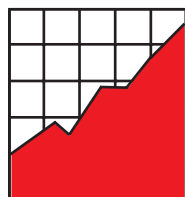


**A National Study on Graduation
Requirements and Diploma Options for
Youth with Disabilities**



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In collaboration with:

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Technical Report 36

A National Study on Graduation Requirements and Diploma Options for Youth with Disabilities

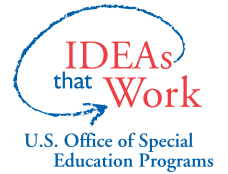
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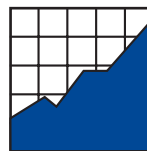
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Executive Summary

Public criticism during the past two decades about the lack of knowledge and skills among students leaving schools with high school diplomas has led states to implement graduation policies and requirements that call for raised academic standards for all students, state and local district testing, development of exit exams linked to a student's eligibility for a diploma, and a focus on increasing student graduation rates. Within this context, there has been a new emphasis on the inclusion of all students in an educational system with high expectations and the same standards for all students. Thus, one of the major challenges in implementing more rigorous high school graduation policies has been to determine how best to include students with disabilities.

States have diverse approaches to the graduation requirements to which they hold students. Past studies have indicated that factoring in disabilities increases the diversity of approaches even more. This diversity in graduation requirements is complicated further by an increasingly diverse set of diploma options. Previous studies of graduation requirements and diploma options were conducted before the implementation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. Although NCLB is a school accountability law, it does include as one of the school accountability indicators the percentage of students earning a standard diploma in four years. Therefore, it is important to again examine states' graduation policies for students with disabilities.

In addition to examining the policies themselves, there is a need to examine states' perspectives on the intended and unintended consequences of various graduation policies.

The present study was undertaken to update the status of graduation policies. 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 were:

- (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 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?

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. Responses were obtained online, via mailed response, or through telephone interview from 46 of the 50 states and from the District of Columbia (a 92% response rate).

Results confirmed the continued diversity of graduation requirements and diploma options. For example, while most states (n=31) set minimum requirements to which local education agencies may add their own requirements, there are other states that set specific requirements that cannot be changed at all by local education agencies and there are still other states in which the policies are set completely at the local agency level. Results also indicated that a range of diploma options continue to be available to students with and without disabilities in most states. In only 13 states is only a standard diploma (or a standard diploma and honors diploma) available to all students. One state had as many as seven diploma options available to students, and another three states had up to five options. Most states with multiple options had two to three different types of diploma options available to students. In the present study, 27 states indicated that they required or would soon require their students to take a high-stakes exit exam as a requirement for receiving a high school diploma; 2 additional states require local education agencies to select and administer exit exams for that purpose.

Changes and variation in graduation policies and requirements were evident in this study, both in comparison to past practice and in comparisons among states. The trends are moving forward with little study or examination of their consequences for students, families, professionals, or schools systems. Several recommendations are made to help 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.
- 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.
- Clarify the implications of different diploma options for continued special education services.
- Conduct on-going research on the intended and unintended consequences of state graduation requirements and diploma options.

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Introduction

For more than two decades, state and local education agencies have been evolving standards-based education reforms in response to growing public criticism as students exit our high schools lacking the skills and knowledge required to be productive citizens. Whether the impetus for adopting standards-based reforms comes from a perception of “falling behind” our international counterparts (as in *A Nation at Risk*) or from a belief that we are just “falling short” in providing equitable opportunities for all of America’s children (as in *The Forgotten Half*, Grant Foundation, 1988, or *A SCANS Report for America 2000*, SCANS, 1991), the general consensus seems to be that there are serious things wrong with public education, that the problems are systematic rather than problematic, and that nothing short of major structural change will fix these problems (Cobb & Johnson, 1997). In response to this criticism, states have implemented graduation policies and requirements that call for raised academic standards for all students, state and local district testing, development of exit exams linked to a student’s eligibility to receive a high school diploma, and a focus on increasing student graduation rates. All of these strategies are intended to increase the level of student learning and achievement essential to entering future adult roles.

One of the major challenges in implementing more rigorous high school graduation policies is how to include students with disabilities (Policy Information Clearinghouse, 1997). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997 (Public Law 105-17) require that students with disabilities participate in state and district assessments and that their performance be reported. State testing and graduation policies now are also influenced by the recently enacted No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act signed by President George W. Bush in 2002. Under this legislation, schools and school districts must demonstrate that all students are making “adequate yearly progress,” 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 will be subject to various district and state interventions. While NCLB is focused on school accountability measures and does not require that assessments be used for promotion or graduation, it does require that graduation rate be another indicator that states use at the high school level to determine whether districts are making “adequate yearly progress.” The graduation rate is calculated from the number of students who complete high school in four years with a standard high school diploma. States and districts are responding to all of these new requirements with broad-based policies and administrative efforts to address how all students, including students with disabilities, will be included.

The courts have also ruled in favor of the participation of students with disabilities in state and local testing programs, including the use of high school exit exams. In *Debra P. v Turlington*, a group of African-American students challenged the Florida exit exam as being racially biased. In this landmark case, a U.S. Court of Appeals established that a high school diploma is a property

interest, which makes it subject to protection under the Fourteenth Amendment. The decision in this case imposed requirements of curricular validity and adequate notice of high school exit exams. Further, in *Brookhart v Illinois State Board of Education*, the Court found that students with disabilities can be held to the same graduation requirements as non-disabled students, but schools must guarantee students with disabilities the opportunity to learn the required material (Center on Education Policy, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2002). In this case, the Court recognized that students with disabilities might require more advanced notice and opportunities to prepare for such testing than other general education students.

Recent court cases have focused more specifically on graduation exit testing requirements and the use of accommodations. In a recent settlement of a case against the state of Oregon by Disability Rights Advocates, Oregon agreed that for its Certificate of Initial Mastery (CIM) and other state testing as well, it would view all accommodations as valid first, until the state could gather evidence to indicate that specific accommodations would result in invalid scores (Disability Rights Advocates, 2001; Fine, 2001). It also agreed that it would initiate a juried assessment process for those students who met the CIM requirements but were unable to demonstrate their mastery on a paper and pencil test. Technically, Oregon's CIM is not an exit exam because all students who meet coursework requirements achieve a standard diploma – the certificate is an indication that the student has mastered the content considered necessary for high school graduates to master.

More recently, in *Chapman v California Department of Education*, the Federal Courts ordered California to allow accommodations in testing procedures for students with disabilities. In this case, California students with disabilities filed a lawsuit in 2002 challenging the state exit exam. The Courts also ordered the State of California to develop an alternative form of the test for students who cannot be appropriately assessed by a standardized test. This ruling represents the first time that a state has been ordered to adjust its high school exit exam for students with disabilities. Providing students with disabilities an opportunity to learn the material being tested and receive needed accommodations, including alternative assessments, has been the basis for the debate concerning state graduation requirements and exit exams in the courts.

Diversity in graduation requirements is complicated further by an increasingly diverse set of possible graduation diploma options. The standard high school diploma is not the only exit document available to students with and without disabilities upon high school completion. The array of diploma options found across the United States ranges from honors diplomas, to the standard diploma, to certificates of completion or attendance, and others. In addition, some of these diploma options and certificates are just for students receiving special education services (Guy, Shin, Lee, & Thurlow, 1999). These differentiated diploma options have not been fully examined in relation to future adult outcomes, particularly in relation to postsecondary education access and future employment and earnings.

There is a critical need to examine the current and future implications of varied state graduation requirements and diploma options. This has become important because of the findings that students with disabilities experience significant negative outcomes when they do not earn a high school or equivalent diploma (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Bruininks, Thurlow, Lewis, & Larson, 1988; Edgar, 1987; Hasazi, Gordon, & Roe, 1985; Johnson, McGrew, Bloomberg, Bruininks, & Lin, 1997; Wagner, 1992). There are also data to suggest that more stringent graduation requirements may be related to higher rates of dropping out of school among students with disabilities, compared with the dropout rates of students without disabilities (Wagner, Newman, D'Amico, Jay, Butler-Nalin, Marder, & Cox, 1991).

This paper examines the results of a national study on the current status of state graduation policies and diploma options for youth with disabilities. We examined these state policies in relation to their intended benefits as well as possible unintended consequences. The rationale for this study was 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

States like Florida and New York have attached high-stakes exams to graduation since the late 1960s and early 1970s. The minimum competency test movement of the late 1970s and 1980s addressed similar concerns to those that the present-day graduation requirements and use of exit exams attempt to resolve. Minimum competency tests were established in response to concerns of employers, parents, and the general public that young people were exiting high schools ill-prepared for adult life. Advocates of minimum competency testing argued that schools had relaxed their standards and strayed from their academic mission – a problem that could be solved by getting “back to basics” (Lerner, 1991).

Options for students with disabilities participating in these state-level minimum competency tests were exclusion from such testing programs, use of different standards, and use of different tests (Wildemuth, 1983). Little attention was directed to the participation of students with disabilities in such testing programs. Despite their popularity (statewide minimum competency testing grew from 2 to 34 states from 1973 to 1983), studies concluded that these tests did not bring about the significant gains in student learning or broad improvements in public education that reformers had hoped for (U.S. Office of Technology Assessment, 1992). In addition, the U.S. Office of Technology Assessment study reported that these tests were disproportionately harming minority and low-income students and increasing dropout rates. The minimum competency test movement, however, served as a template, in many respects, for the standards-based reform initiatives that began in the early 1990s.

