

# TOPICAL REVIEW TWO

## High Stakes: Exit Documents and Students with Disabilities

October, 2002



**The Institute for the  
Study of Exceptional  
Children and Youth**

University of Maryland  
1308 Benjamin Building  
College Park, Maryland 20742-1161  
301.405.6509 • fax: 301.314.9158



**High Stakes:  
Exit Documents and  
Students with Disabilities**

*Katherine Nagle,  
University of Maryland*

*Diana Pullin,  
Lynch School of Education, Boston College*

*Joanne Karger,  
Harvard Graduate School of Education*

*Kimber Malmgren,  
University of Maryland*

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*The push for educational accountability and standards-based reform has had a significant impact on the awarding of high school diplomas. In the US, a regular diploma indicates basic academic and personal competence; a student without one faces stigma and limited options. Yet, as states raise standards and require competency exams, some students - including those with disabilities - may be given alternate exit documents (such as IEP diplomas and certificates of completion) or none at all.*

*High school graduation began to take on its present significance in the early decades of the 20th century. Because of changes in the economy, the arrival of great numbers of immigrants, and fears of urban social unrest, Americans gradually came to view high school completion as a key to economic success. It wasn't until the 1960s and early 1970s that students with disabilities finally won access to the opportunities that a public education and high school diploma can confer.*

*Now, however, exit exams threaten to deny diplomas to special populations, and lawsuits are challenging both the process and results for students with disabilities. The legal challenges include constitutional claims brought under the Due Process and Equal Protection Clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment, and claims under disability statutes. Case law and administrative opinions indicate that:*

- *Denial of a diploma to students with disabilities can thwart the goals of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA);*
- *Decisions about participation in assessments should be made by a student's IEP team;*
- *Students with disabilities must be given the opportunity to learn material covered on exit exams;*
- *Students with disabilities must receive appropriate accommodations on exit exams or be given the chance to have alternate assessments.*

*A relatively high percentage of students with disabilities drop out of high school without meeting exit requirements. Causes for this include a lack of curricular relevancy, particularly given the increasing emphasis on academic standards. Students with disabilities who leave school before graduation face the general economic and societal risks associated with dropping out and also lose access to specialized transition education and vocational programs.*

*Students with disabilities who remain in school experience a wide range of state policies on graduation requirements. States differ in significant ways, including:*

- *Exit document options offered (standard diploma only, IEP diploma, certificate of attendance, honors diploma, etc.);*
- *Requirements for a diploma (course credits only, credits plus exam, exam only, etc.);*
- *Types of exit exams given (basic skills, comprehensive assessment, etc.);*
- *Changes allowed in course and/or exam requirements to permit students with disabilities to earn a standard diploma (modified course work with unchanged exam, unchanged coursework with exemption from exam, etc.).*

*A look at how four European countries handle issues of diploma requirements and special education reveals a similar variety of approaches. Sweden and Italy emphasize local assessments by teachers, while France and the United Kingdom (UK) put heavy reliance on external examinations. Attempts in several of the countries to equalize the value of exit documents from vocational programs and academic ones has proved problematic. The extent to which students with disabilities are explicitly included in educational reform also varies, but none of the four countries give the issue as high a profile as the US does, and none disaggregate score data for these students.*

*Policymakers face the difficult challenge of ensuring quality control and enforcing high standards, yet offering exit documents that recognize the achievement of all students. Three models used in the US and Europe present a number of relevant considerations:*

- The Single Diploma Model offers common content, holds all students to a higher standard, emphasizes academics, and provides access to higher education;*
- The Multiple Exit Document Model allows core content to vary for IEP diplomas, gives recognition to differences in performance, and may provide alternative access to higher education;*
- The Separate Track Exit Document Model offers different curricula, settings, and assessments, provides a second chance at education for post-school populations, and is not tied to student age.*

*A recent EPRI symposium on exit documents and students with disabilities resulted in a variety of policy recommendations: alter requirements for a standard diploma; use accommodations before actual testing; retest; change the way we report and analyze assessments; build assessments with students with disabilities in mind; continually monitor school and student performance; make changes during the early childhood and elementary years; improve access to quality instruction; and plan for students' future beyond high school.*

*Clear legal standards address some of the complex issues raised by exit exams and exit documents. The goals of the laws governing the education of students with disabilities and the ongoing evaluation of states' current efforts can provide further guidance.*

Failure to obtain at least a high school diploma looks more and more like the contemporary equivalent of functional illiteracy. High school dropout indicates a failure to pass minimum thresholds of economic, social or political motivation, access and competence. (Hauser, 1997, p. 154)

For many American youth, the receipt of a high school diploma signifies the end of childhood and the beginning of adulthood. Yet it was only in the latter half of the twentieth century that high school attendance and high school graduation became an integral rite of passage in the US. In the early twentieth century, high schools were elite institutions that accepted only a small number of students and graduated only a small minority of that number (Dorn, 1993). By the mid twentieth century, however, universal high school attendance and graduation with a regular diploma were common for most American teens. Today, completing high school is viewed as the appropriate path for American youth and the receipt of a diploma is regarded as the culmination of a successful high school experience (Dorn).

