evidence of the extreme variation and ever-changing political environments of states regarding student graduation requirements. Wherever possible and appropriate, the results of the current survey were compared to responses from past surveys.

Graduation Requirements

States vary in relation to the locus of control over requirements that are set for graduation from high school. Table 1 identifies the relationship between state and local education agencies (LEAs) in terms of who establishes graduation requirements for youth with disabilities. Options include:

- State provides minimum requirements and LEAs (local districts) may add to them.
- State requirements must be followed 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 assessments.

The variation in the relationship between state and local education agencies in controlling the setting of high school graduation requirements is noted in Table 1.

The most commonly observed practice across states is for the state to provide minimum requirements and extend options to the LEAs to add to them. A total of 45 states currently have graduation policies reflecting this practice. Four states (Hawaii, Indiana, Louisiana, and Wyoming) set requirements for graduation and the LEAs are not permitted to change them. Only one state, Wisconsin, sets guidelines for graduation requirements with LEAs having the final decision. The District of Columbia, being its own LEA, sets its own graduation requirements.

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

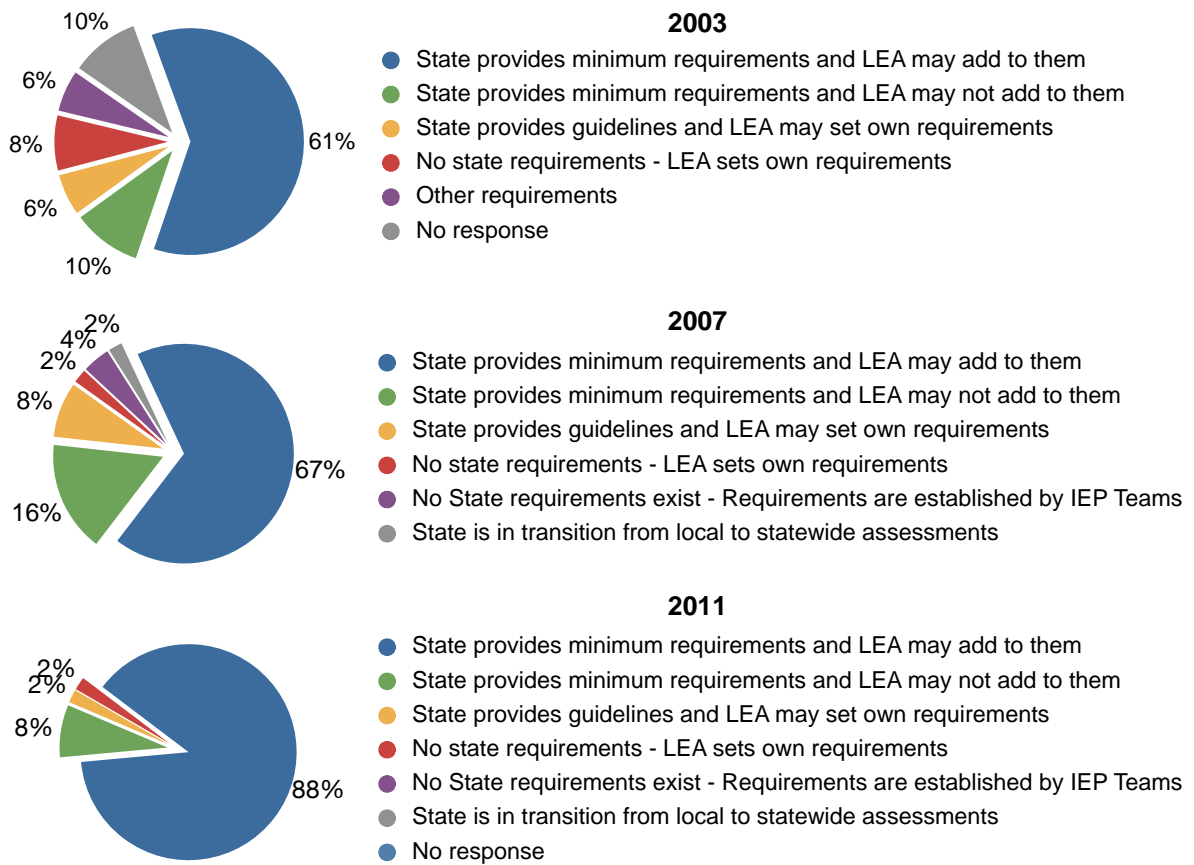
	State provides minimum requirements and LEA may add to them	State provides minimum requirements and LEA may not add to them	State provides guidelines and LEA may set own requirements	No state requirements—LEA sets own requirements	No State requirements exist—Requirements are established by IEP Teams	State is in transition from local to statewide assessments	N/A
Alabama	•						
Alaska	•						
Arizona	•						
Arkansas	•						
California	•						
Colorado	•						
Connecticut	•						
Delaware	•						
District of Columbia				•			
Florida	•						
Georgia	•						
Hawaii		•					
Idaho	•						
Illinois	•						
Indiana		•					
Iowa	•						
Kansas	•						
Kentucky	•						
Louisiana		•					
Maine	•						
Maryland	•						
Massachusetts	•						
Michigan	•						
Minnesota	•						
Mississippi	•						
Missouri	•						
Montana	•						
Nebraska	•						
Nevada	•						

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 exist—Requirements are established by IEP Teams	State is in transition from local to statewide assessments	N/A
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:	45	4	1	1	0	0	0

In comparing the 2011 results with the two previous surveys (Johnson & Thurlow, 2003; Johnson et al., 2007), a significant trend can be observed as seen in Figure 1. In 2003, 61% of states provided minimum graduation requirements with the possibility for LEAs to add requirements. In 2011 this percentage had increased to 88%. This trend over time has been for states to set minimum graduation requirements for LEAs, but also grant LEAs some latitude to add to these requirements.

Figure 1. High School Graduation Requirements for Youth with Disabilities, 2003–2011



States were asked whether there had been an increase in graduation requirements to receive a standard diploma in the past three years. Table 2 shows that 34 states increased their graduation requirements to receive a standard diploma for both students with and without disabilities. New Mexico was the only state to increase graduation requirements only for students with disabilities, while New York and the District of Columbia increased graduation requirements only for students without disabilities. Fourteen states indicated that no changes had been made to their graduation requirements. In 2007, 28 states indicated that there had been an increase in the graduation requirements to receive a standard diploma for both students with and without disabilities and 17 states indicated no increase in graduation requirements (Johnson, Thurlow, & Stout, 2007). Table 3 lists specific changes that have occurred in individual states, as reported by the states.

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 students with and without disabilities
Alabama	•			
Alaska	•			
Arizona				•
Arkansas				•
California				•
Colorado				•
Connecticut				•
Delaware				•
District of Columbia			•	
Florida				•
Georgia				•
Hawaii				•
Idaho				•
Illinois	•			
Indiana				•
Iowa	•			
Kansas				•
Kentucky	•			
Louisiana	•			
Maine				•
Maryland				•
Massachusetts				•
Michigan				•
Minnesota				•
Mississippi				•
Missouri				•
Montana	•			
Nebraska	•			
Nevada				•
New Hampshire				•
New Jersey				•
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 students with and without disabilities
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:	14	1	2	34

Table 3. State Changes in Graduation Requirements for Youth with Disabilities¹

State	Comments
Arizona	“Added one credit for math and science.”
Arkansas	“Must pass Algebra end-of-course exam to receive academic course credit toward graduation; students are allowed multiple attempts to pass the exam. [S]tudents with disabilities under IDEA who cannot pass the exam after multiple attempts may graduate if they can meet alternative standards competency.”
California	“2006 High School Exit Examination; however, students with disabilities had exemptions for 2006, 2007 and 2010, 2011.”
Colorado	“Added requirements re # years of English and Social Studies.”

¹ As reported by respondents to the 2011 survey

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

State	Comments
Connecticut	"Effective the graduating class of 2018, CT has raised the credit requirements from 20 to 25 units."
Delaware	"Will be changing next school year. Additional mathematics credit required. Coursework must include no less than the equivalent of the traditional requirements of Geometry, Algebra I and Algebra II courses. For the Freshman class of 2011-2012 minimum credits will increase from twenty two (22) to twenty four (24) credits in order to graduate. Students will also be required to have two (2) credits in a World Language."
Florida	"Addition of requirements for students to choose a major area of interest."
Georgia	"Change to one diploma; more rigorous course [requirements]."
Hawaii	"[S]tandards-based instruction."
Idaho	"Take three (3) years of math, one of which must be the last year of high school; Take three (3) years of science; Complete a senior project; Take the ACT, SAT or Compass exam by the end of 11th grade."
Illinois	"Course requirements/credits."
Kansas	"The number and type of courses or course units have been expanded in some content areas (i.e., science and math)."
Maryland	"Requirement to pass four end of course high school assessments."
Massachusetts	"The state has added a science/engineering test (one of four) to the ELA and math test requirements."
Michigan	"[A]dditional math."
Minnesota	"GRAD test is embedded in the assessment options with specific GRAD retest options available."
Mississippi	"[Number] of Carnegie Units required for graduation."
Missouri	"[P]ersonal finance course credits now required."
Nevada	"Addition of Nevada High School Proficiency Exam in Science. Addition of a 4th year of Math and 3rd year of Science."
New Hampshire	"NH has increase our academic standards for graduation. We have increased, for example, the number of credits and the level of performance (1 year of algebra) in mathematics."
New Jersey	"[A]dditional 5 credits in Career Education and Consumer, Family, and Life Skills or CTE."
North Carolina	"Essential Standards have been re-written to be more rigorous. [A] fourth math has been added."
North Dakota	"Additional units of math and science."
Ohio	"Minimum credit hours and course types have increased."
Oklahoma	"We now have a requirement that all students must pass 4 of 7 end of instruction exams to [receive] a diploma."

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

State	Comments
Oregon	"Oregon added an English requirement, science requirements, and 3 credits of math that must start at the algebra 1 level and higher. Oregon also added requirements for essential skills in reading, writing and math."
South Dakota	"[H]igher level math and science."
Tennessee	"Increased [number] of required credits. Increased [number] of math and science courses. Added personal finance and phys. ed. courses. Increased rigor of all courses. Individualized focused plan of study by 8th grade (similar to SPED transition plan). Added rigorous end-of-course tests for core content classes—Tests do not have to be passed for a diploma but the courses must be passed."
Texas	"An additional year of language arts, math, and science. Financial literacy class required."
West Virginia	"[One] added math credit; 1 fewer career concentration credit; total number of credits were unchanged; occurred for 06-07 year for students entering grade 9."

Diploma Options

Table 4 illustrates the range of diploma options for high school graduates with disabilities across the 50 states and the District of Columbia. The alternative diploma options include a standard diploma, honors diploma, IEP or Special Education diploma, certificate of attendance, certificate of achievement, occupational diploma, and others. All 51 respondents indicated that they offer a standard diploma. Of these, 13 offer an honors diploma, 11 offer an IEP or Special Education diploma, 19 offer a certificate of attendance, 15 offer a certificate of achievement, 3 offer an occupational diploma, and 8 offer other options.