Over the years, graduation requirements have taken many forms. 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 et al., 1999; Thurlow, Ysseldyke, & Anderson, 1995). States also vary in their use and application of these requirements for graduation. The alignment of exit exams with state and local graduation requirements has increased across the United States. At present, more than 25 states have, or will soon have, mandatory exit exams in place as a condition of receiving a standard diploma (Center on Education Policy, 2002). This is an increase from 16 states in 1997 (McDonnell, McLaughlin, & Morison, 1997), 18 in 1998 (Heubert & Hauser, 1999), and 22 states in 2000 (Olson, Jones, & Bond, 2001). Graduation testing is also expected to increase over the next several years. The American Federation of Teachers (2001), for example, estimated that exit exams would rise to 26-30 states within the next few years.

High-stakes testing has become a significant part of standards-based reform and educational accountability. Tests are “high stakes” when they are used in making decisions about which students will be promoted or retained in grade and which will receive high school diplomas (Heubert, 2002; Thurlow & Johnson, 2000). The use of exit exams to determine whether a student earns a high school diploma, for example, is “high stakes” because it has life-long consequences and directly affects an individual’s economic self-sufficiency and well-being as an adult. The consequences of high-stakes testing for students with disabilities as a component of educational accountability is not, however, well understood (Lewis, 2000; Heubert, 2002; Thurlow & Johnson, 2000).

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 (Center on Education Policy, 2002). Others believe that students with disabilities and minority students are often victims of low expectations and weak instruction and stand to benefit from efforts to provide high-quality instruction for all

students (McDonnell, McLaughlin, & Morison, 1997). Critics of high-stakes exit exams point to several observable negative consequences that students may experience. These include: (a) increased dropout rate, particularly among minority and poor students, and students with disabilities; (b) retention of students within grades until they demonstrate improved performance on state and local district exams; (c) increased referrals of general education students to special education, due to increased pressures to pass exit exams; (d) narrowing of the curriculum and instruction to focus on specific learning outcomes assessed in state and local district tests; (e) limitations in the range of curricular and program options students can participate in because of intensified efforts to concentrate on areas of weakness identified by testing (consequently limiting options for participation in vocational education, work-study, instruction in adult living skills, and others); and (f) unknown impact of receiving an alternative or different diploma option other than the standard diploma in terms of future postsecondary education and employment opportunities (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1992; Education Commission of the States, 1998; Heubert, 2002; Johnson, Stodden, Emanuel, Luecking, & Mack, 2002; Lane, Park, & Stone, 1998; Langenfeld, Thurlow, & Scott, 1997). Existing research on the consequences of high-stakes exit testing is limited and inconclusive, and the debate and controversy regarding use of high-stakes testing continues in the absence of empirical findings.

Across the United States, state and local district graduation policies continue to evolve, with a concerted move toward increasing requirements for graduation. State legislatures have also continued to experiment with state standards policies, graduation requirements, and the use of exit exams as a requirement for receiving a diploma. Revisions and modifications of graduation requirements across states are commonplace. With the advent of the No Child Left Behind Act, states must test all students annually in grades 3-8 in reading and math, and must test students at least once in high school; science testing also soon comes into force, with that content area tested one time in each school level (elementary, middle, and high). This means that all states must have high school tests, although they need not be a “high-stakes” exit exam tied to graduation. This legislation, however, will continue to influence the discussions of states and local districts about the use of tests in relation to monitoring student progress, graduation, and other forms of accountability. It will also affect discussions about what it means to graduate due to its definition of graduation as earning a standard high school diploma in four years.

Alternative Diploma Options

The value of a high school diploma is currently under debate nationally. Many argue that its value has depreciated, due to lowered academic expectations and to social promotions of ill-prepared students. Complaints from employers that the standard diploma has little or no meaning as an exit credential have heightened the debate. The meaning of a high school diploma today is far different from its meaning 30 or 40 years ago. Over the years, increasingly larger numbers of

students have gone on to complete high school and enter college. Today, 83% of adults have completed high school, and 25% have finished four or more years of college or university training (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). By contrast, in 1960, only 41% of adults aged 25 and older had completed high school, and 8% had finished four or more years of college. Currently, access to a good job is contingent on far more knowledge, skills, and education than ever before, but there is no measure to indicate that the larger numbers graduating and going on to post-secondary educational settings translates to higher skills levels. The use of state exit exams aligned with state standards has been an attempt, in part, to ensure that a diploma means something in terms of a student's knowledge and skills.

Not all high school diplomas are alike, however; some states offer a special diploma to students who take rigorous course work, achieve a high grade point average, or post high scores on state exams (Martinez & Bray, 2002). At the other end of the spectrum, students who fail state exit exams or who cannot meet other graduation requirements may receive differentiated or alternative diplomas or certificates. Thurlow et al. (1995) and Guy et al. (1999) in national studies of state graduation requirements and diploma options found extensive arrays of differentiated diplomas in use across states. These options included diplomas of high distinction, honors diplomas, standard diplomas, certificates of completion or attendance, IEP diplomas, occupational diplomas, and others. States also varied in the number of diploma options they extended to students. Diploma options ranged from one option only (standard diploma) to up to five or more options.

Arguments have been made for the use of both the single and multiple diploma options across the states. Advocates of the single, standard diploma contend that the use of a common diploma for all helps to maintain high expectations across diverse student groups (Phillips, 1993; Thurlow & Thompson, 1999; Thurlow, Ysseldyke, & Reid, 1997). Benz, Lindstrom, and Yovanoff (2000) suggest that a single, standard diploma with endorsements that demonstrate additional coursework or mastery would be beneficial. That is, they advocate for retaining a single diploma option, with additional recognition that allows those students, with and without disabilities, who demonstrate mastery beyond the requirements of the standard diploma to receive credit for their accomplishments. Thurlow and Thompson (1999) argue that regardless of how many diploma options, these options must be available to all students.

Proponents of multiple diploma options base their argument for this approach on claims of "fairness" and "reasonableness." They contend that when students experience difficulties in passing state exit exams it is only fair and reasonable to create additional options with alternative or different performance expectations. Offering such options is intended to maintain student motivation and reduce frustrations that could otherwise lead students to drop out. Unfortunately, there is little research on the value or merit of alternative diplomas in terms of a student's future opportunities for education or employment (Heubert, 2002; Thurlow & Johnson, 2000).

Overview of the Study

The present study builds on the earlier work of Thurlow et al. (1995) and Guy et al. (1999). 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 policy-makers and state education agency personnel information on the current cross-state status of graduation requirements, and (2) create a data-base to track changes in policy as states proceed to develop and change graduation policies. This study was undertaken to update the status of states' graduation policies. 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 were:

- (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 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 two prior studies by Thurlow et al. (1995) and Guy et al. (1999). The survey instrument was submitted for limited review to selected state and local special education directors as a means of receiving 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 Internet 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 October 2001 to April 2002. A total of 46 states and the District of Columbia responded, representing a 92% response rate.

Summary tables of all data gathered were compiled and transposed into tables. Selected tables then were returned to respondents to check to ensure that the data were accurate. This resulted in numerous phone consultations to clarify survey responses and the data presented in each table. In addition, an analysis of state graduation policies and supporting documents was conducted. This information was also used to help verify the accuracy of the survey data reported.

Results

Survey responses from the state directors of special education or their designees are summarized in this section of the report. Subheadings reflect survey sections and are presented in tabular form, with discussion. 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 (October 2001-April 2002). Given the dynamic nature of policy discussions across the United States concerning state graduation policies and diploma options, it is highly likely that changes in these policies have occurred since the time of data collection. This would be consistent with previous surveys (Guy et al., 1999; Thurlow et al., 1995), which have documented the extreme variation, and ever-changing political environments of states regarding student graduation requirements.

State Graduation Requirements for Youth With and Without Disabilities

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 in terms of who establishes graduation requirements for youth with disabilities. Options include: (a) the state provides minimum requirements, and the LEA may add to them; (b) the state provides minimum requirements, and the LEAs may not add to them; (c) the state provides guidelines, and the LEAs may set their own requirements; and (d) no state requirements are imposed, and the LEAs set their own requirements. Besides the four states that did not respond to the survey (NSR), one additional state (North Carolina) did not respond to this item.

In examining the relationship between state and local education agencies in controlling the setting of high school graduation requirements, significant variation is noted in Table 1. The most common 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 31 states currently have graduation policies reflecting this practice. Four states (Hawaii, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina) and the District of Columbia set requirements for graduation, and the LEAs are not permitted to change them. The states of North Dakota, Rhode Island, and Wyoming provide guidelines, but

Table 1. High School Graduation Requirements for Youth with Disabilities

State	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	Other requirements ¹	No response
Alabama	✓					
Alaska	✓					
Arizona	✓					
Arkansas	✓					
California	✓					
Colorado				✓		
Connecticut					✓	
Delaware	✓					
Florida	✓					
Georgia	✓					
Hawaii		✓				
Idaho	✓					
Illinois	✓					
Indiana						NSR
Iowa				✓		
Kansas				✓		
Kentucky	✓					
Louisiana		✓				
Maine						NSR
Maryland	✓					
Massachusetts	✓				✓	
Michigan	✓					
Minnesota	✓					
Mississippi		✓				
Missouri	✓					
Montana				✓		
Nebraska				✓		
Nevada						NSR
New Hampshire						NSR
New Jersey	✓					
New Mexico	✓ ²				✓	
New York	✓					
North Carolina						✓
North Dakota			✓			
Ohio	✓					
Oklahoma	✓					
Oregon	✓					
Pennsylvania				✓		
Rhode Island			✓			
South Carolina		✓				
South Dakota	✓					
Tennessee	✓					
Texas	✓					
Utah	✓					
Vermont	✓					
Virginia	✓					

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

State	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	Other requirements¹	No response
Washington	✓					
West Virginia	✓					
Wisconsin	✓					
Wyoming			✓			
District of Columbia		✓				
Total	31	5	3	6	3	5

NSR = No Survey Response; other checkmarks in the No Response column indicate no response to this survey question. Note: States in bold letters indicate those states that currently have or will be implementing an exit exam for all graduating seniors.