Despite claims that the high school diploma has been devalued (Boylan, 1993; Murnane & Levy, 1996), there is still considerable evidence that individuals who do not graduate with a high school diploma have a limited number of options in the adult world. Jaeger (1989) concluded that having a high school diploma determined whether a young person could gain employment and earn money, as well as the amount of financial remuneration available. In addition, earning a high school diploma is associated with family formation and stability, and civic participation (Heubert & Hauser, 1999).

The fundamental purpose of the high school diploma is to provide evidence that its bearer has attained an acceptable level of academic competence and is sufficiently prepared to succeed in American society (Ravitch, 1995). In the past, students usual-

ly obtained diplomas by passing Carnegie units, based on the number of hours spent in class rather than on any particular standard of learning (Heubert & Hauser, 1999). The wide variety of curricula options and levels enabled students of varying interests and ability to follow some sort of educational career and graduate with a regular diploma. This allowed high schools to tread the precarious path between being institutions that provided comprehensive education and institutions designed to sort the able from the less able.

However, in the current climate of standards-based reform and educational accountability, some states have adopted policies that make graduation from high school less certain for American youth. Several states, including three of EPRRI's core study states, Maryland, New York, and Texas, are requiring students to pass one or more competency exams and to demonstrate higher order thinking skills in order to graduate with a regular high school diploma (Heubert & Hauser, 1999). The basic premise behind this policy and standards-based reform is the belief that all students can meet higher standards if the requirements are clearly defined and if all students have access to challenging subject matter (McDonnell, McLaughlin, & Morrison, 1997). However, as attractive as the concept of increasing academic performance may be to the American public, the devil is in the details.

Typically, states have adopted a "conjunctive" model of assessment at the high school exit level (Heubert & Hauser, 1999). The conjunctive model requires students to complete all the required coursework and demonstrate mastery by passing the required tests to obtain a standard high school diploma. This practice poses a dilemma for states, local education authorities, and school personnel.

The standard for passing may be set so low as to be meaningless and thus defeat the purpose of standards-based reform (Ravitch, 1995). On the other hand, critics fear that certain sections of the school population, such as poor students, African-American youth, and students with disabilities, may be harmed by the new graduation practices since they have not been given the same opportunity to learn as their more advantaged peers (Heubert & Hauser, 1999).

Some students, and those with disabilities in particular, may instead receive a special diploma or a certificate of completion that signifies a lesser status in the post school population (Bodner, Clark, & Mellard, 1987). According to Guy, Hyeonsook, Sun-Young, and Thurlow (1999), 24 states offered an IEP diploma as an exit document option for students with disabilities and 31 states offered a certificate of completion, which in some states was available to students with and without disabilities.

The increasing use of high stakes tests and the enforcement of rigorous standards to grant or withhold regular high school diplomas are contentious issues in the debate surrounding public education in the United States. This debate is likely to intensify if, in the current standards-based climate, states deny diplomas to large proportions of students. Moreover, setting high standards is likely to lead to differences in passing rates among particular sections of the student population. Unless ways are found to improve educational opportunities for all, special populations may be at greater risk of educational failure as they may leave school without a high school diploma due to increased graduation requirements (Heubert & Hauser, 1999).

This topical review examines the traditional role of the high school diploma in the current context of standards-based reform as it relates to students with diverse educational needs, and students with disabilities in particular. The first section examines the high school diploma in three domains: historical, legal, and economic. The second section presents current data and information on high school graduation policies across the United States as they relate to special populations. The third section explores graduation policies in other industrialized nations in an effort to widen the debate on exit documents and to identify possible future US policy directions, and the final section presents possible alternative approaches to exit documents in the United States.

## 2. Overview of the High School Diploma

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Ravitch (1995) pointed out that the American public high school plays a variety of roles in American society: educational, moral, and social. According to this view, schools provide a basic level of academic skills, inculcate students in the white Protestant work ethic, and provide opportunity for social mobility to everyone. The culmination of a high school career is the receipt of a high school diploma, which signifies that an individual has successfully completed his or her apprenticeship to become an American adult. Possession of a high school diploma no longer guarantees employment, yet its absence carries considerable social and economic stigma (Dorn, 1993). Graduation from high school may be only the first step on the ladder of success, but it is still an achievement that marks the end of twelve years of schooling.

To understand the heated debates currently surrounding the high school diploma and high stakes testing, it is important to understand the multifaceted and, at times, conflicting nature of the document itself. Today, the high school diploma is both more and less than a certificate of academic competency. It is more because American public schools are not only the purveyors of academic learning but also the conduits by which American youth learn the values of democracy, citizenship, and the workplace (Kearns & Doyle, 1988). And it is less because of the perception that, as a badge of academic quality, it is frequently found wanting (Dorn, 1993; Ray & Mickelson, 1993). This section explores, in three complementary ways, the nature and function of the high school diploma to better understand why it generates such intense emotion.

### Historical Overview

#### The Expansion of the American High School

The history of the American public school is dominated by the notion of common schools for all children (Cohen & Neufield, 1981; Ravitch, 1995). During the mid 1800s, the common schools movement was aimed at the elementary school level and sought universal attendance and a standardized curriculum. By the early 1900s, the majority of 7-to-12 year-olds were already in schools and the idea of using public money to support universal elementary education was firmly established. Most children left school by age 13, and this rendered secondary education of little importance (Lazerson, 1999).