Seventeen states offered only the standard/regular diploma to both students with and without disabilities. The remaining 34 states offered multiple diploma option to their high school graduates. The highest in total number of diploma options was 7 in Nevada (three diploma options were noted in the "other" category), and 5 in Oregon, Louisiana, and Virginia. Five states reported 4 diploma options and 15 states reported using 3 diploma options.

In response to a variety of state and local interests, states are clearly experimenting with alternative diploma options. When comparing to the previous two surveys conducted (Johnson & Thurlow, 2003; Johnson et al., 2007), diploma options have remained relatively similar. States continue to use a range of alternative diploma options, in addition to the standard or regular diploma. The comparative results can be seen in Figure 2.

Table 4. High School Graduation Diplomas Available for Youth with Disabilities

	Honors Diploma	Regular Diploma	IEP / Sp. Ed. Diploma	Certificate of Attendance	Certificate of Achievement	Occupational Diploma	Other	Total
Alabama	•	•				•	• ^a	4
Alaska		•		•	•			3
Arizona		•						1
Arkansas		•						1
California		•		•	•		• ^b	4
Colorado	•	•	•	•				4
Connecticut		•						1
Delaware	•	•			•			3
District of Columbia		•	•					2
Florida		•	•	•		•		4
Georgia		•	•	•				3
Hawaii	•	•		•				3
Idaho		•						1
Illinois		•		•				2
Indiana	•	•		•				3
Iowa		•		•	•			3
Kansas		•		•	•			3
Kentucky	•	•			•			3
Louisiana		•			•		• ^c	5
Maine		•						1
Maryland		•						1
Massachusetts		•					• ^d	2
Michigan		•						1
Minnesota		•						1
Mississippi		•	•			•		3
Missouri		•		•				2
Montana		•						1
Nebraska		•		•	•			3
Nevada	•	•	•	•			• ^e	7
New Hampshire		•		•				2

Table 4. High School Graduation Diplomas Available for Youth with Disabilities (continued)

	Honors Diploma	Regular Diploma	IEP / Sp. Ed. Diploma	Certificate of Attendance	Certificate of Achievement	Occupational Diploma	Other	Total
New Jersey		•						1
New Mexico	•	•	•					3
New York	•	•	•					3
North Carolina		•			•			2
North Dakota		•						1
Ohio	•	•						2
Oklahoma		•						1
Oregon	•	•		•	•		• ^f	5
Pennsylvania		•					• ^g	2
Rhode Island		•			•			2
South Carolina		•						1
South Dakota		•						1
Tennessee		•	•	•				3
Texas	•	•			•			3
Utah		•						1
Vermont		•						1
Virginia	•	•	•	•	•			5
Washington		•						1
West Virginia		•	•					2
Wisconsin		•		•	•		• ^h	4
Wyoming		•		•	•			3
Total:	13	51	11	19	15	3	8	

^a Graduation Certificate (Alabama)

^b Diploma with endorsement for Golden State (California)

^c Career Diploma, Skills Certificates, Other Endorsements (Louisiana)

^d LEAs may offer any or all of the other types (Massachusetts)

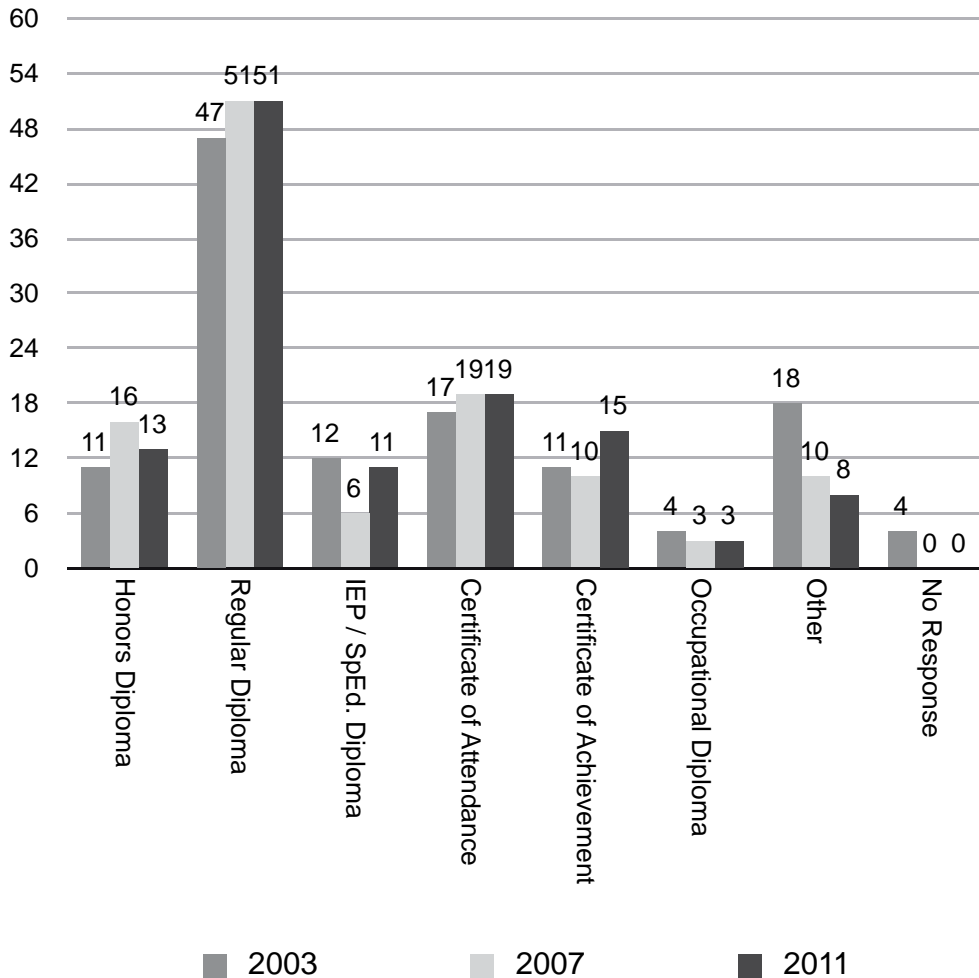
^e Adult Standard Diploma, Advanced Diploma, Standard Diploma with CTE Endorsement (Nevada)

^f Extended or Modified Diploma (Oregon)

^g Recognition of Achievement (Pennsylvania)

^h High School Equivalency Diploma (Wisconsin)

Figure 2. High School Graduation Diplomas Available for Youth with Disabilities, 2003 - 2011



New to the 2011 study, states were asked about the relationship between alternative diploma options and youth with disabilities. Specifically, states were asked whether there were any high school diplomas that were only available to youth with disabilities. Although over half of the states (30) responded that they did not have diplomas that were available only to youth with disabilities, it is worth noting that eight states used the certificate of attendance only for youth with disabilities, six states used the certificate of achievement only for youth with disabilities, and three states used their occupational diploma only for youth with disabilities. As the term implies, the IEP/Special Education diploma is used by eight states only for youth with disabilities. Full results can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5. Diplomas Available Only to Youth with Disabilities

	None	Yes, IEP/Sp. Ed. Diploma	Yes, Certificate of Attendance	Yes, Certificate of Achievement	Yes, Occupational/Vocational Diploma	Other
Alabama					•	
Alaska			•	•		
Arizona	•					
Arkansas			•			
California	•					
Colorado	•					
Connecticut		•				
Delaware				•		
District of Columbia		•				
Florida		•	•		•	
Georgia		•				
Hawaii			•			
Idaho	•					
Illinois			•			
Indiana	•					
Iowa	•					
Kansas			•	•		
Kentucky				•		
Louisiana				•		• ^a
Maine	•					
Maryland	•					
Massachusetts						• ^b
Michigan	•					
Minnesota	•					
Mississippi			•		•	
Missouri	•					
Montana	•					
Nebraska	•					
Nevada		•				
New Hampshire	•					
New Jersey	•					

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

	None	Yes, IEP/Sp. Ed. Diploma	Yes, Certificate of Attendance	Yes, Certificate of Achievement	Yes, Occupational/Vocational Diploma	Other
New Mexico	•					
New York		•				
North Carolina	•					
North Dakota	•					
Ohio	•					
Oklahoma	•					
Oregon						• ^c
Pennsylvania	•					
Rhode Island	•					
South Carolina	•					
South Dakota	•					
Tennessee	•					
Texas	•					
Utah	•					
Vermont	•					
Virginia		•				
Washington	•					
West Virginia		•				
Wisconsin	•					
Wyoming			•	•		
Total:	30	8	8	6	3	3

^a Skills Certificate (Louisiana)

^b LEAs may vary in diploma options offered (Massachusetts)

^c Extended Diploma (Oregon)

Allowances Made for Youth with Disabilities to Receive a Standard Diploma

States vary in the allowances they make for youth with disabilities to receive a standard diploma. Variations include reducing the number of credits required to obtain a standard diploma, taking alternative courses, lowering performance criteria, granting extensions, using the IEP to set the terms for graduation requirements, and other allowances. Table 6 reports on state practices in making allowances for youth with disabilities to receive a standard diploma. Many states—particularly Missouri, Nebraska, and Pennsylvania—offer a wide range of allowances for youth with

disabilities to receive a standard diploma. As shown in Table 6, the most common state allowance made for students with disabilities is to permit the IEP team to address the issue (36 states).

Twenty-three states allowed alternate courses to be used to earn the required course credits in order to graduate with a standard diploma. Only three states—Missouri, Nebraska and Pennsylvania—allowed the reduction of credits. Nine states allowed the lowering of performance criteria and 15 states allowed extensions.

When compared to the 2003 and 2007 survey results (Johnson & Thurlow, 2003; Johnson et al., 2007), states granting extensions for youth with disabilities to receive a standard diploma have seen the most significant change. As seen in Figure 3, the number of states granting extensions has fallen from 22 states in 2007 to only 15 states in 2011. There has also been a slight increase in states that allow graduation criteria to be addressed by IEP teams, as well as a steady increase in the number of states that allow alternate courses to be used to earn required course credits.

Only two states—Arizona and Oregon—allow no exceptions to graduation requirements for students with disabilities. In 2003, there were five states—Louisiana, Mississippi, New York, Ohio, and West Virginia—that allowed no exceptions, and in 2007 only three states—Indiana, Mississippi, and New Hampshire—allowed no exceptions (Johnson & Thurlow, 2003; Johnson et al., 2007). Noted here is the changing nature of state policies in not granting exceptions to graduation requirements. No state retained this policy over time from 2003 - 2011.