¹ Other options included: State is in transition from local to statewide assessments (Massachusetts), guidelines are set for the career readiness and abilities programs of study, requirements are established by IEP teams (New Mexico); requirements are set in same way as for non-disabled populations (Connecticut).

² New Mexico also selected the third response, which indicated that the state provides guidelines and the LEA may set its own requirements. Since the intent was for states to select only one of the first four responses for this item, the first response choice was selected.

LEAs may set their own requirements. Six states (Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, and Pennsylvania) reported having no minimum state requirements for high school graduation. In this situation, LEAs are responsible for setting their own graduation requirements. In cases where states provide basic guidelines or offer no minimum state requirements, local school boards and/or district administrative staff set local graduation requirements. Requirements may also be established by IEP teams.

Overall, 39 of the 46 states and the District of Columbia responding to the survey indicated that they establish minimum graduation requirements for LEAs to follow. Because policy changes were occurring within individual states at the time this survey was conducted, several state education agency respondents were reluctant to answer this survey question, and one did not answer it although it answered other items. New Mexico identified other graduation requirements—Career Readiness and Abilities Programs, with graduation requirements established by local IEP teams. Massachusetts indicated it was in transition from local to statewide assessments.

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. The range includes making no allowances and holding all students to the same standards, reducing the number of credits that a student needs, making available alternate courses that can be used to earn required course-credits, lowering performance criteria, and other alternatives.

Table 2 reports on patterns of state practices in making allowances for youth with disabilities to receive a standard diploma. Some states, such as Minnesota and Iowa, reported wide diversity in options extended to students with disabilities. Other states (Connecticut, Delaware, Idaho, and others) limit such options to a single allowance to receive a standard diploma.

As shown in Table 2, the most common state allowance (19 states responding) made for students with disabilities is to permit the use of alternate courses to earn required course credits. Determining the “appropriateness” of these alternate courses was generally left up to LEAs through students’ IEP teams. Examples include allowing a student to earn required social studies or history credits through participation in a work-study program or receive required English credits by participating in a service-learning program that emphasized language or writing development. Many other examples were found across states in relation to this specific allowance practice.

Several states (Louisiana, Mississippi, New York, Ohio, and West Virginia) and the District of Columbia make no allowances for students with disabilities and hold all students to the same graduation requirements. Other states have opted to reduce the total number of credits required (6 states) or lower performance criteria (10 states) for students with disabilities.

A total of 30 states reported that they used “other” allowances. These other allowances include: (a) letting LEAs substitute credit in special education for regular education as long as course credit requirements are generally the same (Arkansas), (b) use of agreed-upon modifications or changes as addressed in IEPs (Connecticut, Delaware, Idaho, Iowa, Michigan, Missouri, New Jersey, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon, South Dakota, and West Virginia), (c) alternate courses that can be used to earn required course credits with a waiver (Georgia), (d) state-level individual consideration process (Massachusetts), (e) time-extensions (Kentucky and Florida), (f) modified curriculum (Minnesota and New Mexico), and (g) development by the district of a “body of evidence” plan and establishment of performance criteria cut-offs (Wyoming). Several states also noted the use of accommodations in coursework and exit exams as an “other” allowance (Alabama, California, Delaware, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Tennessee, Virginia, and Wisconsin), even though these typically are allowed in all states. The array of “other” allowances that are made on behalf of youth with disabilities are authorized through a mix of state and local education agency administrative auspices.

Diploma Options

Table 3 illustrates the range of diploma options for high school graduates across the 50 states and District of Columbia. The differentiated diploma options include honors diplomas, regular/standard diplomas, IEP/special education diplomas, certificates of attendance, certificates of achievement, occupational diplomas, and other variations. All of the 46 states that responded to

Table 2. Allowances Made for Youth with Disabilities to Receive Standard Diploma

State	None	Number of credits may be reduced	Alternate courses can be used to earn required course credits	Performance criteria may be lowered	Other ¹	No response
Alabama					✓	
Alaska					✓	
Arizona			✓	✓		
Arkansas						✓
California					✓	
Colorado						✓
Connecticut					✓	
Delaware					✓	
Florida						✓
Georgia			✓		✓	
Hawaii						✓
Idaho					✓	
Illinois					✓	
Indiana						NSR
Iowa		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Kansas					✓	
Kentucky					✓	
Louisiana	✓					
Maine						NSR
Maryland					✓	
Massachusetts					✓	
Michigan			✓		✓	
Minnesota		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Mississippi	✓					
Missouri		✓	✓		✓	
Montana			✓	✓	✓	
Nebraska		✓	✓	✓		
Nevada						NSR
New Hampshire						NSR
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			✓	✓	✓	

Table 2. Allowances Made for Youth with Disabilities to Receive Standard Diploma (continued)

State	None	Number of credits may be reduced	Alternate courses can be used to earn required course credits	Performance criteria may be lowered	Other ¹	No response
Wyoming					✓	
District of Columbia	✓					
Total	6	6	19	10	30	9

NSR = No Survey Response; other checkmarks in the No Response column indicate no response to this survey item.

Note: States in bold letter indicate those states that currently have or will be implementing an exit exam for all graduating seniors.

¹ Other options included Accommodations in coursework and testing on exit exam (Alabama, California, Delaware, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Tennessee, Virginia, Wisconsin), LEA may substitute credit in special ed for regular ed as long as course content requirements are generally the same (Arkansas), addressed in IEP (Connecticut, Delaware, Idaho, Iowa, Michigan, Missouri, New Jersey, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon, South Dakota, West Virginia), alternate courses can be used to earn required course credits with waiver (Georgia), state-level individual consideration process (Massachusetts), extensions (Kentucky, Florida), modified curriculum (Minnesota, New Mexico), and districts develop “Body of Evidence” plan and establish performance criteria cutoffs (Wyoming).

the survey, as well as the District of Columbia, reported that they offered a standard or regular diploma for students with and without disabilities. Of these states, 11 states also offered honors diplomas, 12 states offered IEP/special education diplomas, 17 states granted certificates of attendance, 11 states granted certificates of achievement, 4 states offered occupational diplomas, and 22 states and the District of Columbia provided variations of these diploma options. Thirteen (13) states extend to students with and without disabilities either a single diploma option, the regular/standard diploma (Arizona, California, Idaho, Kansas, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Texas, Vermont), or the standard diploma plus an honors diploma (Ohio).

Of those states that responded, 34 offered multiple diploma options to their high school graduates. The highest in total number of diploma options is Nebraska, reporting seven different diploma options. Other states, such as Colorado, Connecticut, and Wisconsin, report five options. In the column identified as “other” in Table 3, several additional diploma options are noted. Several are variations on those already described; however, it is of interest to examine variations across and within states. These other diploma options include: (a) alternative adult diploma (GED) and locally offered certificates (Alabama), (b) diploma options that vary by LEAs within individual states (Montana, Colorado, Connecticut, and Michigan), (c) certificate with a follow-up plan of action (IEP) related to meeting transition service needs (West Virginia), (d) advanced studies diploma and modified standard diploma (Virginia), (e) pre-GED/skills option certificate (Louisiana), (f) alternate completion diploma (Utah), and (g) certificate of completion of course requirements (Hawaii). Table 3 also illustrates the range of diploma options currently available within states.

Table 3. High school graduation diplomas available for youth with disabilities

State	Honors Diploma	Regular/ Standard Diploma	IEP/ Special Ed. Diploma	Certificate of Attendance	Certificate of Achievement	Occupation Diploma	Other ¹	No response
Alabama	✓	✓				✓	✓	
Alaska		✓			✓			
Arizona		✓						
Arkansas	✓	✓					✓	
California		✓						
Colorado		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Connecticut	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	
Delaware	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	
Florida	✓	✓	✓	✓				
Georgia		✓	✓	✓				
Hawaii		✓					✓	
Idaho		✓						
Illinois		✓		✓				
Indiana								NSR
Iowa		✓		✓			✓	
Kansas		✓						
Kentucky		✓						
Louisiana		✓			✓		✓	
Maine								NSR
Maryland		✓					✓	
Massachusetts		✓						
Michigan		✓		✓	✓		✓	
Minnesota		✓						
Mississippi		✓		✓				
Missouri		✓		✓		✓		
Montana		✓					✓	
Nebraska	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Nevada								NSR
New Hampshire								NSR
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		✓					✓	

Table 3. High school graduation diplomas available for youth with disabilities (continued)

State	Honors Diploma	Regular/ Standard Diploma	IEP/ Special Ed. Diploma	Certificate of Attendance	Certificate of Achievement	Occupation Diploma	Other ¹	No response
Wisconsin	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Wyoming		✓			✓			
District of Columbia		✓	✓		✓			
Total	11	47	12	17	11	4	18	4

NSR = No Survey Response; other checkmarks in the No Response column indicate no response to this survey question.