A small number of high schools existed at the turn of the century, but these were regarded as elitist institutions that prepared individuals for the professions. However, the early decades of the twentieth century witnessed a huge transformation in secondary school education. Americans built one high school a day between 1890 and 1918, and enrollment swelled from roughly .5 million in 1900 to more than 6.5 million in 1940 (Olson, 1999).

It was hoped that high schools or the “people’s college,” would become the great equalizers of society by distributing knowledge to both rich and poor in equal measure (Cohen, 1970; Lazerson, 1999). It was also expected that schools would act as agents of social cohesion and assimilation for the ever increasing numbers of immigrants. Given these new roles, progressive reformers made fundamental changes in the way the school systems operated - from large ward-dominated school boards made up of local dignitaries to streamlined bureaucracies made up of professional educators and experienced businessmen (Tyack, 1974). The decision-making process was to be controlled by superintendents, who, with a small clique of experts, would run schools on the corporate model, with greater efficiency and less waste. A new generation of Americans was to be created by the public schools, and they would be “trustees for our American civilization” (Butler, 1906).

These changes totally revolutionized the school system and, although opposed by local community leaders, teachers, and unions, the “progressive reformers” and their professional supporters, were able to perform their successful transformation within a 20 year period. This same period saw the start of the expansion of high school attendance and the increase in graduation rates. The underlying causes of these momentous changes have been the focus of considerable scholarly interest. The views discussed below represent three possible explanations and are not mutually exclusive. As with most historical work, researchers examine events through their own subjective lenses to produce their own individual truths. The validity of each interpretation will undoubtedly change over time as more information is added to the field’s knowledge base. In addition, as different voices are heard, such as those of women and those of people with disabilities, new stories and theories will emerge.

### **Changes in the Economy.**

Paul Osterman (1979) made a direct link between the economy during this period and the expansion of secondary education. He argued that changes in technology, in the form of large machinery, reduced the need for a significant pool of unskilled child labor at the same time that the pool of adult labor expanded. The new machinery used in factories was more complicated to operate but could run almost constantly. Adult workers were thus better suited to this mode of production and were available in abundance. From 1890 to 1920, nearly twenty million immigrants entered the United States, and most settled in urban areas where cheap labor was in demand (Lazerson, 1999). In addition many more Americans moved to the cities from rural areas to take up employment in factories.

The influx of workers created a pool of adult labor ready to meet the requirements of an industrialized economy. The introduction of technology, such as the internal combustion engine, the draper loom, and continuous processing techniques, needed semi-skilled machine operators - also preferably adults (Osterman, 1979).

Thus children, once the core of the economy, were displaced and needed somewhere to go; that somewhere, according to Osterman, was the classroom. If the children did not go willingly then they were compelled so by truancy officers upholding the compulsory education laws of earlier years, and implementing new ones. In addition, because business had a replacement for children, it no longer opposed legislation that outlawed child labor and enforced compulsory schooling. The opponents of child labor were finally successful in getting legislation enforced with little opposition. By 1910, 42 states and the District of Columbia had enacted compulsory education laws for students through age 14 (Olson, 1999).

According to Osterman (1979), the middle classes and the business owners who came from their ranks felt threatened by the number and variety of immigrants. They feared that the fabric of society would break down if the immigrants were not assimilated, leading to social unrest, instability, and mob violence, factors that were not conducive to the expansion of markets. In addition they wished to preserve the increasing number of white-collar jobs for themselves and feared competition from immigrants.

The solution was to use schools to Americanize the newcomers while demanding higher levels of education for the best jobs - so high that only children of more affluent families could qualify (Osterman, 1979). The requirements for entry into white-collar jobs continued to increase, and potential employees demanded more and more education in order to gain access to the job market. At the beginning of this era, the completion of high school was required for white collar jobs; as more young adults achieved this status, the requirement was increased to two years of college, then four years, then additional degrees.

Osterman (1979) suggested that the role of high schools changed dramatically during this period. Rather than being an institution based on the ideals of equality and egalitarianism, high schools took on two roles. High schools were to teach the children of immigrants to know their place and enable more middle class children to gain the skills needed to become the bosses of the future. Osterman pointed out that students who graduated were generally children of the professional and managerial classes, whereas children from working class and immigrant children frequently did not graduate, but were retained in the lower grades until they could leave. Dorn (1993) shows that although high school attendance expanded during the Progressive Era, the number of graduates did not expand at the same rate. Educational reformers wanted to get adolescents off the streets and into school so they could learn vocational skills and be prepared for the labor market. But in the period between 1930 and 1950, adolescents did not have to graduate. Up to the mid 1950s, only students who were college bound were required to have a high school diploma.

#### **Immigrant Demand for Education.**

Smith (1969) offered a different cause for the expansion of the high school system during this period. He believed the demand for better education on the part of immigrants forced large cities, like New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and Boston to extend their high school education systems. Immigrant parents, especially from Central and Southern Europe, wanted to send their children to school to learn to read and write English and avoid being taken advantage of by resident Americans and more established immigrant populations.

Immigrants also used education as a means of determining their identity in America. They saw this as a land of many cultures and traditions. It promised the freedom to enjoy cultural pluralism: both the opportunity for advancement and the ability to maintain cultural ethnicity (Smith, 1969). Immigrants wanted to be good Americans and developed a sense of civic responsibility.