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

	None	Number of credits may be reduced	Alternate courses can be used to earn required course credits	Performance criteria may be lowered	Addressed individually in IEP	Extensions are granted	Other
Alabama			•				
Alaska			•		•		
Arizona	•						
Arkansas			•		•		
California					•	•	
Colorado			•	•	•		
Connecticut					•		
Delaware					•	•	
District of Columbia					•		
Florida						•	• ^a

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

	None	Number of credits may be reduced	Alternate courses can be used to earn required course credits	Performance criteria may be lowered	Addressed individually in IEP	Extensions are granted	Other
Georgia							• ^b
Hawaii					•	•	
Idaho					•		
Illinois					•		
Indiana					•	•	
Iowa					•		
Kansas					•		• ^c
Kentucky					•		
Louisiana					•		• ^d
Maine			•		•	•	
Maryland							• ^e
Massachusetts							• ^f
Michigan			•			•	
Minnesota			•	•	•		
Mississippi			•	•	•		• ^g
Missouri		•	•	•	•	•	
Montana			•		•		
Nebraska		•	•	•	•	•	
Nevada							• ^h
New Hampshire			•		•	•	• ⁱ
New Jersey					•		
New Mexico			•	•	•		
New York							• ^j
North Carolina			•				• ^k
North Dakota			•		•		
Ohio					•		• ^l
Oklahoma			•		•		
Oregon	•						
Pennsylvania		•	•	•	•	•	
Rhode Island					•		• ^m

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

	None	Number of credits may be reduced	Alternate courses can be used to earn required course credits	Performance criteria may be lowered	Addressed individually in IEP	Extensions are granted	Other
South Carolina					•		• ⁿ
South Dakota			•	•	•		
Tennessee			•			•	
Texas			•				
Utah			•		•		
Vermont			•		•	•	
Virginia					•	•	
Washington					•		
West Virginia				•	•	•	• ^o
Wisconsin							• ^p
Wyoming			•				
Total:	2	3	23	9	36	15	16

^a Florida: "Waiver of passing scores on graduation exam, as determined appropriate by the student's IEP team, as long as the student meets other criteria for a standard diploma."

^b Georgia: "Students with disabilities who take and pass Mathematics 1 in conjunction with a mathematics support class and Mathematics 2 in conjunction with a mathematics support class upon determination through the Individualized Education Plan process may meet diploma requirements by completing Mathematics 3 or its equivalent for a total of 3 math credits. Also, students with significant cognitive disabilities may graduate and receive a regular high school diploma when the student's IEP team determines that the student has: (I) completed an integrated curriculum based on the GPS that includes instruction in Mathematics, English/Language Arts, Science and Social Studies as well as career preparation, self determination, independent living and personal care to equal a minimum of 23 units of instruction, and (II) participated in the GAA during middle school and high school and earned a proficient score on the high school GAA test, and (III) reached the 22nd birthday OR has transitioned to an employment/education/training setting in which the supports needed are provided by an entity other than the local school system."

^c Kansas: "The students with IEPs are required to complete the same number of course units and course content; however, the courses may include supplementary aids and supports that would be identified in order for the student to complete the course requirement. The accommodations, modifications, and adaptations the student needs in order to participate in the general education curriculum with his or her nondisabled peers would be listed on the IEP."

^d Louisiana: "One of the exit exams may be waived if the exam is in the area of the student's disabilities (GEE waiver)."

^e Maryland: Bridge Projects are completed to cover high school assessments that may not have been passed. Waivers are available on a very limited basis. These are available for ALL students."

^f Massachusetts: "Students with disabilities may take tests with non-standard accommodations."

^g Mississippi: "Goals in IEP achieved."

^h Nevada: "Students with disabilities are allowed permissible accommodations on the Nevada Proficiency exam which is the only allowance they are given to achieve a standard diploma."

ⁱ New Hampshire: "Extended learning opportunities (non classroom-based courses) are available but the same competencies must be met by any and all students via performance competencies evaluated by a general content teacher in this content area."

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

^jNew York: “Students with disabilities can get a local diploma with a lower score on the Regents exit exam or by passing an alternative exam that is at a somewhat lower level. NY is phasing up the required scores on the Regents exams for all general education students and eliminating the local diploma for those students. (However, the diploma requirements for all students are undergoing intensive review and requirements may be changed for everyone.)”

^kNorth Carolina: “NC has an occupational course of study that leads to the standard diploma. The OCS is aligned to the general content standards but has a functional approach that prepares students for the world of work.”

^lOhio: “IEP team can exempt certain students from consequences of graduation test.”

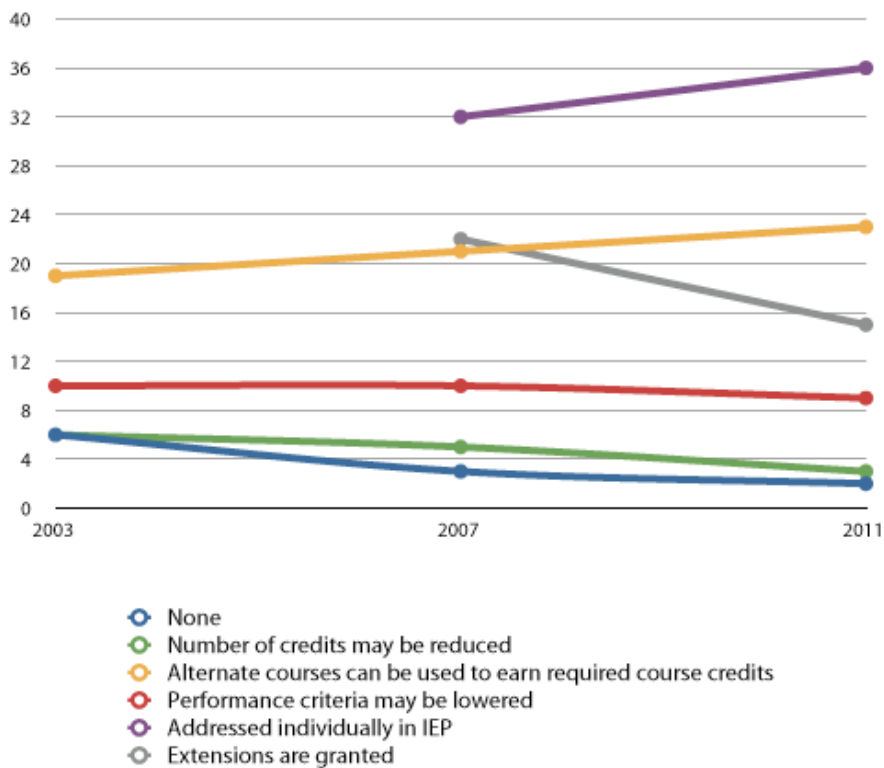
^mRhode Island: “Students remain eligible for special education and related services until they achieve the regular proficiency based diploma or turn age 21.”

ⁿSouth Carolina: “Instructional and testing accommodations.”

^oWest Virginia: “Explanation of above-Perf crit (as per specially designed instruction in gen. ed. setting or separate class), Extensions (students earn partial credit when courses are extended-can be a problem for # credits needed for graduation and time needed for extending).”

^pWisconsin: “Awarding a diploma to any student is a local district decision—each district sets the requirements for a regular diploma and may choose any of the above options.”

Figure 3. Allowances Made for Youth with Disabilities to Receive a Standard Diploma, 2003 - 2011



Involvement of Community Stakeholders

As states and LEAs adopt alternative diplomas, a pressing question is how different diplomas are valued by key community stakeholders. As cited in the literature at the beginning of this report, Hartwig and Sitlington (2008) found a general confusion from post-secondary institutions and the business community about alternative diploma options. As the connection between school and access to postsecondary education and employment increasingly is examined and critiqued, we wondered whether states had involved community stakeholders in policy discussions around alternative diploma options. Table 7 identifies states that involved community stakeholders in discussions about alternative diplomas. Most states established alternative diploma options without outside consultation from postsecondary institutions, businesses, or the general community. However, when a State Education Agency consulted community stakeholders, they were more likely to involve multiple stakeholders. Involving stakeholder groups helps to ensure that these alternative diploma options are understood in terms of their meaning and rigor in relation to the standard diploma. There has been a slight increase in outside stakeholder involvement from 2003 to 2011 (Johnson & Thurlow, 2003; Johnson et al., 2007), but the increase does not appear to be significant. Overall, there remains a considerable lack of engagement of outside input into the development of alternative diplomas.

Table 7. Involvement of Community Stakeholders in Alternative Diploma Discussions

	State Involved Post-Secondary Institutions			State Involved Business Community			State Involved General Community		
	Yes	No	N/A	Yes	No	N/A	Yes	No	N/A
Alabama	•			•			•		
Alaska			•			•	•		
Arizona			•			•			•
Arkansas			•			•			•
California			•			•			•
Colorado		•			•		•		
Connecticut		•			•			•	
Delaware	•			•			•		
District of Columbia			•			•			•
Florida	•			•			•		
Georgia			•			•			•
Hawaii			•			•			•
Idaho		•			•			•	
Illinois			•			•	•		

Table 7. Involvement of Community Stakeholders in Alternative Diploma Discussions (continued)

	State Involved Post-Secondary Institutions			State Involved Business Community			State Involved General Community		
	Yes	No	N/A	Yes	No	N/A	Yes	No	N/A
Indiana	•					•	•		
Iowa		•			•			•	
Kansas			•			•			•
Kentucky			•			•			•
Louisiana	•			•			•		
Maine			•			•			•
Maryland	•			•			•		
Massachusetts			•			•			•
Michigan			•			•			•
Minnesota			•			•			•
Mississippi	•			•			•		
Missouri			•			•			•
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			•			•			•
Utah			•			•			•

Table 7. Involvement of Community Stakeholders in Alternative Diploma Discussions (continued)

	State Involved Post-Secondary Institutions			State Involved Business Community			State Involved General Community		
	Yes	No	N/A	Yes	No	N/A	Yes	No	N/A
Vermont			•			•			•
Virginia	•			•			•		
Washington			•			•			•
West Virginia		•			•			•	
Wisconsin		•			•			•	
Wyoming			•			•			•
Total:	11	7	33	11	7	33	16	5	30

State Data on Students Receiving Alternative Diplomas

We sought to understand whether states maintain data on the number of students receiving each diploma option and whether they did so by disability category. This question was new to the 2011 survey. Although 34 states offered multiple diploma options, only 19 states responded to this question. Only two of the reporting states—California and Colorado—did not keep student data on youth with disabilities receiving each diploma option. Twelve states have their data available by disability category; Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, New York, and Oregon do not differentiate by disability category. Results from this question can be examined in Table 8.

Table 8. State Data on Students Receiving Alternative 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?		N/A
	YES	NO	YES	NO	
Alabama	•		•		
California		•		•	
Colorado		•		•	
Connecticut	•		•		
Florida	•		•		
Illinois	•		•		
Indiana	•			•	
Iowa	•				• ^a

Table 8. State Data on Students Receiving Alternative Diploma (continued)

	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?		N/A
	YES	NO	YES	NO	
Kansas	•				• ^b
Louisiana	•		•		
Mississippi	•		•		
Nebraska	•		•		
Nevada	•		•		
New Mexico	•		•		
New York	•			•	
Oregon	•			•	
Texas	•		•		
Virginia	•		•		
Wisconsin	•		•		
Total:	17	2	12	5	2

^a“We do not collect data on disability category. We are clear in our communications that certificates of attendance or completion are not ‘high school diplomas.’”

^b“The number of students with and without disabilities who graduate are reported and disaggregated into two groups: students who don’t have disabilities and IEPs and those students that do have disabilities with IEPs. The data only are reported for those who graduate with a regular hs diploma regardless of their disability. We have the capability of disaggregating the data by student disability category who receive a regular [high school] diploma but we are not required to report the data in such a manner. We do not collect or report data on students with disabilities and IEPs who receive an alternative form of diploma, such as a Certificate of Attendance or Achievement. These types of certificates are not recognized as diplomas in our state.”

Exit Exams and “High Stakes” Testing

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 exit exams as a means of benchmarking student performance and as a means for receiving a high school diploma. The term “high-stakes testing” has been associated with the use of these exit exams. When the receipt of a high school diploma is contingent on passing certain exit exams, high-stakes testing applies.