Note: States in bold letters indicate those states that currently have or will be implementing an exit exam for all graduating seniors.

¹ Other options included: Regular diploma can include “honors”, “standard” and “basic” in some districts (Arkansas); graduation certificate; Alabama Alternate Adult Diploma (GED) and locally offered certificates (Alabama); locally offered certificates (South Dakota); certificate of completion (Arizona); certificate of course completion requirements (Hawaii); varies by LEA (Montana, Colorado, Connecticut, Michigan); high school certificate (Maryland); certificate with a follow-up plan of action (IEP) related to transition service needs; modified diploma (West Virginia); advanced studies diploma; modified standard diploma (Virginia); Pre-GED/Skills Option certificate (Louisiana); and alternate completion diploma (Utah).

All states reported offering a regular/standard diploma for students with and without disabilities. Significant levels of variation occur across states, however, in the offering of alternative diplomas for students. Further, several of these diploma options are limited to students with disabilities. Alabama’s occupational diploma, Virginia’s special diploma, and a range of other alternatives have been developed. These findings are comparable to those of the two earlier studies, Thurlow et al. (1995) and Guy et al. (1999). States are clearly experimenting with alternative diploma options in response to a variety of state and local interests. The general trend since 1995 has been for some states to increase their diploma options while other states are reducing the range of such options.

Respondents were also requested to provide information about the involvement of community stakeholders in discussions and decisions about the use of alternative diplomas. As states and LEAs continue to adopt the use of alternative diplomas, a pressing question is how these different diplomas are valued by key community stakeholders. Postsecondary education institutions and employers represent two critical groups of stakeholders. Their views and perspectives about alternative diploma options need to be considered. The question is whether graduating from high school with a standard diploma or alternative diploma or certificate grants students access to postsecondary education programs and future meaningful employment. Table 4 identifies states that involve community stakeholders in discussions concerning alternative diplomas. Few states currently involve either postsecondary education representatives or employers in such discussions. As shown in Table 4, for those states responding, eight states currently involve postsecondary education institutions and seven states involve the business community. Only six states (Alabama, Alaska, Florida, Mississippi, Oregon, and Wisconsin) indicated that they include both postsecondary education and business community representatives in a dialogue on alternative diploma options.

Table 4. Involvement of Community Stakeholders in Discussions

State	State Involved Post-Secondary Institutions		State Involved Business Community		No Response/NA
	Yes	No	Yes	No	
Alabama	✓		✓		
Alaska	✓		✓		
Arizona					✓
Arkansas		✓		✓	
California					✓
Colorado					✓
Connecticut					✓
Delaware		✓		✓	
Florida	✓		✓		
Georgia					✓
Hawaii		✓		✓	
Idaho		✓		✓	
Illinois					✓
Indiana					NSR
Iowa		✓		✓	
Kansas					✓
Kentucky	✓			✓	
Louisiana		✓	✓		
Maine					NSR
Maryland					✓
Massachusetts					✓
Michigan		✓		✓	
Minnesota					✓
Mississippi	✓		✓		
Missouri	✓			✓	
Montana					✓
Nebraska					✓
Nevada					NSR
New Hampshire					NSR
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					✓
District of Columbia					✓
Total	8	13	7	14	30

NSR = No Survey Response; other checkmarks in the No Response/NA column indicate no response to this question.

Note: States in bold letters indicate those states that currently have or will be implementing an exit exam.

State Use of Exit Exams—“High-Stakes” Testing

As noted earlier in this report, exit exams are not a new idea. During the 1970s and 1980s, a number of states adopted policies and implemented minimum competency tests to ensure that students graduate from high school with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in postsecondary education programs, employment, and as citizens. The standards-based reform movement has revitalized discussions concerning 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 stakes are high for students, such as having the receipt of a high school diploma contingent on passing certain exit exams, the term “high-stakes testing” applies.

Several questions were posed to state special education directors in relation to their state’s use of exit exams. Because four states did not respond to the survey and an additional six states did not respond to the question about whether youth with disabilities were required to pass a state exit exam to receive a high school diploma, we searched policy documents for those states that did not respond to this question or to the survey. The numbers shown in Table 5 reflect both the survey responses and the document review. As shown in Table 5, 27 states require youth with disabilities to pass an exit exam in order to receive a high school diploma. Two of the states that did not require students with disabilities to pass a state exit exam did require that students pass a local exit exam (Pennsylvania and Wisconsin).

Twenty-seven states with an state exit exam reflects an increase in the total number of states reporting the use of exit exams as a requirement for youth with disabilities to receive a high school diploma, based on the findings of two earlier studies. Thurlow et al. (1995) identified 16 states where exit exams were linked to the student’s receipt of a diploma, and Guy et al. (1999) found 20 states with these policies. These findings are generally consistent with other national studies that have examined states’ use of graduation tests as a condition of receiving the standard diploma. In 1997, McDonnell, McLaughlin, and Morison identified 16 states using exit exams, and 18 states in 1998 (Heubert & Hauser, 1999). In a more recent study, Olson (2001) identified 20 states requiring students to pass exit exams as a requirement for receiving a high school diploma. The 2003 *Quality Counts* issue of *Education Week* identified 24 states that have or will have either exit exams or end-of-course exams required for graduation.

Discrepancies in numbers reported by different sources are sometimes due to different interpretations of what an “exit exam” is. We specifically wanted to identify tests that students had to pass to receive a high school diploma. Other states have exams (e.g., Michigan, Oregon), however, that are used to identify students who will receive mastery certificates, such as Oregon’s Certificate of Initial Mastery. Furthermore, some states that have graduation exams for earning a diploma also use those exams to identify students who will receive special endorsements, such as the honors endorsement in Arizona or the diploma with honors in Ohio.

Table 5. States Requiring Youth with Disabilities to Pass a State Exit Exam in Order to Receive High School Diploma

State	Yes, State requires	No, State does not require	No Response	Graduating Class Year
Alabama	✓			1985
Alaska	✓			2004
Arizona	✓			2005
Arkansas		✓		
California	✓			2004
Colorado		✓		
Connecticut		✓		
Delaware	✓			2004
Florida	✓			1983
Georgia	✓			1994
Hawaii	✓			2008
Idaho	✓			2005
Illinois		✓		
Indiana	✓*		NSR	2000
Iowa			✓	
Kansas		✓		
Kentucky			✓	
Louisiana	✓			1989
Maine			NSR	
Maryland	✓			1988
Massachusetts	✓			2003
Michigan		✓		
Minnesota	✓			2000
Mississippi	✓			1988
Missouri		✓		
Montana		✓		
Nebraska		✓		
Nevada	✓*		NSR	1999
New Hampshire			NSR	
New Jersey	✓			1993
New Mexico	✓			1987
New York	✓			2004
North Carolina	✓*		✓	2003
North Dakota			✓	
Ohio	✓			1990
Oklahoma			✓	
Oregon		✓		
Pennsylvania		✓**		
Rhode Island		✓		
South Carolina	✓			1986
South Dakota			✓	
Tennessee	✓			2002
Texas	✓			1987
Utah	✓			2005
Vermont		✓		
Virginia	✓			2004
Washington		✓		
West Virginia		✓		
Wisconsin		✓**		
Wyoming		✓		

Table 5. States Requiring Youth with Disabilities to Pass a State Exit Exam in Order to Receive High School Diploma (continued)

State	Yes, State requires	No, State does not require	No Response	Graduating Class Year
District of Columbia	✓			2004
Total ^b	27	17	10	

* Indicates states with exit exam policies found in other sources; these are states that did not respond to either the item or the survey.

** Indicates states that require local districts to use an assessment to determine whether student receives high school diploma.

NSR = No Survey Response; other checkmarks in the No Response column indicate no response to this survey question.

^a States with local graduation exams

^b Numbers in Total line do not add up to 51 states because we entered information from other sources for some of the states that did not respond to either the item or the survey.

Also indicated in Table 5 is the graduating class year first held to the exit exam requirement. Of the 27 states, a majority (17 states) currently have their exit examinations under way for graduating seniors. The remaining 10 states reported that policies were in place to implement “high-stakes testing” requirements in the near future (2004-2008). Some of these states previously had exams in place, but have new exams that will affect future classes. Several states have had exit exam requirements in place for many years. As shown in Table 5, Florida has required students with disabilities to pass an exit exam since 1983, Alabama since 1985, South Carolina since 1986, and Louisiana since 1989. Other states’ policies were new and the states were careful to clarify that responses applied to the time of the survey. For example, Massachusetts indicated that its responses were for the graduating class of 2003.

Table 6 presents graduation examination policies and practices by state for high school youth with and without disabilities. The 23 responding states, of those with state graduation exams, reported that they used the same examination and passing score standards for all graduating students. Two states, Massachusetts and Minnesota, also established different graduation examination tests and passing score standards for students with and without disabilities. In addition, Minnesota, indicated that it also applied different passing score standards for students with disabilities on the same exit tests taken by students without disabilities.

In examining trends in high school exit exams, some changes are noted. Guy et al. (1999) found, in their study of state policies and practices in 1998, that only 12 of 20 states with exams held students with and without disabilities to the same tests and passing scores. The current study identified 23 states with exams now holding students to the same testing standards (with an additional 4 exit exam states that did not respond). Only a few states appear to be using different passing scores and offering different tests and passing score options.