Smith (1969) suggested that the arrival of the greatest number of immigrants coincided with the increase of vocational subjects in high schools. Schools added vocational programs to the high school curriculum because immigrant families required them. These families were keen to share in the skills

they saw as essential for success in their new homeland and believed that their children should learn them in school. Some immigrant groups had seen educational reforms in their own countries but were denied a share in them because of societal barriers to upward mobility. To many immigrants, America promised opportunity to all based on hard work, not social status. Education was seen, therefore, as means to upward social mobility.

#### **Fears of Urban Social Unrest.**

A third explanation for the expansion of high schools was put forth by Tyack (1974), who suggested that educators and reformers were so concerned by the rate of immigration and its effect on urban society that they used public schools to Americanize immigrants. Both conservatives and liberal reformers believed a revolution was taking place and the only way to protect society was to make the newcomers totally American in outlook, behavior, and ambitions.

Tyack (1974) believed that the majority of educators and administrators were supportive of the need for Americanization. Superintendents had been brought up to believe in traditional American values and did not question them because they themselves had been successful in this society. Teachers too, even those who were second generation immigrants, felt the need to Americanize newcomers.

In order to belong, immigrants had to be more American than Americans. Tyack believed, in contrast to Smith, that immigrants not only had to learn to navigate an urban society, but also had to shed all trappings of "foreignness" - names, accents, language, and customs - even if that meant going against parental values. Most educators felt that immigrant children had to fit into the system rather than have the system evolve.

Despite the negative feelings immigrants may have had about the Americanization of their children, families sent their children to public elementary and high schools in large numbers. In northern cities, immigrant children attended school as regularly as, or more often than, native born students (Tyack, 1974). Some immigrants certainly felt that access to public education was one of the most important elements of success in society, but as Tyack points out, not all groups felt this way. Children who came from English speaking backgrounds were

generally more successful, attended school more regularly and for longer periods, and were less likely to be labeled retarded than children from non-English speaking backgrounds, such as children from Polish or Southern Italian families (Cohen, 1971).

Tyack suggested that some newly arrived urban and middle class groups enthusiastically embraced education. They fully understood the value of education, even if (and possibly because) they had been denied it in their native lands. Others did not share this background because they were from predominantly rural environments. Education was valued, but it was a practical, hands-on passing of skills needed to survive on the land. In these societies, children were expected to work when they were older, and extra schooling was regarded as pointless. Hard work, family loyalty, and obedience to elders were valued more than academic learning.

### **High School Responses to Increased Enrollment**

High school became the default destination of most young adults and a necessity in the minds of the American public. By the second decade of the twentieth century, unprecedented enrollment brought an increasingly diverse population into secondary schools. To satisfy the demand for both comprehensive schooling and prestige, high schools dramatically altered their internal structure and curricula offerings and reorganized in a stratified manner (Cohen & Neufield, 1981).

### **Curricular Reform.**

In 1892, the Committee of Ten was established by the National Education Association (NEA) to promote uniformity in the curricula offerings of American high schools (Ravitch, 1995). The committee, made up of academic elites, endorsed four model curricula, all of which included English, mathematics, history, and science, but which differed according to the number of foreign languages required. The Committee of Ten rejected calls that differentiation be based on social class and instead emphasized student choice regardless of whether the individual was college bound.

As a result of the work of the Committee of Ten, the NEA established a committee on college entrance requirements to produce a common framework for college preparation. This committee proposed adopting course units as a uniform meas-

ure. High school students were required to study 16 units in their four-year high school career; some of the units were in mandatory subject areas while others were electives (Ravitch, 1995). (The shift in emphasis from equivalent programs of study to equivalent and interchangeable units helped set the stage for graduation equivalency among the increasingly diverse curricula offerings later provided by high schools.) Each “Carnegie unit” was defined as a course of five periods per week for one academic year.

The development of vocational education curricula in American high schools was spurred by the passage, in the US Congress, of the Smith-Hughes Act in 1917 (Spring, 1997). The major influence on the Smith-Hughes Act was a report by the Commission on National Aid to Vocational Education established by Congress in 1914. The Commission determined that vocational education was necessary to avoid wasting the country’s human resources. Through vocational education, youth would be trained according to individual needs and callings and America would provide its own labor force rather than import workers from Europe. The Smith-Hughes Act established a Federal Board for Vocational Education and provided federal dollars to motivate states and communities to establish vocational training for youth and adults workers.

In 1918 the NEA sponsored a Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education (CRSE). The CRSE was made up of professional educators and focused on both academic and non-academic subjects. Seven cardinal principles of education were identified: health, command of fundamental processes, worthy home membership, vocation, citizenship, worthy use of leisure, and ethical character (Ravitch, 1995). Every academic subject had to contribute in some way to the achievement of these objectives; those that did not were abandoned or submerged into broader areas of study (Ravitch, 1995).

The CRSE announced that the purpose of high school was to educate students in the practicalities of their lives as workers and citizens. The CRSE viewed the new students as unable to cope with a serious academic curriculum and advocated the introduction of a more diverse and less demanding curriculum. The reformers believed that if students were provided with an array of curricula offerings at different levels of difficulty, they

would be more likely to stay in school and to graduate with a high school diploma (Olson, 1999).