Table 9 notes that 25 states have exit exams and 25 states and the District of Columbia do not. Johnson, Thurlow, and Stout (2007) reported that 24 states had exit exams in the previous survey. The 2011 survey would indicate that there has been an increase in the number of states that use exit exams—although not the increase to 28 as the Center on Education Policy (2010) reported for 2010, or even to 25 as reported by the Center on Education Policy (2011) for 2011.

One explanation of the discrepancy between our survey results and the results of the Center on Education Policy survey could be the phase-in timing of implementing exit exams. For example, some states have begun to administer exit exams but have not yet begun to withhold diplomas based on examination results. There can also be different interpretations of what an exit exam is or differences in the date of implementation considered. Of interest in Table 9: two states (Arizona and California) do not require students with disabilities to pass an exit exam to receive a regular high school diploma, but all students without a disability must pass the exit exam.

Table 9. States Requiring Youth to Pass a State Exit Exam in Order to Receive a High School Diploma

	No	Yes, but just for students WITH disabilities only	Yes, but just for students WITHOUT disabilities only	Yes, both students with and without disabilities
Alabama				•
Alaska				•
Arizona			•	
Arkansas	•			
California			•	
Colorado	•			
Connecticut	•			
Delaware	•			
District of Columbia	•			
Florida				•
Georgia				•
Hawaii	•			
Idaho				•
Illinois	•			
Indiana				•
Iowa	•			
Kansas	•			
Kentucky	•			
Louisiana				•
Maine	•			
Maryland				•
Massachusetts				•
Michigan	•			

Table 9. States Requiring Youth to Pass a State Exit Exam in Order to Receive a High School Diploma (continued)

	No	Yes, but just for students WITH disabilities only	Yes, but just for students WITHOUT disabilities only	Yes, both students with and without disabilities
Minnesota				•
Mississippi				•
Missouri	•			
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				•
Utah				•
Vermont	•			
Virginia				•
Washington				•
West Virginia	•			
Wisconsin	•			
Wyoming	•			
Total:	26	0	2	23

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 10, of the 24 states that answered this question, all kept state records of the number of students taking the text exam. Ten states made this information available by disability category. As most states stated, 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 exam.

In comparison with the 2007 survey results, there was an increase in the number of states that are maintaining records of students taking the exit exam and also in states that have data available by disability category (Johnson et al, 2011). In 2007, 19 states reported that they kept records on how youth with disabilities performed on exit exams. In 2011, 24 states reported that they kept records. Eight states reported that records were available by disability category in 2007, while in 2011 ten states reported that records were available by disability category.

Table 10. State Record Keeping on Students Taking the Exit Exam

	YES	NO	Data Available by Disability Category?
Alabama	•		•
Arizona	•		
California	•		•
Florida	•		•
Georgia	•		
Idaho	•		
Indiana	•		
Louisiana	•		
Maryland	•		•
Massachusetts	•		•
Minnesota	•		
Mississippi	•		•
Nevada	•		
New Jersey	•		
New Mexico	•		
New York	•		
Ohio	•		•
Oklahoma	•		
Rhode Island	•		

Table 10. State Record Keeping on Students Taking the Exit Exam (continued)

	YES	NO	Data Available by Disability Category?
South Carolina	•		•
Texas	•		
Utah	•		
Virginia	•		•
Washington	•		•
Total:	24		10

Other Exit Exam Information

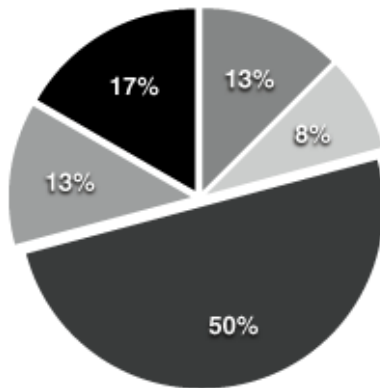
In the 2011 survey, several questions were added to better understand how exit exams functioned in each state. We first wanted to understand the grade at which a student is first able to take the exit exam. This is important in that some students may need more opportunity to prepare for the exit exam as well as several opportunities to earn a passing score. Table 11 indicates that half of the states with an exit exam offer the exam in grade 10 (see also Figure 4). Three states—Minnesota, Mississippi, and New Mexico—allow the exit exam to be taken beginning at grade 8; Georgia, New Jersey, and Rhode Island set the exit exam at grade 11. Four states used end-of-course exams, which has become a recent trend in educational policy (CEP, 2010). End-of-course exams test specific content knowledge and occur more frequently than a general exit exam. This may eliminate an “all or nothing” scenario in exit exams, but also could shift the contingency of graduation onto a single academic subject in which a student struggles. More research needs to be conducted on end-of-course exams in order to explore the positives and negatives of such a policy.

Next we asked whether states had separate exit exams for different content areas, or whether they had one comprehensive exit exam that covered multiple content areas. Only five states—New Jersey, New Mexico, Rhode Island, Utah, and Washington—had one comprehensive exam that included content from several content areas. We also asked all states that required an exit exam what content areas were tested. These results can be seen in Table 12 and Figure 5. The most common content areas to test on the exit exam were math (24 states) and reading (24 states) with writing (19 states) following closely behind. Twelve states include science as a required subject on their exit exam and 9 states required social studies.

Table 11. The Grade Students First Take the Exit Exam

	6	7	8	9	10	11	At end of each course
Alabama					•		
Arizona					•		
California					•		
Florida					•		
Georgia						•	
Idaho					•		
Indiana				•			
Louisiana					•		
Maryland							•
Massachusetts					•		
Minnesota			•				
Mississippi			•				
Nevada					•		
New Hampshire							
New Jersey						•	
New Mexico			•				
New York							•
Ohio					•		
Oklahoma							•
Rhode Island						•	
South Carolina					•		
Texas					•		
Utah					•		
Virginia							•
Washington				•			
Total:	0	0	3	2	12	3	4

Figure 4. The Grade Students First Take the Exit Exam



- 8th grade
- 9th grade
- 10th grade
- 11th grade
- At end of each course

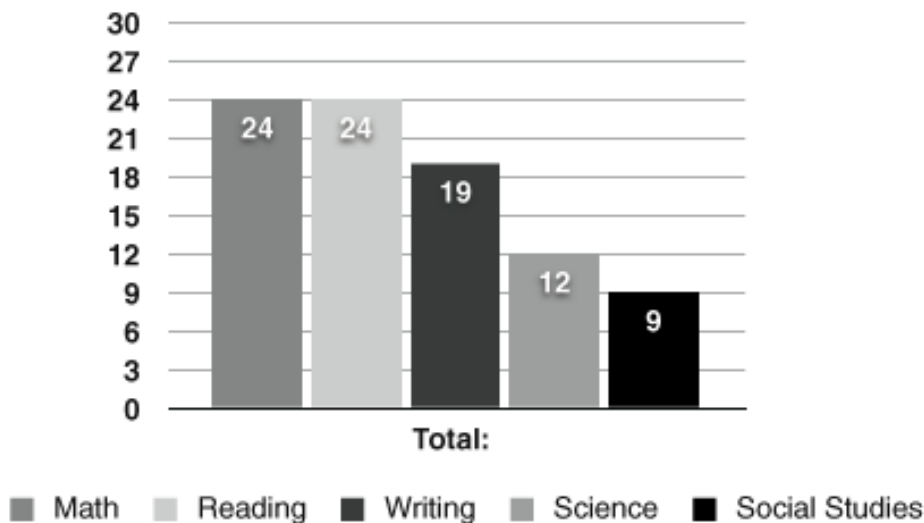
Table 12. Content Tested on the Exit Exam

	Math	Reading	Writing	Science	Social Studies	Other (as reported out)
Alabama	•	•	•	•	•	
Arizona	•	•	•	•		
California	•	•	•			
Florida	•	•				
Georgia	•	•	•	•	•	
Idaho	•	•	•	•		
Illinois						
Indiana	•	•	•			
Louisiana	•	•		•	•	
Maryland	•	•			•	“Government and English 10”
Massachusetts	•	•	•	•		“One of four science/engineering tests”
Minnesota	•	•	•			
Mississippi	•	•		•	•	“English I, Biology II, Algebra I, U.S. History 1877 to Present”
Nevada	•	•	•	•		

Table 12. Content Tested on the Exit Exam (continued)

	Math	Reading	Writing	Science	Social Studies	Other (as reported out)
New Jersey	•	•	•			
New Mexico	•	•	•			
New York	•	•	•	•	•	“Global Studies, American History, Science, and some students take more”
Ohio	•	•		•	•	
Oklahoma	•	•	•	•	•	“United States History”
Rhode Island	•	•	•			
South Carolina	•	•	•			
Texas	•	•	•	•	•	
Utah	•	•	•			
Virginia	•	•	•			
Washington	•	•	•			
Total:	24	24	19	12	9	

Figure 5. Content Tested on the Exit Exam



When asked whether states used the SAT or ACT as the exit exam in their state, 18 states responded that they did not. However, some states allowed the SAT or ACT to act as a replacement for a passing score on the state exit exam. We found that six states—Florida, Idaho, Maryland,

New York, Texas, and Virginia—allowed SAT or ACT scores to take the place of the exit exam. Results from this question can be found in Table 13.

Table 13. Use of the SAT or ACT in Place of the Exit Exam

	Yes	No	If yes, what score on the SAT or ACT must students receive to be exempt from taking the exit exam?
Alabama		•	
Arizona		•	
California		•	
Florida	•		“SAT Reading - 420; Math 340; ACT Reading 18; Math 15”
Georgia		•	
Idaho	•		“This is not a state alternate option but may be one at the LEA level, so the scores are established by them. It could also be an option chosen by an IEP team and again that would be set by the team.”
Indiana		•	
Louisiana		•	
Maryland	•		
Massachusetts		•	
Minnesota		•	
Mississippi		•	
Nevada		•	
New Jersey		•	
New Mexico		•	
New York	•		
Ohio		•	
Oklahoma		•	
Rhode Island		•	
South Carolina		•	
Texas	•		“This is being phased in presently.”
Utah		•	
Virginia	•		
Washington		•	
Total:	6	18	

Accommodations Given for Exit Exams

Although 25 states reported that they required students to pass an exit exam in order to receive a high school diploma, not all states held youth with disabilities to this same requirement. Table 14 shows that 18 states held both students with and without disabilities to the same criteria (with one state not reporting). Four states with exit exams—Arizona, Nevada, Texas, and Utah—reported that they did not require students with disabilities to pass an exit exam in order to receive a high school diploma.

As also indicated in Table 14, some accommodations were permitted in the exit exam results. Five states allowed different passing scores for students with disabilities and students without disabilities. Six states allowed different passing scores and different tests to be used for the two groups of students. There has been very little variation in this finding between 2007 and 2011. Johnson, Thurlow, and Stout (2007) found that 18 states used the same test and same passing score for students with and without disabilities, 4 states used the same test but different passing scores, and 4 states used different tests and different scores.