Also of interest is the range and variation of options extended to youth with disabilities if they

Table 6. Passing Scores on High School Exit Exam by States with Exit Exams

State	Same test and passing score are used by students with and without disabilities	Same test is used for both groups, but different passing scores are used	Both tests and passing scores are different for students with and without disabilities	No response
Alabama	✓			
Alaska	✓			
Arizona	✓			
California	✓			
Delaware	✓			
Florida	✓			
Georgia	✓			
Hawaii	✓			
Idaho				✓
Indiana				NSR
Louisiana	✓			
Maryland	✓			
Massachusetts	✓		✓	
Minnesota	✓	✓	✓	
Mississippi	✓			
Nevada				NSR
New Jersey	✓			
New Mexico	✓			
New York	✓			
North Carolina				✓
Ohio	✓			
South Carolina	✓			
Tennessee	✓			
Texas	✓			
Utah	✓			
Virginia	✓			
District of Columbia	✓			
Total	23	1	2	4

NSR = No Survey Response; other checkmarks in the No Response column indicate no response to this survey question.
 * Indicates states with exit exam policies found in other sources; these are states that did not respond to either the item or the survey.

fail exit exams. Table 7 identifies the range of options, which include: test-retake, having an alternate form of an exam made available, taking an exam that is altogether different, petitioning for an exemption while still receiving a diploma, and others. Of the 20 states with state exit exams that responded to this question, 16 states allow students with disabilities to retake the test, 5 states offer alternate form of the exam, 5 states allow students to take a different exam, and in 3 states students can petition for an exemption and still receive a diploma. In addition, 8 states reported other options for students who did not pass the exit exam to receive diplomas. These options included remediation of objectives if exams are failed, alternative methods of completion, IEP team determination, and others. Seven of the states with exit exams did not respond to this survey item. Several states allow LEAs to determine policies and practices concerning these options, and other states were in the process of discussing modifications of these options for students with and without disabilities.

Table 7. Options for Youth with Disabilities if They Fail the Exam

State	Students can retake exam	Students can take an alternate form of the exam	Students can take a different exam altogether	Students can petition for an exemption, and still receive diploma	Other ¹	No response
Alabama					✓	
Alaska	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Arizona	✓				✓	
California	✓					
Delaware	✓					
Florida						✓
Georgia	✓			✓		
Hawaii	✓					
Idaho						✓
Indiana						NSR
Louisiana						✓
Maryland	✓					
Massachusetts	✓	✓		✓		
Minnesota			✓		✓	
Mississippi	✓		✓			
Nevada						NSR
New Jersey			✓			
New Mexico	✓	✓			✓	
New York	✓		✓			
North Carolina					✓	
Ohio					✓	
South Carolina	✓	✓				
Tennessee	✓	✓				
Texas	✓					
Utah	✓				✓	
Virginia	✓					
District of Columbia					✓	
Total	16	5	5	3	8	5

NSR = No Survey Response; other checkmarks in the No Response column indicate no response to this survey question.

¹Other options included: Remediation of objectives failed is provided (Alabama); alternative methods (Arizona, Utah); still pending or under discussion (North Carolina, District of Columbia); IEP team decision (Minnesota, Ohio); alternative completion diploma if coursework complete and documentation of 3 attempts to pass all sub-tests, state uses different exams during a retake (New Mexico); and alternative completion diploma (Utah).

Table 8 lists those states that maintain records of high school exit examination scores. Of the 23 states with state exit exams responding to a question about records, 21 reported that they keep records on these scores, and 2 states reported that no records were maintained.

Table 9 identifies where the exam scores are reported, whether the information is available to students, and whether information is available by disability category. As illustrated in Table 9, a wide range of methods are used to report exam scores. These include: state report cards, Web sites, press releases, performance and assessment reports, state and local reports, and others.

Table 8. Does State Maintain Records on Exit Exam?

State	Yes	No	No Response
Alabama	✓		
Alaska	✓		
Arizona	✓		
California	✓		
Delaware	✓		
Florida	✓		
Georgia	✓		
Hawaii	✓		
Idaho			✓
Indiana			NSR
Louisiana	✓		
Maryland	✓		
Massachusetts	✓		
Minnesota	✓		
Mississippi	✓		
Nevada			NSR
New Jersey	✓		
New Mexico	✓		
New York	✓		
North Carolina			✓
Ohio	✓		
South Carolina	✓		
Tennessee	✓		
Texas	✓		
Utah		✓	
Virginia	✓		
District of Columbia		✓	
Total	21	2	4

NSR = No Survey Response; other checkmarks in the No Response column indicate no response to this survey question.

Of the 21 states that maintain exit exam records, 20 reported that they provided score information to students. Less than half of those states, however, maintained these records by disability category. These findings are also comparable to those of the earlier two studies, Thurlow et al. (1995) and Guy et al. (1999)

Table 10 lists those states that maintain records of how youth with disabilities perform on exams that must be passed to graduate. Of the 21 states with state exit exams responding to the question, 20 reported that they keep records of exit examinations taken by students with disabilities; 1 state did not.

Table 11 reports on which document is used to record student performance information and whether this information is available by disability category. A total of eight states reported that they can disaggregate data by disability category. Information on student performance scores is made available by annual report to OSEP, press releases, Web sites, annual performance and assessment reports, state and local reports, management information systems, and other means.

Table 9. Records for Those States That Do Keep a Record of the Exam...

State	Where are the numbers reported?	Information is Available to Students	Information is Available by Disability Category
Alabama	State Report Card, Web site, public press releases	✓	✓
Alaska	State Report Card	✓	
Arizona	Web site	✓	
California	California Dept of Ed. Standards		
Delaware	DOE	✓	✓
Florida	Assessment Office	✓	✓
Georgia	State and local report cards	✓	✓
Hawaii	Test Development Section	✓	
Louisiana	Student Standards Attainment Report, DOE	✓	✓
Maryland	Maryland School Performance Report site	✓	
Massachusetts	Annual Report Card	✓	
Minnesota	Web site, district reports	✓	
Mississippi	Miss. Report Card	✓	
New Jersey		✓	✓
New Mexico	State Dept. of Ed.	✓	
New York	Annual Performance Report	✓	
Ohio	ODE Assessment	✓	✓
South Carolina	Department Annual Exit Report	✓	
Tennessee	Division of Assessment	✓	
Texas	State, local & student reports	✓	
Virginia	School Report Card	✓	✓
Total		20	8

Table 10. Does State Keep Records on How Youth with Disabilities Perform on Exams that Must be Passed?

State	Yes	No	No Response
Alabama	✓		
Alaska	✓		
Arizona	✓		
California	✓		
Delaware	✓		
Florida	✓		
Georgia	✓		
Hawaii	✓		
Idaho			✓
Indiana			NSR
Louisiana			✓
Maryland	✓		
Massachusetts	✓		
Minnesota	✓		
Mississippi	✓		
Nevada			NSR
New Jersey	✓		
New Mexico	✓		
New York	✓		
North Carolina			✓
Ohio	✓		
South Carolina	✓		
Tennessee			✓
Texas	✓		
Utah		✓	
Virginia	✓		
District of Columbia	✓		
Total	20	1	6

NSR = No Survey Response; other checkmarks in the No Response column indicate no response to this survey question.

Table 11. For Those States That Do Keep a Record of this Information...

State	In which document is the performance recorded?	Information is available by disability category
Alabama	Biannual Report to OSEP, public press release, Web site	✓
Alaska	School records & diploma	
Arizona	Biannual Report to OSEP	
California	Statewide STAR assessment	✓
Delaware	Annual Report and Web site	✓
Florida	Assessment Report	✓
Georgia	State system reports, OEA reports	
Hawaii	Reports to the superintendent	✓
Maryland	Maryland School Performance Report	
Massachusetts	Annual Report Card	
Minnesota	Web site, district reports	
Mississippi	Miss. Report Card and on-line site	
New Jersey	State, district, school and student reports	✓
New Mexico	New Mexico Articulated Assessment	
New York	Annual Performance Report	
Ohio	State Ed Info Management System	✓
South Carolina	Department Annual Exit Report	
Texas	State, local & student reports	
Virginia	Ed Hawk Reports	✓
District of Columbia	Stanford 9	
Total		8

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, (c) use of multiple diploma options, and (d) use of alternative diploma options. The following summarizes state responses in relation to these policies and practices. Approximately half of the states provided responses indicating intended and unintended consequences.

Consequences of Requiring Students with Disabilities to Pass Exit Exams to Receive a Standard High School Diploma

Intended Consequences

- More students with disabilities will participate in the general education curriculum and achieve results.

- Higher academic expectations will improve students' access to postsecondary education and employment.
- 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.
- Exit exams signify a minimum standard for all students to achieve—holding all students to these standards gives clearer meaning and value to diplomas earned.
- Educators will use differentiated instructional strategies, including the use of accommodations, to assist students in meeting higher academic standards and passing exit exams.

Unintended Consequences

- Some students with disabilities will fail to receive a diploma.
- Higher dropout rates may result as students' frustrations rise through encountering difficulties in passing state and local school district exit exams.
- Student self-esteem is lowered by repeated failures on exit exams.
- Dissatisfaction and conflicts with parents may sometimes result; possibilities for lawsuits may also occur.
- Some students may need to remain in school longer to meet the requirements of a standard diploma.
- States and local school districts may be forced to create alternative diplomas and pathways to ensure that students exit with some form of high school exit credential.