The period of the Great Depression further emphasized the importance of remaining in school and graduating with a high school diploma (Lazerson, 1999). High school was seen as a refuge against the world of high unemployment. It provided necessary skills and gave those who were academically inclined an opportunity to enter college. Schools found themselves inundated with large numbers of students, especially from poor and working class families, and responded by creating levels of classes within grades. This practice became known as tracking.

### **The Development of Tracking**

Tracking was seen as an educationally sound and administratively functional way to accomplish two important tasks. First, it provided students with the education best suited to their abilities, and second, it provided the country with an array of workers (Oakes, 1995). In an effort to match students to the right curriculum, high schools began grouping students into classes by ability. Gutek (1991) identified four basic tracks that emerged in curriculum organization:

- The college preparatory program, which included courses in English language and literature, foreign language, mathematics, science, history, and social science;
- The commercial or business program, which offered work in bookkeeping, shorthand, and typing;
- Industrial, vocational home economics, and agricultural programs;
- A general academic program designed for terminal students.

Tracking enabled public high schools to not only meet the democratic agenda of serving all youths, but to preserve the value of a high school diploma for those on the academic track in the following way. Students were placed according to their perceived ability, usually measured by test scores, and occupational destination, usually determined by their class origins (Tyack, 1974). Academic classes and college entrance tracks were largely the preserve of white middle class students who did well on standardized tests and thus were deemed suited to pro-

fessional and technical employment. Children from the lower classes scored worse on such exams and were placed in the general track in vocational classes. There they received preparation for clerical or manual employment. A high school diploma was not a prerequisite for work in the trades, and as a result, many students left school for jobs before graduation. Thus, although in theory the high school diploma was available to all students who met their high school's course requirements, in practice, it was those students who were college bound who remained in school to receive their high school diplomas.

Although some voices were raised against psychometric tests and the tracking system (Cohen & Neufield, 1981), many newly arrived or poor Americans believed that some high school was better than none and did not complain. In 1930, high school attendance was increasing rapidly, but the graduation rate did not increase at the same rate. Failure to graduate from high school was still socially legitimate. This situation changed dramatically after the Great Depression and the Second World War. By 1950, a person who did not graduate was a failure, and the label "high school dropout" became a stigma (Dorn, 1993).

### **Social Promotion**

Changes in curriculum and the development of the tracking system were accompanied by a relaxation of the standards for promotion and graduation, mainly through the increasing practice of social promotion. Social promotion became a feature of elementary schools, first as a consequence of compulsory education. Schools had to respond to students who could not keep up, placing them either with their age peers or their academic peers (Rothstein, 1998). As more and more youth remained in high school, the practice of social promotion was adopted as a way of moving under-performing students up through the school system until they reached 18. By 1938, most school superintendents supported some form of social promotion (Rothstein).

Cohen and Neufield (1981) argued that social promotion became the means by which high schools dealt with the large numbers of students whose poor academic performance did not warrant promotion. The practice of advancing students from grade to grade based on age became embedded in the institutional routine of high schools. As long as students attended class, they were able to accumulate the required number of course units to graduate with a standard diploma. By 1960, if a

student failed to graduate, it was likely the result of nonattendance rather than of failing to pass through the grade (Cohen & Neufeld).

### **Equity versus Excellence**

The years after the Great Depression saw an increase in federal involvement in public education due to the belief that education reform could reduce social class divisions and eliminate poverty (Spring, 1997). Schools faced mounting criticism that they were part of the problem, not part of the solution to social inequality in America. They were accused of offering a watered down curriculum, failing to nurture the talents of American youth, especially in math and science, and being racist. The federal government stepped in and supported work relief programs to enable states to hire teachers and construct new buildings. The government also made money available for categorical programs targeted at specific groups such as low income families.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) contained major provisions to improve educational programs for children from low-income families. The underlying philosophy was that children from low-income homes lacked parental support and therefore failed to do well at school. In addition, schools serving low-income families tended to offer inadequate instruction and have low expectations for their students. Schools concentrated their efforts on students from higher income groups, and better teachers moved to the middle class suburbs to teach in newer schools with better resources. As a result, children from low-income families became trapped in the poverty cycle of low educational attainment and low paying jobs.

The most important section of the ESEA was Title I, which provided funds to school programs that served children designated as educationally deprived. In order to demonstrate that learning occurred, the ESEA required regular testing in schools that received federal funding. This made the practices of differentiated curriculum, tracking, and social promotion harder to maintain as students had to demonstrate progress; thus schools had to provide an opportunity to learn if they wanted to continue receiving federal funds.

Educational inequalities for other minority groups were also addressed during this period. The Supreme Court, led by Chief Justice Earl Warren, forced Americans to confront school segregation. In 1954, the Court's decision made *Brown v. Board of Education* one of the most significant pieces of litigation in terms of educational access. This led to further litigation that removed barriers - based on racial, linguistic, and physical and mental discrimination - to education access (Lazerson, 1999).

The 1960s and early 1970s saw the final realization of the goal of universal access as the last group, students with disabilities, had their right to a free public education explicitly recognized by Congress and the Courts. However, soon after the achievement of universal access, the debate surrounding it became more complex and centered on the unequal nature of the education to which different groups had access.