Table 14. 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
Alabama	•		
Arizona			
California	•		
Florida	•		
Georgia	•		
Idaho	•		
Indiana	•		
Louisiana			•
Maryland	•		
Massachusetts	•		
Minnesota	•	•	•
Mississippi	•	•	•
Nevada			
New Jersey	•		

Table 14. Requiring Youth with Disabilities to Pass the Exit Exam (continued)

	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
New Mexico	•	•	
New York		•	•
Ohio	•		•
Oklahoma	•		
Rhode Island	•		
South Carolina	•		
Texas			
Utah			
Washington	•	•	•
Total:	17	5	6

Note: Virginia did not respond to this survey question.

For a student who failed the exit exam, all states allowed that student to retake part or all of the exit exam. Table 15 shows that 15 states permit students to retake the same exam or section of the exam. Twelve states allow students to take an alternative exam or test section. Idaho, Minnesota, Mississippi, Nevada, and Texas allowed students who had failed the exit exam to take an entirely different exam. Florida, Idaho, Mississippi, and New Jersey allowed students to petition for an exemption to the required exit exam and still receive a high school diploma.

Testing accommodations attempt to mitigate the effects of a disability from a student’s demonstration of their knowledge and skills. Allowable testing accommodations are usually present in a student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP). Accommodations involve changes to procedures or materials used in the testing process. However, some accommodations are considered “non-approved” and are often called “modification” (Thurlow, in press; Thurlow, Thompson, & Johnstone, 2007) when they alter the construct being tested or the comparability of scores (Thurlow & Wiener, 2000). Table 16 shows that 8 states allowed non-approved accommodations (i.e., modifications) on exit exams in order to earn a standard diploma—as opposed to an alternate diploma or certificate—while 12 states reported that they did not allow non-approved accommodations on exit exams.

When asked whether states thought that the use of accommodations for exit exams had increased in the past 3 to 4 years, slightly over 50% reported that accommodations had increased (36 states did not respond to this question). Figure 6 shows the results of this survey question compared to the results of the 2007 survey (Johnson et al., 2007). The reader will note that there has been an apparent decrease in the use of accommodations between 2007 and 2011.

Table 15. 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	How many times can a student retake the exam?
Alabama		•			"Unlimited"
Arizona	•				
California	•				"Twice in grade 11, 3-5 times in grade 12, and 3 times per year as adult."
Florida	•			•	"Minimum of two times."
Georgia	•				"Unlimited"
Idaho	•	•	•	•	"Up to 2xs per year"
Indiana	•				"Once per semester"
Louisiana		•			
Maryland		•			"It depends on when the student first takes the course for credit. The student can take it as many times as it is offered."
Massachusetts	•	•			"As many as they want"
Minnesota			•		"Must follow established retest schedule"
Mississippi		•	•	•	"Unlimited"
Nevada			•		"Every time it is offered until they reach 22 years of age"
New Jersey	•	•		•	"Twice in the senior year"
New Mexico	•	•			"One - then a portfolio option"
New York	•				"Unlimited"
Ohio	•				"Until he/she passes, several times a year for three years"
Oklahoma	•	•			"Unlimited"

Table 15. Consequences of Failing the Exit Exam (continued)

	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	How many times can a student retake the exam?
Rhode Island	•				"One"
South Carolina		•			"As many as needed"
Texas			•		"As many times as necessary"
Utah	•				"Total of 5 attempts"
Virginia		•			"No limit in policy"
Washington	•	•			"According to a published schedule"
Total:	15	12	5	4	

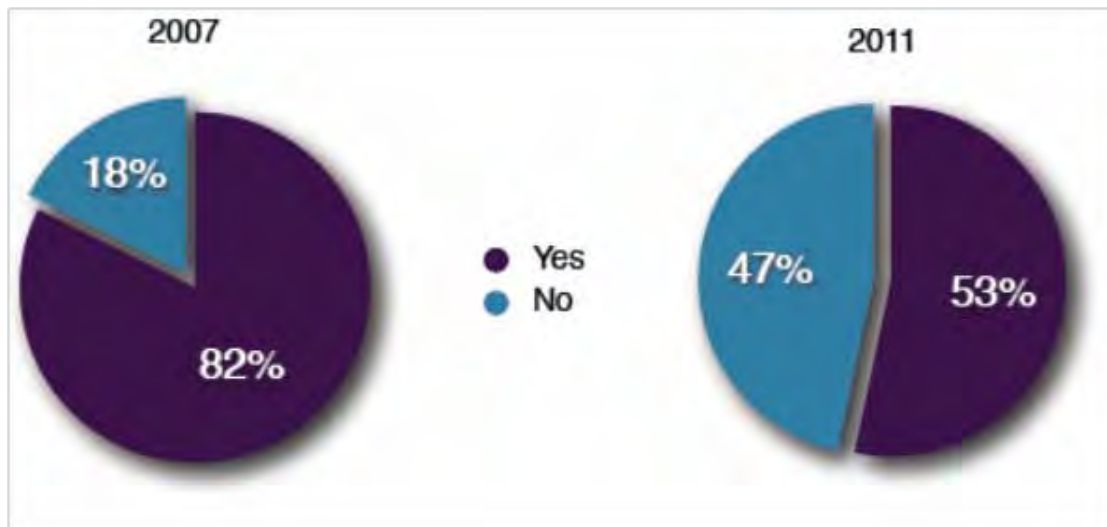
Table 16. The Use of Non-Approved Accommodations (Modifications) on Exit Exams to Earn a Standard Diploma

	Yes	No
Alabama		•
California	•	
Florida	•	
Georgia		•
Idaho	•	
Indiana		•
Louisiana		•
Maryland	•	
Massachusetts	•	
Minnesota	•	
Mississippi		•
New Jersey		•
New Mexico		•
New York		•
Ohio		•
Oklahoma		•
Rhode Island	•	

Table 16. The Use of Non-Approved Accommodations (Modifications) on Exit Exams to Earn a Standard Diploma (continued)

	Yes	No
South Carolina		•
Virginia	•	
Washington		•
Total:	8	12

Figure 6. Increase in the Use of Accommodations for Exit Exams Since 2007



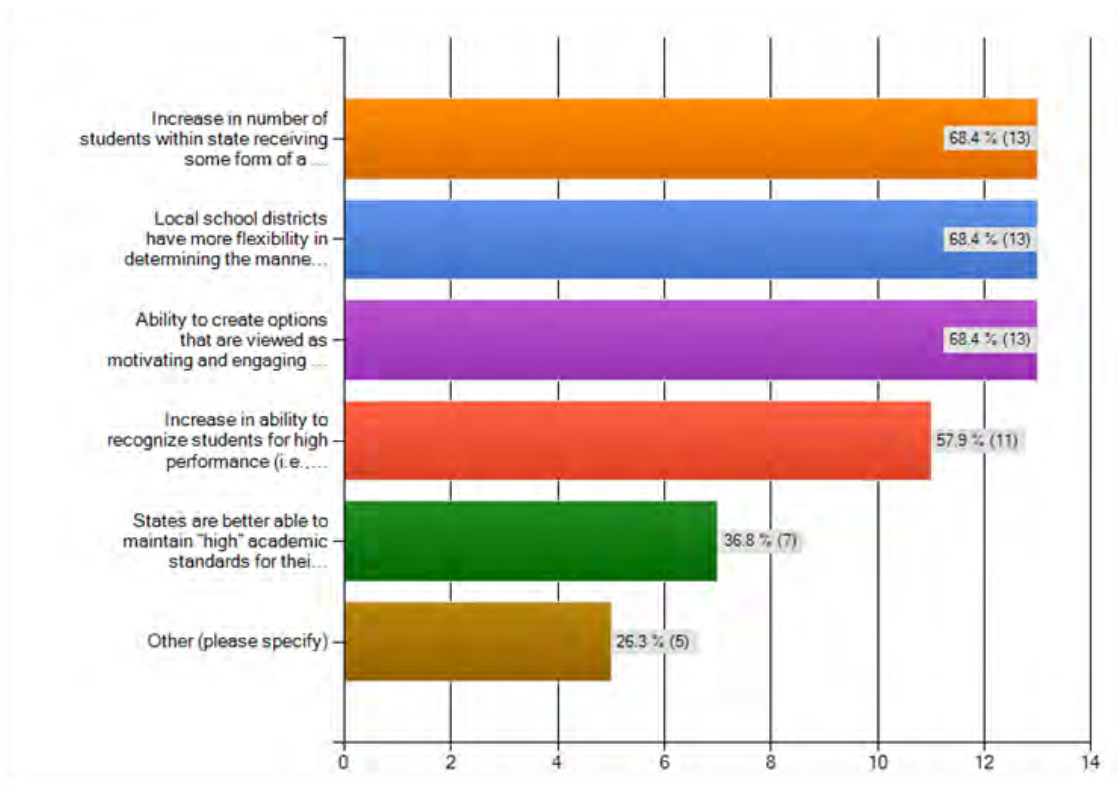
Intended and Unintended Consequences of State Graduation Requirements and Diploma Options

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 alternative 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. Figures 7-14 summarizes state responses in relation to these policies and practices.

Figure 7. Possible INTENDED Consequences of Having Multiple Diploma Options

Answer choices:

- Increase in number of students within state receiving some form of a high school diploma
- Local school districts have more flexibility in determining the manner of student exit
- Ability to create options that are viewed as motivating and engaging for students with disabilities reduces the dropout rate
- Increase in ability to recognize students for high performance (i.e., via honors diplomas)
- States are better able to maintain “high” academic standards for their regular or standard diplomas when alternative diploma options are available



Additional state comments (anonymous):

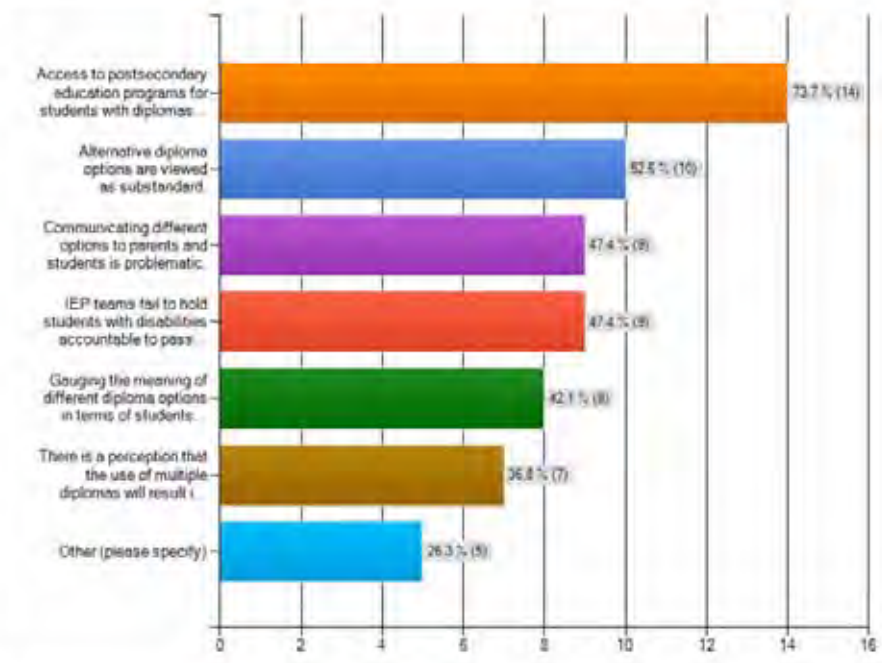
“Students are potentially able to obtain more than one diploma option (e.g., certificate of completion and a regular diploma) depending upon local district policy.”