Consequences of Using a Single Diploma Option

Intended Consequences

- High expectations for all students, including students with disabilities, are maintained.
- More students with disabilities earn a standard diploma.
- Having a single diploma option helps build consistency on the meaning of the requirements associated with the diploma—all students work on and are held to the same state standards.
- The single diploma option provides future employers and postsecondary education institu-

tions a clearer and more detailed record of the student’s performance and achievement.

- The single diploma 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.
- With the single diploma option, students participate in coursework that has a direct connection to opportunities following high school—postsecondary education and employment – which helps to encourage students to remain in school to receive the diploma.

Unintended Consequences

- As graduation requirements increase, fewer students with disabilities actually receive the standard diploma.
- The dropout rate may increase for students who cannot meet required state and local academic standards—students may become frustrated and lose their motivation to remain in school.
- The standard diploma may come to be perceived as too “general” or “watered down” in an effort to accommodate the full range of students’ skills and abilities.
- In order to help students with disabilities meet the requirements for a standard diploma, states may lower their standards for general education students.
- The numbers of special education students remaining in school up to the mandatory age of exit (at age 21 or up to age 22) may be increased because they cannot meet all of the requirements for a standard diploma earlier (this also will result in an increased financial burden on LEAs to retain students for extended periods before standard diploma requirements can be fully met).
- Perceptions develop that the accommodations and modifications special education students need to meet the requirements of a standard diploma are “unfair” to general education students and should therefore not be permitted or else be significantly limited in their use.

Consequences of Using Multiple Diploma Options

Intended Consequences.

- A state is better able to maintain “high” academic standards for its regular or standard diploma when multiple diploma options are available.

- Numbers of students within a state receiving some form of a high school diploma are increased.
- State and local school districts have more flexibility in determining the manner of student exit.
- Creating options that are viewed as motivating and engaging for students with disabilities will ultimately reduce the dropout rate.
- The ability to recognize students (typically general education students) for higher levels of performance in relation to honors diplomas, for example, is increased.

Unintended Consequences.

- States report that IEP teams fail to hold students with disabilities accountable to pass high school exit exams—expectations are lowered for some students with disabilities.
- Diplomas other than the standard diploma are viewed as substandard.
- The use of multiple diplomas is perceived as developing “special tracks” for students to follow, thus making access to the general education curriculum more difficult to achieve for students with disabilities.
- Communicating and clarifying the requirements of different diploma options to parents and students is problematic.
- Access to postsecondary education programs for students with diplomas other than the standard diploma may be limited if these alternative diplomas are viewed as “watered down” in content or of little meaning to postsecondary education admissions staff.
- Gauging the meaning of different diploma options in terms of students’ skills and abilities is confusing for employers.

Consequences of Receiving an Alternative Diploma

Intended Consequences

- Employers and postsecondary education institutions will benefit from having a better idea of the student’s actual skills and abilities based on the type of diploma awarded.
- Students will receive at least some minimum credential that signifies successful completion of high school.

- Opportunities are created to focus more specifically on students’ transition needs, particularly in relation to the development of job skills and functional adult living skills.

Unintended Consequences

- Alternative diplomas are not recognized or valued by employers; many employers require students to have a regular/standard diploma for job entry.
- The alternative diploma may encourage schools, school administrators and staff, and parents to consider it acceptable for students to exit school meeting only the minimal standards associated with alternative diplomas; this may place students at a disadvantage in relation to their future participation in postsecondary education and employment.
- The business community and postsecondary education institutions desire a specific set of standards associated with the awarding of a standard diploma; this is confusing and becomes less clear when alternative diploma options are offered.
- Students with disabilities may be placed in a situation where they are required to take remedial coursework as a condition for entry into postsecondary education programs; courses taken to achieve alternative diplomas may be insufficient to meet minimum entry requirements in many postsecondary education institutions.
- Granting special-education-only diplomas and certificates may have future legal implications, particularly when the criteria used to place students with disabilities in these diploma “tracks” are not well understood by parents and students.

Overall, several major intended benefits of using a single diploma and requiring students with disabilities to pass exit exams to receive this diploma were identified. States also conveyed several possible unintended, negative consequences of the single diploma options. Similarly, states were able to identify both benefits and unintended negative consequences of multiple diploma options for students with disabilities, especially with the requirement that students pass exit exams.

Discussion

For more than two decades, state and local education agencies have been evolving standards-based education reforms in response to growing public criticisms that students are exiting our high schools lacking the skills and knowledge required to be productive citizens. In response to this criticism, states have implemented graduation policies and requirements that call for

raised academic standards for all students, state and local district testing, development of exit exams linked to a student's eligibility for a diploma, and a focus on increasing student graduation rates. All of these strategies are intended to increase the student's level of learning and achievement essential to entering future adult roles. One strategy, high-stakes accountability, has come to dominate the educational landscape (Voke, 2002). High-stakes accountability involves rewarding or sanctioning students, teachers, and schools on the basis of changes in the student's test scores.

The notion of "educational accountability" is the centerpiece of the No Child Left Behind Act signed by President Bush in 2002. This federal Act requires that states test all students, including students with disabilities, annually in grades 3-8 and high school in reading and math, and by 2005-2006 in science in elementary, middle, and high school. While the law does not require high-stakes exit exams that are tied to graduation, it does require extensive use of testing as a means of demonstrating educational accountability. Further, the Act obligates schools and school districts to demonstrate that their students are making "adequate yearly progress" (AYP), as determined by average test scores and other measures. Failure to demonstrate achievement gains among all major racial, ethnic, disability, and income groups will be subject to various district and state interventions. High-stakes accountability is, however, only one component of a larger standards-based strategy to improve student achievement.

Developing appropriate graduation policies and testing approaches for students with disabilities remains a challenge for states and local districts across the nation. The challenge has principally been one of how best to include these students within current and future educational accountability systems and policies rather than establishing separate or alternative assessment practices. The requirement that students with disabilities participate in general education testing and accountability systems was specifically addressed within the IDEA Amendments of 1997. As a requirement of this federal legislation, states must document the number of students participating in the test, report on their performance, and develop alternate assessments for students unable to participate in existing state or district tests. The re-authorization of IDEA will no doubt continue to underscore the importance of these requirements in relation to the No Child Left Behind Act.

Any attempt to document policies and practice is necessarily affected by the volatility of the topic. Although graduation requirements were at one time a fairly stable part of education policy, this is no longer the case. Perhaps since the report *A Nation At Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), the impetus to examine and alter graduation requirements has increased. Though not specifically documented, the concern seems to have been heightened in the past decade with the Improving America's Schools Act and the No Child Left Behind Act, even though they do not specifically address graduation requirements. The No Child Left

Behind Act does, nevertheless, require that graduation rate be one of the indicators for high school accountability, and defines the graduation rate as including those students who receive a standard diploma within four years.

Attempts to document graduation requirements is going to be caught in the quickly changing context that surrounds the topic. Still, it is important to continue to document policies and practices at points in time. This national survey examined the status of state graduation policies and diploma options for youth with and without disabilities in 2002. These state policies were also examined in relation to their intended benefits as well as possible unintended, negative consequences. In the following sections, the results of this study are summarized and discussed and several recommendations focused on current policies and practices are offered.

Graduation Policies Are Increasing and Highly Varied Across States and Local Education Agencies

Increasing state and local district graduation requirements is one component of an overall strategy to raise learning expectations for students, raise academic standards, and place additional accountability on teachers and schools. This broader movement of standards-based reform has three essential elements: (1) state standards that identify what students should know and be able to do, (2) efforts to align teaching and learning with the state standards, and (3) student assessments, also aligned with state standards, the results of which can be used to measure student progress and to promote accountability for improved teaching and learning (Elmore, 2000). Since the mid 1980s, states have been addressing requirements for graduation by raising academic performance standards for all students, implementing state and local district testing programs, linking exit exams to a student's eligibility for a diploma, and other developments. Central to this study and discussion is how states have included students with disabilities as more rigorous high school graduation policies and requirements are put into place.

Standards-based reform stresses that all students, including those with special learning needs, will benefit from being taught to the same high standards as other students (Center on Education Policy, 2002). The IDEA Amendments of 1997 and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 set into place specific requirements that ensure the participation of students with disabilities in state graduation policies and practices. The underlying argument for these requirements is the assumption that unless these students are included in state and local district efforts to raise standards, their needs will be too easily ignored, and the expectations held for them will be too low (Center on Education Policy, 2002; Thurlow & Johnson, 2000). States have responded to this challenge by establishing inclusive graduation policies by developing special criteria and performance standards, offering testing accommodations, developing alternative assessments, or creating alternative diploma options for students with disabilities.

The results of this national survey illustrate significant variation in state graduation policies and practices. As this study was being conducted, several states were actively revising their graduation policies or were in the process of implementing new requirements. Popular press and media have clearly depicted the evolution of state graduation policies and requirements as a “moving target,” often subject to the influence and pressures of state legislatures, teacher unions, special interest groups, as well as parents. What we do know, based on the results of this study, is that the proliferation of graduation policies and requirements is largely subsumed by states with some authority granted to local districts. The most common observed practice across states is for the state to provide minimum requirements and extend options to the local district to add to them. This general conclusion is consistent with the two earlier studies (Guy *et al.*, 1999; Thurlow *et al.*, 1995), which similarly studied patterns and trends in state graduation policies for students with disabilities. Given the implications and possible consequences of fluctuations in state graduation requirements, it is critically important to follow and examine how these changes impact students with disabilities.