The recognition that a high school diploma did not necessarily translate to high school level skills first emerged after the GI Bill made a college education available to millions of Americans. Increased access to a college education devalued the high school diploma in the job market and revealed that many young Americans had been poorly prepared for college by their high schools. This was made even clearer as globalization of the world's economy led developed nations to compare academic achievement at home to the achievement of foreign students.

During the 1970s, critics of American education demanded that schools focus on academic skills to counteract the lowering of standards and expectations. Practices, such as social promotion, grade inflation, tolerance of excessive absenteeism, lower enrollments in rigorous courses, and dilution of the academic curriculum, were held responsible for the decline in educational standards as measured by the SAT. The 1970s saw the birth of the “back to basics” movement, and a number of states, such as Florida, initiated minimum competency requirements for graduation (Heubert & Hauser, 1999).

Although educational standards remained an issue during the late 1970s, it was the 1980 publication by the National Commission on Excellence in Education of “A Nation at Risk” that placed education at center stage. “A Nation at Risk” explicitly linked economic competition in the global market with educational achievement and reported that American students were lacking in the key areas of reading, math, and science. The publication changed the nature of the criticism leveled at public schools. The back to basics movement had focused on minimum competency, but during the 1980s and 1990s, this was seen as part of the problem. Following “A Nation at Risk”, people called for higher standards for all children based on a more rigorous curriculum.

The need to improve educational performance has been a constant in America’s domestic policy for three decades. The drive to improve standards received further support in 1994 with two pieces of federal legislation. Congress enacted Goals 2000: Educate America Act, which embodied the belief that all students could achieve more if they received a high quality education and knew what was expected of them (McDonnell, McLaughlin, & Morrison, 1997). More importantly, the 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, or the Improving America’s Schools Act (IASA), required that states develop challenging content and performance standards to receive Title 1 funds.

In this context, some states have made it much harder for high school students to receive a regular diploma. This inevitably means that some students who have completed their course requirements will not pass the exam that is a requirement for graduation. Many states that use exit examinations have made provisions for remedial assistance, multiple opportunities for students to take the examinations, and other supports. Nevertheless, among the students who fail will be some who would otherwise have graduated with a standard diploma (Beatty, Neisser, Trent, & Heubert, 2001).

### **Conclusion**

Increasing the quality and level of education for all students has widespread support. Yet standards-based reform has revealed that public education remains inequitable for some because of race, geographic location, socio-economic status, and disability (Heubert & Hauser, 1999). This has led to conflict as stakeholder groups have been forced to reassess their understanding of the purpose and relevance of a high school diploma. The following sections consider two important aspects of this debate: the legal significance and economic consequences of a diploma.



During the 1970s in an effort to increase education achievement, states began to implement minimum competency examinations as a prerequisite for receipt of a high school diploma. This resulted in various lawsuits challenging the denial of a diploma based on both constitutional and statutory grounds (*Brookhart v. Illinois State Board of Education*, 1983; *Debra P. v. Turlington*, 1981; and *Board of Education v. Ambach*, 1982). Education reform efforts of the 1990s have again emphasized the use of high school exit exams to ensure accountability (Coleman, 1998). Although the elevation of standards for receipt of a high school diploma has implications for all students, exit exams raise complex public policy and legal issues for students with disabilities: the economic and educational consequences of credentials that students are awarded, the stigmatizing effect of the denial of a diploma, the need for adequate notification and appropriate instruction, and the provision of reasonable accommodations and alternate assessments.

The impact of exit exams on students with disabilities is especially great in light of recent federal statutory provisions mandating the inclusion of students with disabilities in state assessments. For example, both the Goals 2000 Educate America Act and Title I of the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 called for state accountability measures and included specific provisions for the inclusion of students with disabilities. To ensure that students were attaining performance standards, Goals 2000 required that states must have a process for developing and implementing nondiscriminatory and reliable state assessments. Such assessments were to be aligned with the state content standards, involve multiple measures of student performance, and provide for participation of students with disabilities and diverse learning needs with "the adaptations and accommodations necessary to permit such participation" (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001).

The 1997 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and their implementing regulations similarly require states to take significant steps to allow for the participation of students with disabilities in state and district-wide assessments, providing for accommodations where necessary [20 USC. B 1412(a) (17) (A); 34 C.E.R. B 300.138(a)]. In addition to this recent legislation, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 [29 USC. B 794(a); 28 C.E.R. B 41.53] and the

Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 [42 U.S.C. B 12132; 28 C.E.R. B 35.130 (b) (7)] (ADA) bar discrimination on the basis of disability and require the provision of reasonable accommodations as part of testing programs for students with disabilities.

This section will briefly describe major court challenges to high school exit exams, explore the legal and public policy issues raised by the cases, and discuss implications for educators who must implement assessment systems.

#### **Major Court Challenges to High School Exit Exams *Debra P. v. Turlington* (1981).**

The leading case concerning high school exit examinations is *Debra P. v. Turlington*. Although this Florida case in part involved racial issues and did not address claims specific to students with disabilities, it established a model for future student challenges to exit exams, including those made by students with disabilities. In this case, the US Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit held that the state could not deprive students of a high school diploma based on a competency exam unless the state could prove that the students received adequate notice about the test, that the test was fundamentally fair, and that it covered material actually taught in the classroom.