“Certificate of attendance for students with disabilities has always existed as allowed under IDEA.”

Figure 8. Possible UNINTENDED Consequences of Having Multiple Diploma Options

Answer choices:

- Access to postsecondary education programs for students with diplomas other than the standard diploma is limited if the alternative diplomas are viewed as watered-down in content or of little meaning to postsecondary education admissions staff
- Alternative diploma options are viewed as substandard
- Communicating different options to parents and students is problematic
- IEP teams fail to hold students with disabilities accountable to pass high-school exit exams—expectations are lowered for some students with disabilities
- Gauging the meaning of different diploma options in terms of students' skills and abilities is confusing for employers
- There is a perception that the use of multiple diplomas will result in developing “special” tracks for students to follow



Additional state comments (anonymous):

“Diplomas are valuable (economically and personally) to all students. Since students have multiple interests and differing abilities, there need to be multiple ways to show their attainment of core academic skills leading to a diploma.”

“In [our state], LEA’s have the power to create multiple options. My experience is that multiple diploma options is an undesirable slippery slope for [students with disabilities].”

“[Multiple diploma options] have a negligible impact.”

“There is only one diploma that counts for graduation from high school. If the LEA offers a certificate of attendance or achievement, it does not count as a graduation diploma.”

"[My state] is providing statewide Transition Trainings to special education teachers, counselors, administrators, LEA representatives, school psychologists, etc. One important part of this training is to help IEP teams explain the adjusted vs. standard diploma to individuals with disabilities and their families so they are aware of how the various diploma options may limit options in postsecondary education, training, or employment opportunities."

"In recent years some school districts have chosen to set policy to keep students with mild to moderate disabilities on the standard diploma path until their exiting year of high school to keep them in general education classes with content area experts longer, raising the expectations toward achievement of a standard diploma. The data shows that the greater the % time spent in the general education setting, the greater the % graduating with the standard diploma."

"[Multiple diploma options] increased graduation rates."

"[In my state] the IEP diploma is not recognized as a regular diploma and is not accepted for admission to postsecondary colleges or for military enrollment. We are currently reviewing our IEP diploma, which has been misunderstood by many students and families, and are working toward a recommendation to replace it with a career and work readiness credential that would describe a student's skills much more specifically. We are considering making this credential available to a student who does not receive a regular diploma as well as to one who does."

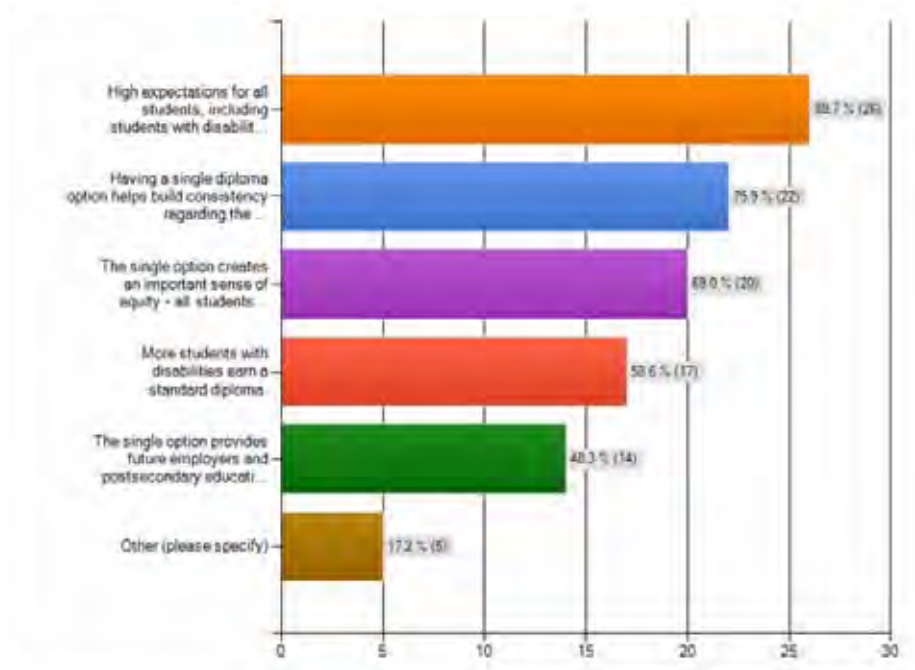
"[Multiple diploma options] reduced graduation rates (since only a regular diploma is considered to end FAPE and result in true graduation versus aging out or moving into another system)."

Figure 9. Possible INTENDED Consequences of a Single Diploma Option

Answer choices:

- High expectations for all students, including students with disabilities, are maintained
- 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
- 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
- More students with disabilities earn a standard diploma
- The single option provides future employers and postsecondary education institutions with a clearer and more detailed record of the student's performance

Figure 9. Possible INTENDED Consequences of a Single Diploma Option (continued)



Additional state comments (anonymous):

"We believe it's the right thing to do, but in a local control state we cannot stop local districts from providing certain certificates that soften the decision for some students to leave. This does NOT end their recognized right to continue to attend public school until a full regular diploma is earned or till they complete their 21st year."

"All students get the same diploma - there are options in how to get there."

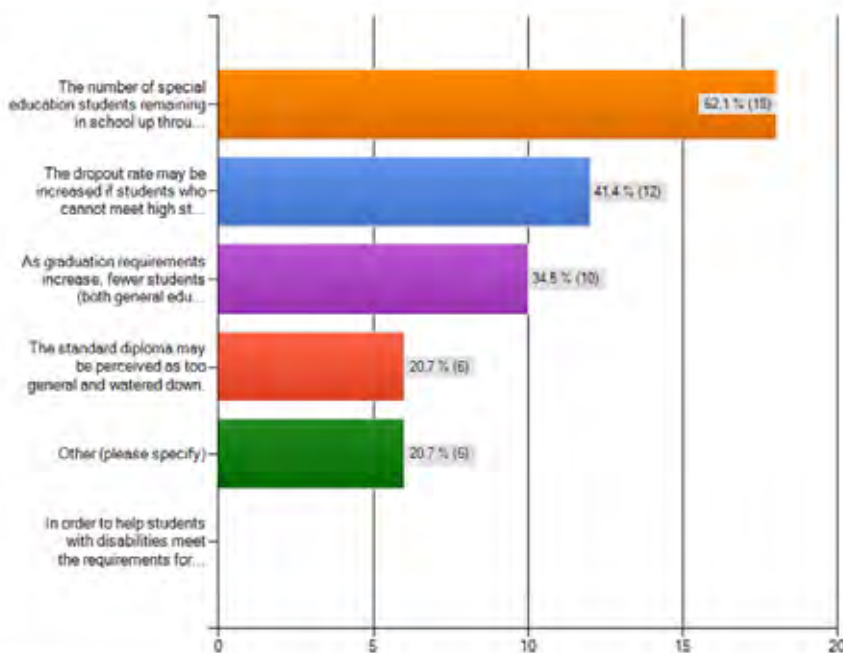
"Access to the general education curriculum in the least restrictive setting."

Figure 10. Possible UNINTENDED Consequences of a Single Diploma Option

Answer choices:

- The number of special education students remaining in school up through age 21 may increase because they cannot meet all of the requirements for a standard diploma earlier
- The dropout rate may be increased if students who cannot meet high standards or who cannot pass statewide tests opt to drop out
- As graduation requirements increase, fewer students (both general education and special education) actually receive the standard diploma
- The standard diploma may be perceived as too general and watered down
- In order to help students with disabilities meet the requirements for a standard diploma, states may lower their overall standards for general education students

Figure 10. Possible UNINTENDED Consequences of a Single Diploma Option (continued)



Additional state comments (anonymous):

“Strategies and data analysis designed to reduce unintended consequences.”

“All are ‘possible’ but our dropout rate is actually declining. We have also passed a law that mandates public school attendance until the age of 18 (up from age 16).”

“The development of research based transition programs for students remaining eligible beyond the typical four years. We have seen new programs in community settings emerge.”

“Special education is being increasingly challenged to treat all children the same although we should be individualizing their education. The system is not flexible. Students with disabilities who cannot reach those standards are left with no options.”

“I believe it instills we have high expectations for ALL our students.”

“IEP teams have to be focused on the student’s post school goals rather than just the receipt of a diploma. This is important as they design accommodations or adaptation to the graduation requirements to ensure that the student is prepared for entrance into post secondary and employment.”

“Parents may need individual explanations related to their child and the strategies for completion of the requirements.”

“The certificate of attendance is only used for kids with disabilities if they age out at age 21.”

“Raising expectations for students with disabilities has improved their educational outcomes, not without pain, but the shift in expectations has been critically important—and requires much support for their teachers and teams.”

“[My state] is a one diploma state but also a local control state. This creates a bit of a paradox. Despite the fact that some school districts do have certain late stage ‘certificates,’ [my state] only recognizes one full and regular HS diploma. The continuing rights of students with disabilities even if they do receive such a certificate—are understood by our district teams and are enforced by the state.”

“The advocacy community supports the single diploma option [in my state].”

“Overall [the single diploma] has worked fine. It is the course of study that has been individualized in the IEP when appropriate. State legislators passed legislation last spring that allows an optional curriculum path for students failing a percentage of courses or in a certain percentile range. This is intended for any student that meets the criteria.”

"The special ed. grad. rate is up, dropout rate is down in three years data. Fifth year retention rate up. New transition programs with community based focus emerging. Continued pressure from LEAs to develop alternative diploma."

"[My state] has an exploratory group researching an occupational course of study that leads to a high school diploma."

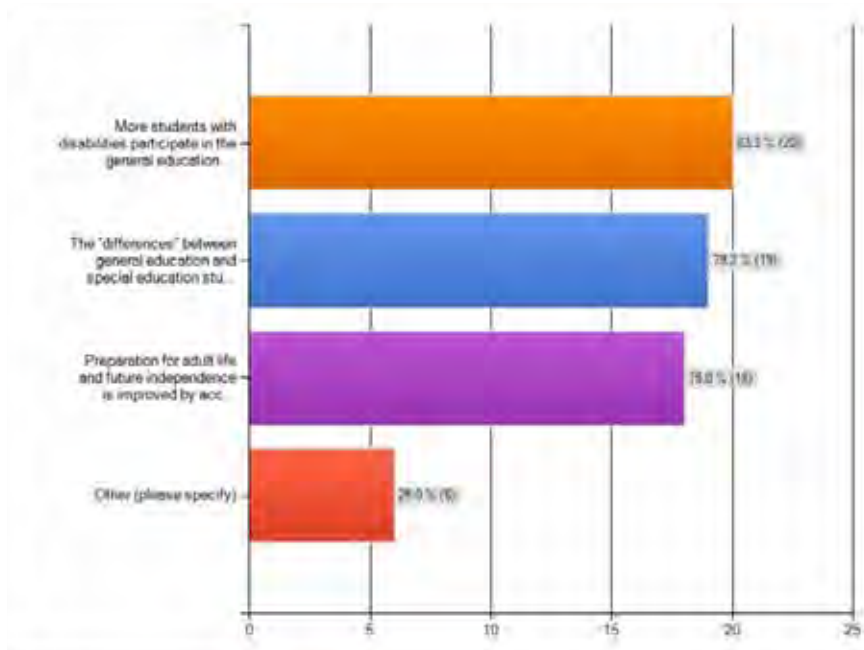
"[In my state], the new standards became effective with the incoming freshman class last fall (2009-10 school year). The first diplomas earned via the new standards will be granted in the spring of 2013. The State Board of Education made it clear that the Certificate of Special Education, just as with the Certificate of Attendance, WAS NOT a [High School] Diploma since students receiving those exit documents had not satisfied the rigorous requirements for the diploma."