A Wide Range of Diploma Options Is Being Made Available to Students With and Without Disabilities

Over the past 15 years, there has been an expansion in the type and level of high school exit documents – *diplomas* – granted to students with and without disabilities. The standards-based education movement has been the primary force driving this diversification in diploma options. As states and local districts have evolved standards and assessment policies and practices (including the use of high-stakes exit exams), they are increasingly being aligned with various high school diploma options. Many examples of this are currently in practice. Several states, for example, have established honors diplomas, based on students’ passing rigorous state academic standards. Conversely, when students experience difficulty in achieving minimal performance on standard tests, an array of alternative or differentiated diploma options, including certificates of participation, IEP diplomas, occupational diplomas, and others, have been developed.

The current challenge for public school systems is how to address the diversity of student abilities and needs, and extend to these students a valued exit credential – the standard high school diploma (Dorn, 1996; Dorn, 2003; Labaree, 1988). One organizational response to this challenge is to create new categories of diplomas for students who fall short of meeting standard diploma requirements. The meaning and value of a high school diploma continues to change as states and local districts raise performance standards for graduation and align these standards with varied diploma options.

This study identified a wide variety of diploma options currently in use across the United States. It is evident from the findings of this study that there is not one model that satisfies everyone.

Currently, 13 states extend to students with and without disabilities a single diploma option (or a standard diploma plus honors diploma only), with the remaining states offering multiple options for youth with and without disabilities. As noted earlier in this report, the highest in total number of diploma options offered is Nebraska, reporting seven different diploma options. Other states, such as Colorado, Connecticut, and Wisconsin, report up to five options.

Those in favor of granting only the standard diploma believe that alternative diplomas perpetuate stigmatization, that the standard diploma stands for a certain level of accepted achievement for all students, and that by granting alternative diplomas to students who achieve at different levels the educational process is corrupted (DeStefano & Metzger, 1991). Unfortunately, there is little research on the value of certificates and alternate, non-standard diplomas in terms of a student's future opportunities for education and employment (DeStefano & Metzger, 1991; Guy et al., 1999; Heubert, 2002; Thurlow et al., 1995). Preliminary data from a study in New Mexico (Gaumer, 2003) indicated that most college admissions offices had not encountered or heard of the certificate of completion available to students with disabilities. In fact, junior colleges in the state, which had open admissions policies, indicated a willingness to admit students with certificates, but also noted that financial aid probably would not be available to them until they earned a General Educational Development (GED) diploma. This study, despite limitations due to the newness of the certificates and the few students receiving them, confirms the importance of pursuing this topic. As it is, in the absence of empirical evidence, states and local districts are proceeding with the development of an array of alternative or differentiated diploma options that may or may not benefit students in relation to future post-high school opportunities for postsecondary education access and employment.

The state education agency staff responding to this survey held a variety of viewpoints regarding the use of a single diploma vs. multiple diploma options for students with disabilities. The arguments for holding all students to a single, standard diploma option include: (a) high expectations for all students, including students with disabilities, are maintained; (b) more students with disabilities will earn a standard diploma; (c) more students with disabilities will participate in the general education curriculum, including rigorous academic coursework; and (d) postsecondary institutions and the business community have a clearer sense and more detailed record of a student's performance and achievement upon graduation. In contrast, the unintended or negative consequences of a single diploma include: (a) fewer students with disabilities will actually receive the standard diploma as graduation requirements increase; (b) the dropout rate may increase as students become frustrated when they cannot meet required state and local testing standards; (c) the standard diploma may be perceived as too "general" or "watered-down," in an effort to accommodate the full range of student abilities; and (d) states may actually lower their standards in an effort to ensure that students with disabilities meet the requirements for a standard diploma.

Arguments in favor of multiple diploma options were also examined by this national survey. The benefits of using multiple diploma options, as reported by state education agency staff, include: (a) the state is better able to maintain “high” academic standards for its regular or standard diploma when multiple diploma options are available; (b) the number of students within a state receiving some form of a high school diploma or credential is increased; (c) state and local districts have more flexibility in determining the manner of student exit; and (d) alternative diploma options may be perceived as motivating and engaging for students with disabilities and, consequently, dropout rates will decrease within states. Conversely, the unintended or negative consequences of differentiated or multiple diploma options may include: (a) expectations are lowered for students with disabilities overall; (b) diplomas other than the standard diploma are viewed as substandard; (c) the use of alternative diplomas may also become associated with the development of “special tracks” for students to follow, thus making access to the general education curriculum more difficult to achieve for students with disabilities; (d) communicating and clarifying the requirements of different diploma options to parents of student is confusing and problematic; and (e) access to postsecondary education programs and future employment may become limited if these alternative diplomas are viewed as having little meaning by postsecondary education admissions staff and employers.

As the value of the diploma continues to be gauged in relation to specific knowledge and skills students must acquire to graduate, additional information on the implications of these policies and practices needs to be thoroughly examined. The information gathered through this national survey represents only a “snapshot” of the current range and variation in states’ practices regarding diploma options.

There Is an Increased Trend Toward the Use of “High-stakes” Exit Exams as a Requirement for Receiving a High School Diploma

The push to align exit exams with students’ eligibility to receive a high school diploma continues to increase nationally. In the present study, 27 states required youth with disabilities to pass a state exit exam in order to receive a high school diploma; 2 additional states required that local education agencies select and administer exit exams. These numbers represent an increase over the numbers in the studies conducted by Thurlow et al. (1995), which identified 16 states where exit exams were linked to the student’s receipt of a high school diploma, and Guy et al. (1999), which found 20 states using this policy. Other studies have noted similar trends (Center on Education Policy, 2002; Heubert & Hauser, 1999; McDonnell, McLaughlin, & Morison, 1997; Olson, Jones, & Bond, 2001). The evolution of “high-stakes” testing practices is not proceeding without controversy and debate in state legislatures, and among researchers, educators, professionals, advocacy groups, and the general public.

Proponents of exit exams argue that by adopting such exams, state policymakers are trying to

ensure that a diploma “means something,” namely, that the holder has obtained the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in a job, college, or other aspects of daily life (Center on Education Policy, 2002). Amrein and Berliner (2002), in summarizing the historical context of “high-stakes” tests, identified several arguments that have been used to promote this testing approach. These include: (a) students and teachers need “high-stakes” tests to know what is important to learn and to teach; (b) teachers need to be held accountable through “high-stakes” tests to motivate them to teach better, particularly to push low-achieving students to work harder; (c) students work harder and learn more when they have to take “high-stakes” tests; (d) students will be motivated to do their best and score well in “high-stakes” tests; and (e) scoring well on the tests will lead to feelings of success, while doing poorly on such tests will lead to increased effort to learn. It is also assumed that “high-stakes” testing will provide good measures of the curricula taught to the students.

Supporters of high school exit exams also point to fact that colleges as well as employers have pushed for these tests as a means of spurring a general improvement in public education overall. They argue that far too many students leave public school programs ill-prepared to meet the entrance requirements for college or to minimally meet entry-level job-performance requirements. Exit exams serve as a form of quality assurance, especially when they are tied to challenging state standards for what students should know and be able to do (Center on Education Policy, 2002).

Requirements added into the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 to include students with disabilities in state and LEA assessments, and to report on their performance, recognize that students with disabilities benefit from being held to high standards, having access to the general education curriculum, and being part of the student body for which educators are accountable for teaching (McDonnell, McLaughlin, & Morison, 1997; Thurlow & Johnson, 2000; U.S. Department of Education, 1999). The importance of maintaining high expectations for all students is central to this belief. To do otherwise would ultimately relegate special education students to separate curriculum “tracks” that are perceived as “watered down” from or “less” than what is offered within the general education curriculum. Advocates of including students with disabilities in state and local district assessments, including “high-stakes” testing, argue that the use of accommodations, appropriate instruction, support, and collaboration with general education teachers, can ensure that students meet high academic standards for graduation.

Critics of exit exams contend that such exams can inflict disproportionate harm on minority students, the poor, and students with disabilities, who have lower than average passing rates on these tests (Center on Education Policy, 2002; Heubert, 2002; Heubert & Hauser, 1999). Several recent research studies and state-level analyses have been conducted pointing out negative consequences of “high-stakes” testing for students, including students with disabilities, who do not perform well on these tests. Observable consequences may include: (a) increased refer-

als to special education for services; (b) lowered expectation of students as learners when test failures occur; (c) narrowing of the curriculum and instruction to focus on the specific learning outcomes assessed in state tests; (d) limiting the curriculum and student learning opportunities by teaching directly to test items; (e) limiting the range of program options students can participate in because of intensified efforts to concentrate on areas of weakness identified by testing; (f) increase in the overall drop-out rate of students with disabilities and others; (g) grade-level retention of students who perform poorly on state and local district tests, even when students appear to be performing adequately in academic coursework; and (h) the impact test scores have on judging whether a student will graduate from school with a standard education diploma or will receive an alternative diploma that is explicitly or implicitly valued as “lesser” than the standard or regular diploma (Education Commission of the States, 1998; Heubert, 2002; Lane et al., 1998; Langenfeld et al., 1997; Lewis, 2000; National Research Council, 2000; Thurlow & Johnson, 2000).