#### ***Board of Education v. Ambach* (1981/1982).**

The first court case pertaining to students with disabilities and exit exams was *Board of Education v. Ambach*. In *Ambach I*, the New York state trial court held that, in general, the state had the power to require the passing of a competency exam for receipt of a diploma and that the denial of diplomas to students with disabilities was not a violation per se of the Education for Handicapped Act (EHA) (the forerunner of IDEA) or Section 504.

The following year in *Ambach II* (1982), however, the state appellate court determined that students are entitled to sufficient advanced notification of a graduation testing requirement to allow appropriate IEPs to be prepared. But that court modified the earlier court decision, holding that the students' due process rights had not been violated because a notice period of three years was sufficient.

### **Brookhart v. Illinois State Department of Education (1983).**

The first federal court case pertaining to students with disabilities and exit documents was *Brookhart v. Illinois State Department of Education*. Like the New York court in *Ambach II*, the US Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit found that requiring students with disabilities to pass a minimal competency exam as a prerequisite for receipt of a diploma was not a violation per se of the EHA or Section 504. Similar to the court's holding in *Debra P.*, however, the *Brookhart* court also found that the students' due process rights were violated because they received only a year and a half period of notice before imposition of the test requirement.

### **Chapman v. California Department of Education (2002).**

A federal district court judge entered a preliminary injunction concerning the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE). According to the terms of the court's order, students with learning disabilities should be permitted to take the test, if they wish, with any accommodations, modifications or alternate assessments specified in their IEP or Section 504 plan for either the CAHSEE, any standardized test, or any classroom testing. Students with learning disabilities were also entitled to valid assessment of their capabilities and the state was ordered to develop an alternate assessment system (*Chapman v. California Department of Education*, 2002).

### **Legal and Public Policy Considerations**

Legal challenges brought against states implementing exit exams as a prerequisite for receipt of a diploma have included: (1) constitutional claims brought under the Due Process and Equal Protection Clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment and (2) statutory claims brought under various anti-discrimination laws. This section will describe these challenges and suggest some additional areas in which future legal challenges might arise.

#### **Constitutional Challenges.**

**Procedural Due Process.** The Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment states, "No person shall ... be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law ..." (US Constitution). Although courts often defer to the educational and curricular decisions of local school districts, courts will intervene when an individual has been deprived of a life,

liberty or property interest (see e.g., *Brookhart*, 697 F.2d at 182; *Debra P.*, F.2d at 403; *Ambach II*, 458 N.Y.S.2d at 686).

Governmental action that deprives an individual of a benefit to which that person has a legitimate claim of entitlement creates a constitutionally-recognized property interest, which is protected by the Due Process Clause. Courts have found that in states with compulsory attendance, students have a "legitimate entitlement to a public education" (i.e., a constitutionally protected property right) (*Debra P.*, 644 F.2d at 403).

Courts have also found that denial of a diploma implicates a constitutionally protected liberty interest. For example, in *Debra P.*, the courts recognized a liberty interest in being free of the stigmatization associated with receipt of a certificate of completion by students who failed the graduation test Florida had named the Functional Literacy Test. In *Brookhart*, the court expressed grave concern over the impact of denying students with disabilities a high school diploma and also acknowledged the public policy goal, reflected in such legislation as IDEA, Section 504 and the ADA, of preparing students with disabilities for future employment and education opportunities in the community (*Pullin*, 1984).

Once a constitutionally protected interest - whether property or liberty - is found, the next question is: What process is due? Usually due process involves an opportunity to be heard on the denial of a right or benefit; however, in the context of exit exams, courts have tended to look to whether the parents and students received adequate notice about the test (e.g. *Brookhart*, 697 F.2d at 185). The issue is whether the students have sufficient opportunity to prepare for the test. Notice periods tend to vary and courts have been reluctant to determine what specific time period constitutes adequate notification. However, courts have determined that some students with disabilities may require a greater period of notice than students without disabilities (e.g. *Brookhart*, 697 F.2d at 186-187; *Ambach I*, 436 N.Y.S.2d at 574). Courts have been more likely to find a sufficient period of notice when there are opportunities for retesting and remediation (*Rene ex rel. Rene v. Reed*; *Ambach II*).

**Substantive Due Process.** The substantive due process provision of the Fourteenth Amendment requires that government entities avoid action that would deprive individuals of property or liberty interests in a way that is “arbitrary and capricious, does not achieve, or even frustrates, a legitimate state interest, or is fundamentally unfair” (Debra P., 644 F.2d at 404). The National Research Council’s Committee on Appropriate Test Use (NRC, 1999) has explained that there are a number of interpretations of the concept of fairness that affect testing. These include the absence of bias in the test, the equitable treatment of individuals taking the test, and an opportunity for those being tested to learn the material covered by the test (National Research Council, 1999).

Courts have made reference to the third of these interpretations when examining substantive due process challenges to high school exit exams. In *Debra P.*, the Fifth Circuit found that the state had made no effort to determine whether the material being tested on the competency exam was actually being taught in the schools. On remand, the trial court determined that the students were now being provided with the opportunity to learn the material covered on the exam and that the testing program had been made fundamentally fair.