"Some parents and educators have expressed concerns about [students with disabilities] ability to meet the increased math and science requirements. The State Legislature has changed the exit exam requirements; the Class of 2010 will be the last class required to participate until a new exit exam is developed and implemented for the Class of 2014."

Figure 11. Possible INTENDED Consequences of the Exit Exam Requirement

Answer choices:

- More students with disabilities participate in the general education curriculum and achieve good results
- 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
- Preparation for adult life and future independence is improved by accessing postsecondary education and employment



Additional state comments (anonymous):

“To ensure students attain the knowledge and skills in the standards assessed in the exit examination.”

“Although students with disabilities are required to pass the exam, there is a waiver of the exam available for students whose IEP team determines that the exam does not measure student’s achievement.”

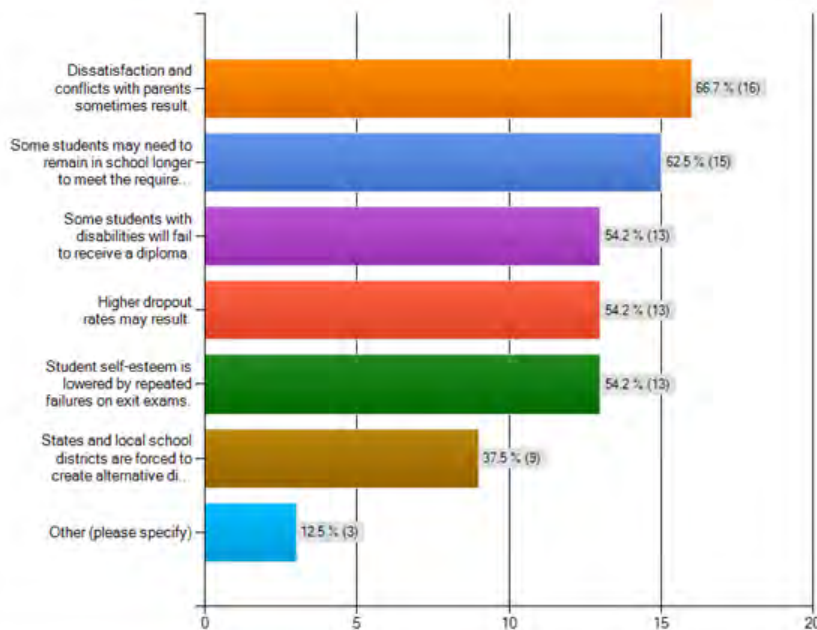
“I would like to specify that while we do have an adjusted diploma option which does not require students with disabilities to pass the Exam, they do have to pass the Exam to earn a standard diploma.”

“I think all of these consequences were INTENDED when the law was written. No one has determined if they have actually occurred.”

Figure 12. Possible UNINTENDED Consequences of the Exit Exam Requirement

Answer choices:

- Dissatisfaction and conflicts with parents sometimes result
- Some students may need to remain in school longer to meet the requirements of the standard diploma
- Some students with disabilities will fail to receive a diploma
- Higher dropout rates may result
- Student self-esteem is lowered by repeated failures on exit exams
- States and local school districts are forced to create alternative diplomas and pathways to ensure that students exit with some form of a high school exit credential



Additional state comments (anonymous):

“[Exit exams] makes it much harder for students with disabilities to acquire a standard diploma.”

“[The state exit exam] has upheld high standards; however, some students with disabilities even with mild impairments are not prepared to pass the rigor of the exam.”

"[The exit exam] has increased the efforts of local school systems to include students with disabilities in content courses at the secondary level."

"Exit exams require districts to raise expectations for students to meet the standards that are being evaluated. For students with disabilities, an absolute prescription of a broad range of subject areas to be tested may put those with particular problem areas at a disadvantage."

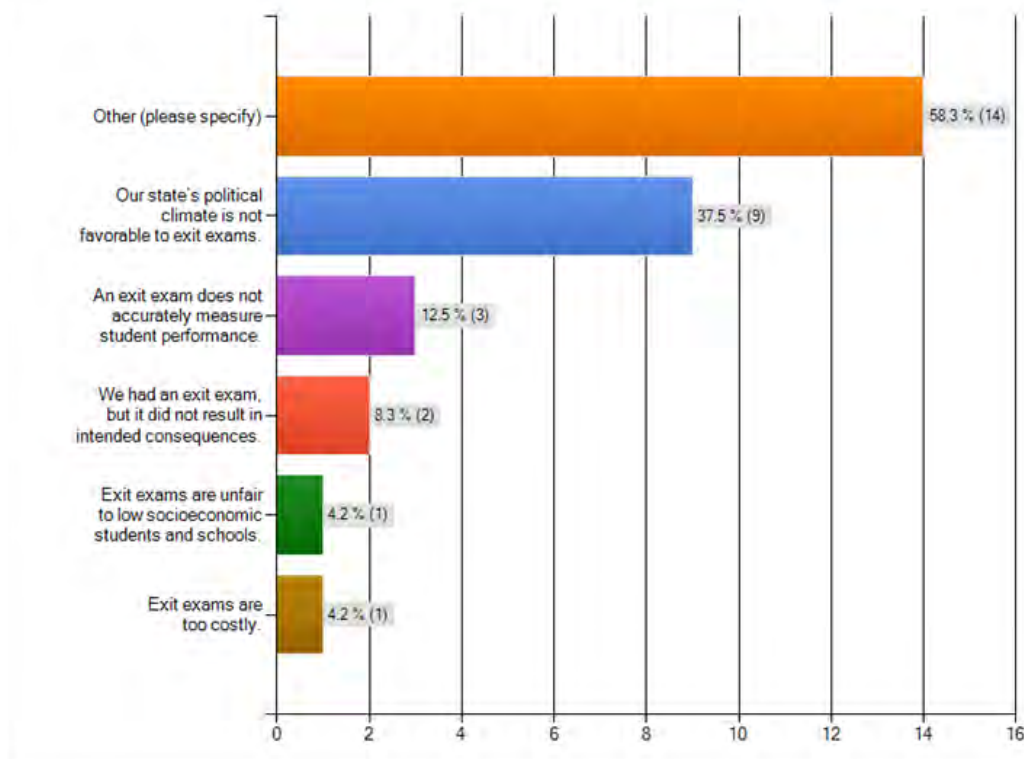
"We hear anecdotes/media sensations about most of these. However, we have no evidence to support a causal relationship."

"The dropout rate for [students with disabilities] has actually decreased during the last 4-5 years, despite worries that the exit exam would increase the rate. The state rules allowed students who participated in the exam, but did not pass all three sections, to receive a diploma that indicated the student did not pass the exit exam. [Students with disabilities] could substitute participation in the alternate assessment for the exit exam to meet graduation requirements."

Additional Questions

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 Figure 13. A variety of factors "other" than those listed in the question were identified by states.

Figure 13. Factors That Played a Role in the Decision Not to Require an Exit Exam



Additional state comments (anonymous):

"[We] felt it was more meaningful to test knowledge throughout high school than at the end of four years with an exit exam."

"[Our state] recently made a change effective the graduating class of 2018. Students will now have end of the school year examinations for the following courses: (A) Algebra I, (B) geometry, (C) biology, (D) American history, and (E) grade ten English."

"[My state] is a local control state. Therefore, an LEA may require an exit exam, but the SEA does not require students to take an exit exam."

[Exit exams in my state] are currently being discussed as a possibility."

"[My state] uses a system of course competencies that must be demonstrated. This is a more distributed form of assessment that is believed to serve a similar purpose to a 'formal HS exit exam' in what we believe is a more fair manner. Competency assessments are, essentially, through course assessments."

"[We are] currently in a curriculum and accountability reform effort."

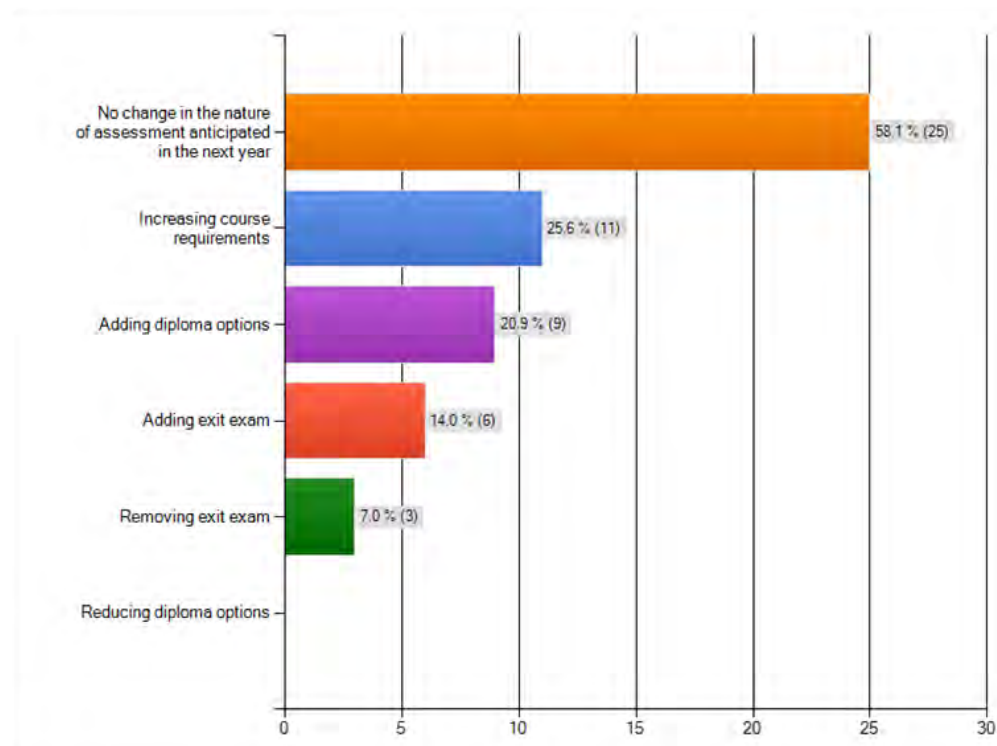
"Students are required to pass an exam to determine if they are proficient in the essential skills of reading, writing, and math but we do not consider it an exit exam."

"[My state] has a strong history of local control of education and exit exams have not had strong support at that level."

"[We] initiated the development of an exit exam but did not complete it due to cost and logistical issues."

States also were asked to indicate discussions taking place about exit exams and diploma options. About half the states indicated that no change was anticipated in the next year. Other states indicated an array of changes (see Figure 14).

Figure 14. Discussions Currently Taking Place About Exit Exams and Diploma Options



Additional state comments (anonymous):

"[We] may move from subject specific exams (at 11th grade level) to end of course exams."