Opponents also challenge “high-stakes” testing on several additional factors. A central theme emerging is whether students are provided the opportunity to learn the material being tested. Opportunity to learn is a comprehensive concept that involves providing students with the full range of instructional services and supports that are necessary for them to meet state standards (Center on Education Policy, 2002). Beyond questions focused on the adequacy of instruction and whether the curriculum being taught is appropriately aligned with state standards is the added concern about the extent to which appropriate accommodations and support are being offered to students with disabilities to increase their chances of performing adequately on state tests.

An additional issue focuses on the reliance on using a single test for critical educational decisions. Heubert and Hauser (1999) comment that an educational decision that will have an impact on a test-taker should not be made solely or automatically on the basis of a single test score. National organizations such as the American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, National Council on Measurement in Education, and National Research Council have clearly advocated for the use of multiple measures of student performance as a standard for educational decision-making about students. The distinction lies between the use of a single “high-stakes” test (such as an exit exam) for system and student accountability purposes vs. the use of multiple measures that provide evidence of student learning and the development of knowledge and skills.

Both sides of the debate offer compelling and important arguments that raise important questions for schools and local districts to resolve. Many of these questions apply to all students, yet there are several that specifically address students with disabilities as they are required to take exit exams for graduation. For example, what do schools need to consider about using exit exams as a criterion for receiving a high school diploma? What are the implications of state exit exams, in relation to the use of alternative diploma options? How do we ensure that results

on exit exams do not unnecessarily limit educational experiences and learning opportunities for students with disabilities? What other measures of student performance should be used in making critical decisions regarding a student’s eligibility for receiving a standard diploma? These and other questions pose challenges, and must be answered to produce viable solutions for including students with disabilities in “high-stakes” assessments.

The urgent need to answer these questions is highlighted by the implication of the No Child Left Behind Act that only students who earn a standard diploma within four years count in the graduation rate required as a second indicator in AYP formulas. The extent to which this affects policy and perhaps even dropout rates among students with disabilities will be important to track over time.

Recommendations

As illustrated within this study, as well as those cited in this report, the range and variation in state graduation requirements for students with and without disabilities is extensive. Changes in graduation policies and requirements are also occurring frequently across states. Further, many states have opted to create an array of alternative or differentiated diplomas in response to a variety of needs and pressures. The meaning and value of all of these graduation requirements are, however, not well understood. “High-stakes” testing also continues to increase as an accountability strategy to ensure that students graduate with a diploma that acknowledges what they have learned. These trends in state policies and practices are all moving forward 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

Beginning from the assumption that it is beneficial for students with disabilities to participate in state and local district assessments, and also beginning from the need to comply with federal law, it is important to ask what is required for these students to take state and local district assessments in a way that best reflects what they have learned, that is, what they know and can do (Thurlow & Johnson, 2000). It is further assumed that the tests themselves, as well as the diploma options received by states, reflect student knowledge and skills learned. This broad assumption has particular implications for students with disabilities.

The testing of students with disabilities is not something new. Tests have been in place for many years to determine the eligibility of students for special education services, as well as to support educational placement decisions. State and local district tests developed in response to standards-based initiatives and requirements for new forms of accountability are new. Many of these tests were developed for students in general education, without much consideration for how well special education students would fare when participating in these assessments. Further, as these tests were developed, little attention was focused on how accommodations or alternate assessments would be used to support their participation. Controversy continues to surround the use of accommodations, as well as the use of alternate assessments.

Several assumptions concerning the adoption and use of alternative diploma options for students with disabilities have also been made. It is assumed that such options create the additional flexibility needed by certain sub-groups of students to successfully earn an exit credential at the end of high school. Questions concerning the rationale, specific requirements, and criteria used for each of these diploma options, and who receives them, must be fully addressed. If the basic assumption is that it is beneficial for students with disabilities to participate in and be held accountable to the full range of state graduation requirements and diploma options, then these policies and practices must be carefully scrutinized, with broad public input and evidence that proves their efficacy.

Ensure Students with Disabilities an Opportunity to Learn the Material They Will be Tested on in State and Local Assessments

Ensuring students an “adequate opportunity to learn” the requisite knowledge and skills before participating in state and local district assessments is at the heart of the debate over testing policies and practices. These concerns have been shared by leading national organizations, such as the American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, and the National Council on Measurement in Education (1999). Concerning students with disabilities, Heubert and Hauser (1999) have commented that “If the student with disabilities is subject to an assessment used for promotion or graduation decisions, the IEP team should ensure that the curriculum and instruction received by the student for the individual education program is aligned with the test content and that the student has had adequate opportunity to learn the material covered by the test” (p. 295).

Many students with disabilities will need access to special services and supports that are necessary to learn the material covered by the test. These supports will include effective instruction by high-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 programs. Further, opportunity to learn does not begin in high school, but rather is a shared responsibility among grades K-12 (Center on Education Policy, 2002). This would allow an opportunity to gradually phase in requirements of state and local district assessments. For example, those students now in elementary school would be the first required to meet the state graduation requirements (Thurlow & Thompson, 1999). This would give teachers, parents, and students with disabilities the additional time needed to adequately perform on state and local district assessments, including “high-stakes” exit exams.

Make High School Graduation Decisions Based on Multiple Indicators of Students’ Learning and Skills

The central concern of this recommendation is the use of exit exams as the sole criterion for graduation. As noted earlier in this report, requirements that states set for graduation can range from Carnegie unit requirements (a certain number of class credits earned in specific areas), successfully passing a competency test, high school exit exams, or a series of benchmark exams. States may also require almost any combination of these to earn a high school diploma (Guy et al., 1999; Johnson et al., 2002; Thurlow et al., 1995). Each of these forms of assessment operates as a required criterion for graduation. That is, a student must successfully earn a specified number of credits or pass required exit exams before a diploma is granted. Failure to meet minimum requirements in any one of these areas denies the student the opportunity to graduate with a standard diploma.

A case can be made for the use of exit exams in conjunction with other measures of student performance for graduation. Strategies may include: (a) allowing passing grades to compensate for failing an exit exam; (b) using authentic or performance-based assessments, such as portfolios or other documentation; and (c) using judgments by panels of teachers, including—for students with disabilities—the IEP team. Many states have also opted to develop alternative diploma options, with modified graduation requirements, to allow students to graduate.

State and local districts have also developed several special testing provisions for students with disabilities. These include: use of accommodations during test situations, use of alternate assessments, and providing waivers or appeals processes, as well as use of multiple opportunities for retesting (which is available to all students). The important point is that the validity and fairness of reaching a graduation decision based on a single measure of a student’s test performance is inconsistent with what we know about effective and reasonable testing practices (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, National Council on Measurement in Education, 1999; Haertel, 1999; Heubert & Hauser, 1999; Lewis, 2000).

Clarify the Implications of Developing and Granting Alternative Diploma Options for Students with Disabilities

The question here is whether receiving something other than a standard high school diploma limits a student's access to future postsecondary education, employment, and other adult life opportunities (Johnson et al., 2002). As illustrated in this study, many states offer and grant alternative diplomas in addition to the standard high school diploma. Unfortunately, there is little research on the value of these alternative diplomas in terms of a student's future opportunities for education and employment (Heubert, 2002). 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.

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, 2002). Employers also need to be consulted and engaged in discussions regarding the meaning of these alternative diplomas in terms of students' skills and knowledge. If members of the business community are not engaged in discussions about plans to use the array of alternative diplomas, they may view alternative diplomas as a convenient screening mechanism for new employees. Students who hold a standard high school diploma might thereby be viewed as more desirable candidates for employment than those with an alternative or other type of diploma. Decisions about the development of alternative diplomas should also be discussed with school administrators, community service agencies, postsecondary education institutions, union representatives, parents, and individuals with disabilities, to be sure that the meanings of these diploma options are well understood and valued.

Clarify the Implications of Different Diploma Options for Continued Special Education Services

Educators, parents, and students must know that if a standard high school diploma is received, the student is no longer entitled to special education services, unless a state or district policy for continued services under such circumstances exists. Most states do not have such policies. Special education and general education teachers should carefully work with students and their families to consider what it actually means to receive a high school diploma. In some cases, it may be advisable to delay formal receipt of a standard high school diploma until the conditions (goals and objectives) of the student's IEP have been fully met, including all transition service requirements, as outlined in IDEA 97 (Thurlow & Johnson, 2000). Prematurely ending

a student's educational program of studies may result in needless frustration and difficulties in achieving access to postsecondary education, seeking employment, and fully participating in community life.

Conduct On-going Research on the Intended and Unintended Consequences of State Graduation Requirements and Diploma Options

States are moving quickly to put into place graduation requirements that include assessment and accountability measures required by IDEA 97 and, now, the No Child Left Behind Act. States, however, vary extensively in their implementation of these requirements. It is also recognized that states and local districts are encountering technical, political, and logistical difficulties as they put these graduation policies and practices in place. 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. High failure rates on state and local district assessments, potentially unnecessary grade-level retention of students, increased dropout rates, students not receiving a standard diploma at the end of their high school education, and other difficulties 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.

Conclusion

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 importance of promoting high expectations for all students by adopting evidence-based practices that help students with disabilities to successfully meet state graduation requirements is recognized as a national goal. 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 a removal of the student from the general education curriculum.

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