"[Our state is] developing a pilot study to investigate the feasibility of having an alternate to our exit exam."

"All decisions made about increasing course requirements and end of course exams effect the graduating class of 2018."

"[My state is] currently in the process of adapting a new statewide comprehensive assessment system. To date an exit exam is not part of the system. The system will provide the SEA and LEAs the ability to measure a student's performance throughout the year. As a student's performance is measured the educator will be able to tailor classroom instruction [with] the data measured through the assessment system."

"[We are] currently working on clarifying state rules to apply to the new governance structure for all schools in the District."

"[My state] is moving towards end of course exams for a standard high school diploma, and we are also exploring the opportunity to revise the special diploma requirements."

"The exam that is used is the state assessment for AYP requirements. Students are required to meet the proficient level on the 10th grade standards assessment. LEAs must have in place an alternate mechanism that students can use to demonstrate proficiency on the standards if they are not able to do so using the test. This is available to all students regardless of disability. In addition to this the IEP can establish the method that the student will use to demonstrate proficiency."

"[Our state is] moving to end of course exams."

"[We are discussing an] exit exam in Social Studies."

"[My state] has one exit exam for all students; however, the IEP determines graduation."

"[Our state is] having extensive discussions on the graduation requirements, course content, assessment options and diploma options. These changes cannot be put into place next year but the work with RTTT and the various assessment consortia may influence some of this."

"[Our] entire assessment system will be changing in the next couple of years. So, the nature of assessment will change, although some form of exit exam will remain."

"Since the new HS diploma standards became effective this year with the incoming freshman class, students in grades 10, 11 and 12 will still have to pass the [state] exit exams to graduate with a regular diploma."

"[Our state] is changing to end of course exams for exit grades."

"The current exit exam will be removed. The department is mandated to develop and implement a different method of assessing basic skills by 2014."

"[We are discussing the following:] 1. Adding standard and advanced diploma options for all that show recognition for completing career/technical programs. 2. Development of assessment on Modified Achievement Standards for verified credit in end-of-course tests for standard and advanced diplomas."

Discussion

The educational policy response to growing public criticism that students are exiting our high schools lacking the skills and knowledge required to be productive (e.g., economic) citizens has been to introduce accountability into the system. However, accountability measures have been uneven and often represent political and principled motivations. In the face of global economic competition, it seems the U.S. is constantly trying to gauge its relational standing in education

by high-stakes accountability. This involves rewarding or sanctioning students, teachers, and schools on the basis of a limited range of criteria such as test scores or graduation rates.

Since the mid-1980s, and more recently, legislation such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, have raised the stakes on educational accountability. The Obama administration, with its “Race to the Top” education initiative, has squarely focused on results-orientated educational policy. ESEA requires annual testing, although it does not as yet require exit exams to be linked to receiving a high school diploma. Another tenet of ESEA (USDoE, 2011) is its emphasis on educational accountability based on student test scores. While controversy regarding this policy continues in public debate (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2007), this policy is being supported in discussions of the next reauthorization of ESEA (USDoE, 2011).

For students with disabilities, graduation policies and testing approaches continue to be a challenge for state and local districts. IDEA requires that all students with disabilities participate in general education testing and accountability systems, which is also reinforced by requirements in ESEA. Both laws also require that accommodations “as appropriate” be made to facilitate greater inclusion of students with disabilities in accountability. These accommodations ensure that a student with a disability represents him or herself faithfully and improves the validity of the results of the testing instrument (Koretz, 2008). The inclusion of students with disabilities into high-stakes testing situations can be difficult for states trying to balance the interpretation of “appropriate accommodation” with the political needs of appearing to have high standards. Lang, Elliot, Bolt, and Kratochwill (2008) found that while test accommodations do have a statistically significant effect on the test scores of students with disabilities, the vast majority of students without disabilities who were surveyed indicated that accommodations for students with disabilities in high-stakes testing situations were “fair” and “just.”

A comparison of the 2011 graduation requirements survey results with previous surveys (Thurlow, Ysseldyke, & Anderson, 1995; Guy et al., 1999; Johnson & Thurlow, 2003; Johnson et al., 2007) finds that states are perpetually adjusting allowances, accommodations, diploma options, and other requirements. What was once a trend for two survey cycles now trends in a different direction. For example, the increase in the use of accommodations has lessened between 2007 and 2011 (Johnson et al., 2007). Between 2003 (Johnson & Thurlow, 2003) and 2011, however, the number of allowances for students with disabilities to receive the standard diploma has both increased and decreased in different categories in different years.

There is a strong trend of states controlling and increasing graduation requirements. Figure 1 (High School Graduation Requirements for Youth with Disabilities, 2003–2011) shows that since 2003, there has been movement in determining who makes decisions about graduation requirements used in states. In 2003, 61% of states did not allow LEAs to have any say in

graduation requirement decisions (Johnson & Thurlow, 2003). In 2007, 67% of states did not allow LEAs to have a say in graduation requirement decisions (Johnson et al., 2007). By 2011, this number has increased to 88% of states. There is a clear trend of standardization occurring among the states. A majority of states (34) have also increased their graduation requirements since 2007.

A wide range of diploma options continue to be available to students with and without disabilities. The study documented that only 17 states offered just the standard diploma, with the remaining states offering multiple diploma options to students with and without disabilities. This was a decrease from 2007, when 18 states offered the single diploma option only (Johnson, Thurlow, & Stout, 2007). That same 2007 study noted that the general trend at that time was for states to decrease some of the diploma options while increasing others. In this survey, we found that almost all diploma option categories either remained at the same level or increased in number from 2007. The only exception was a decrease in the number of states issuing an honors diploma, which is the opposite trend noted in 2007 (Johnson et al.). In 2011, while the honors diploma option decreased amongst states, the IEP/Special Education diploma and the Certificate of Achievement increased by five states each.

The challenge remains to state and local districts in adding value to a diploma so that it is also recognized as having real economic and social value. Hartwig and Sitlington (2008) found that employers were generally confused as to the meaning of multiple diplomas and were especially skeptical about the value of the General Educational Development (GED) diploma. Gaumer (2003) found that college admissions offices were also confused about the meaning of multiple diplomas. These two studies are particularly important to students with disabilities because Gaumer-Erickson et al. (2007) found that students with disabilities are much more likely to receive an alternative exit certificate than their peers without disabilities.

Exit exams are increasing for students with disabilities, but so are accommodations and allowances. As states move toward increased accountability under federal law as well as their own auspices, the use of measurable educational instruments is on the rise. As reported earlier, 25 states reported that they required students to pass an exit exam in order to receive a high school diploma. Although this number may be in dispute—the Center on Education Policy reported 28 states in 2010 and 25 states in 2011 that required an exit exam—there has been an overall increase in exit exams across the past decade, regardless. Another educational trend to keep on the radar is end-of-course exams (CEP, 2010). The majority of respondents to this survey indicated that an intended consequence of the exit exam requirement is raising academic expectations for students with disabilities. This can be seen in Figure 11 (Possible INTENDED Consequences of the Exit Exam Requirement).

Although Figure 6 (Increase in the Use of Accommodations for Exit Exams Since 2007) indicates a slow-down in the use of accommodations for students with disabilities, there is still some increase in the past 3 years. Very few states do not offer any test accommodations, testing allowances, or alternative portfolio options for students with disabilities and most defer to the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP). All states allow students to retake part or all of an exit exam.

Recommendations

State and local district policies and practices are all moving forward, sometimes without careful study or examination of their consequences for students, families, professionals, or school systems. Offered here are several recommendations that may help to guide state and local district decision making when adopting state graduation requirements and alternative diploma options.

Clarify the assumptions underlying state graduation requirements and diploma options.

Understanding the goals of the educational system is important in understanding how to make that system accountable to itself. Many of the high stakes assessments and graduation requirements were developed in general education, without much consideration for students with disabilities. Assumptions are made as to the efficacy of alternative diplomas, without much research as to how these alternatives to the standard diploma effect employment and post-secondary outcomes. Questions about the rationale, specific requirements, and criteria used for each of these diploma options, 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.

The purpose of the educational system is to teach children, not pass some and fail others. Assessments such as high-stakes exit exams serve more as a bell-wether for the educational system than for the proficiency of the individual student. Ensuring students an "adequate opportunity to learn" the requisite knowledge and skills before participating in state and local district assessments is at the heart of the debate over testing policies and practices. Many students with disabilities will need access to special services and supports to learn the material covered by the test. These supports will include effective instruction by highly qualified teachers and support services personnel, a curriculum that is aligned with state standards, accommodations (extra learning time, special teaching methods, others), and other resources and supports. For these students, instruction on material and content to be tested will likely need to occur within general education classrooms and is a shared responsibility among grades K-12 (Lehr et al., 2005).

Make high school graduation decisions based on multiple indicators of students' learning and skills. High-stakes exit exams focus on a narrow range of content areas, as indicated in the findings of this survey. State requirements for graduation range from Carnegie units to competency tests, exits exams, or end-of-course exams. Many states require a combination of these to earn a high school diploma. If a student struggles in any one area of education, he or she is in danger of jeopardizing his or her entire graduation prospects. Allowances and accommodations are on the rise and hopefully offer multiple pathways to the same outcome with the same meaning: a high school diploma.

Clarify the implications of developing and granting alternative diploma options for students with disabilities. Research has found that there is general confusion over the meaning of an alternative diploma option (Gaumer, 2003; Hartwig & Sitlington, 2008) and that students with disabilities disproportionately receive these alternative diplomas (Gaumer-Erickson et al., 2007). State and local districts need to thoroughly discuss and reach consensus on the “meaning” and “rigor” of these alternative diplomas with, at a minimum, postsecondary education program representatives and employers. Since asking about the involvement of community stakeholders in 2003 (Johnson & Thurlow), states have indicated that involving them in clarifying the meaning and value of alternative diplomas is relatively low. 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 programs' enrollment criteria (regardless of disability) who have taken earlier classes or programs of study (Thurlow & Johnson, 2009). Employers also need to be consulted and engaged in discussions about the meaning of these alternative diplomas. If members of the business community are not engaged in discussions about plans to use an array of alternative diplomas, they may view alternative 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 to undertake research that examines the current and future implications of varied state graduation 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). High failure rates on state and local district assessments, potentially unnecessary grade-level retention of students, increased drop-out rates, students not receiving a standard diploma at the end of their high school education, and other difficulties have been identified. 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 state and local districts proceed to implement graduation requirements and varied diploma options. Exploration of these has been initiated through work that asks for changes on observable events from the perspectives of general education teachers,

special education teachers, and school psychologists (Christenson et al., 2007). Further work based on independent observation of these effects is needed.

Conclusion

It is our hope that this survey furthers the discussion on graduation requirements, multiple diploma options, and exit exams for youth with disabilities. The consequences and implications of graduation policies and practices for students with disabilities, particularly the use of tests to determine graduation status or type of diploma, are not well understood, and little research has been conducted to date to document their impact. The intention of this survey was to make states aware of the educational policies of other states on these issues and to observe national trends. We believe that in order to set high expectations for all students, states must also understand the outcomes and implications of their policies on graduation requirements and diploma options. 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 curricular or program options, or removal of the student from the general education curriculum.

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