**Equal Protection.** The Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment guarantees all persons equal protection under the law (US Const. amend XIV). In essence, equal protection prevents the government from discriminating against particular groups of individuals based on arbitrary classifications. Certain types of classifications, such as race, are considered inherently suspect and, therefore, require a strict level of scrutiny by the courts. Most classifications, however, including disability, need only be rationally or loosely related to a legitimate governmental interest. Equal protection challenges to state exit exams based on disability have tended to be unsuccessful. For example, in *Ambach II*, the New York appellate court said, “The immutable mysteries of genetics, accident, disease and illness are the creators of handicapped children, not the State” (458 N.Y.S.2d at 688-89). The court then proceeded to find that “the integrity of a high school diploma” constituted a legitimate state interest and that the state’s use of a competency exam was reasonably related to such an interest. Thus, the court held that the students’ equal protection rights had not been violated by

the state’s denial of their diplomas.

### **Claims Under Disability Statutes.**

**Denial of “FAPE” Under IDEA.** The IDEA and its forerunner the EHA mandate that students with disabilities receive a “free appropriate public education” (FAPE). In 1982, in *Board of Education v. Rowley*, the US Supreme Court explained that the statute was intended to be more of an attempt “to open the door of public education to handicapped children than to guarantee any particular level of education once inside.” To date, challenges to state exit exams by students with disabilities based on the denial of FAPE have tended to be unsuccessful. It remains to be seen whether the interpretation of FAPE by the courts will change now that the 1997 IDEA Amendments require that a student’s IEP include a statement concerning how the student will be involved and progress in the general curriculum. Also as yet unaddressed by the courts are any disputes concerning the question of whether the particular content or performance standards established by a state are “appropriate” for a particular student with a disability.

**Sole Criterion Requirement Under IDEA.** The IDEA also mandates that “no single procedure shall be the sole criterion for determining an appropriate educational program for a child” [20 U.S.C. § 1412(a)(6)(B)]. Challenges to state exit exam requirements based on this provision of IDEA have tended to be unsuccessful. For example, the court in *Brookhart* found that because the school district had three requirements for graduation - namely, obtaining a sufficient number of credits, taking required courses and passing a minimal competency test, the latter did not violate the “sole criterion” provision of the statute.

**Reasonable Accommodations Under IDEA, Section 504 and the ADA.** One of the most important issues affecting students with disabilities concerning high school exit exams is the provision of appropriate or reasonable accommodations. In reviewing the administration of high school exit exams, lower federal and state courts have found that states are required to provide students with disabilities with reasonable accommodations, but are not required to provide “substantial modifications” that would have an impact on the meaning or interpretation of the exam score (e.g. *Brookhart*, 697 F.2d at 184; *Rene*, 751 N.E.2d at 746). A number of administrative opinions by the Office of

Civil Rights (OCR) of the US Department of Education, the federal agency charged with investigating education complaints under Section 504 and the ADA, have paralleled the line of reasoning used by the courts. OCR has concluded that accommodations are not required when they interfere with the skill being measured and compromise the validity of a test or program.

For example, in 1990 in Hawaii State Department of Education, a parent brought a claim before OCR that the local school district had discriminated against her son by refusing to allow him to have a reader assist him in taking the Hawaii State Test of Essential Competency (HSTEC). OCR found that because a particular section of the exam was designed to test the student's reading ability, allowing a reader would defeat the purpose. Denial of the accommodation, therefore, was not discriminatory under Section 504.

**Alternate Assessments.** A small percentage of students with disabilities require an alternative or different assessment because their curriculum does not completely match the content and performance standards being assessed by the state test (Thompson, Quenemoen, Thurlow, & Ysseldyke, 2001). The provisions of IDEA 1997 place responsibility for determining which students should receive alternate assessments with the IEP team [20 U.S.C. § 1414(d)(1)(A)(v)(II); 34 C.F.R. § 300.347(a)(5)(ii)]. The one case, *Chapman v. California Department of Education*, addressing alternate assessments resulted in an order requiring the State of California to develop an alternate assessment system for students with learning disabilities for use in the State's high school exit testing program (Chapman, 2002).

**Alternative Credentials.** Another issue affecting students with disabilities is the nature of the exit document. A decision on the type of exit document to be given to students is governed by local policy and state law and is not mentioned in IDEA or its accompanying regulations (Letter to Anonymous, 1994). In many instances, students with disabilities receive the same diploma as all other students, even if they complete an alternate program or an alternate assessment. Whenever an accommodated or alternate assessment is provided to a student with a disability, however, there is the possibility that the student may receive an alternate exit document in lieu of a regular high school diploma; this may be a regular diploma with different

wording, a special education diploma, a certificate of completion, a certificate of attainment, or other document (Thompson et al., 2001).

The awarding of alternate exit documents raises a number of due process and equal protection concerns. With respect to procedural due process, courts have held that students with disabilities have a liberty interest in receipt of a diploma, based on the stigma that results from denial of a diploma and the impact on future educational and occupational attainment (Brookhart, 1983). Therefore, the provision of an exit document other than a diploma triggers procedural due process protections - that is, parents are entitled to notice and the opportunity to be heard if their child will not receive a regular diploma. In addition, although a state's use of differentiated diplomas may not be a violation per se of substantive due process, it is clear that a state's method of provision of alternate certificates in lieu of regular diplomas must not be arbitrary and capricious and must be fundamentally fair. In the future, parents may bring challenges under equal protection, claiming that the denial of equal access to post-secondary educational and occupational opportunities is discriminatory because it is based on disability status. Such claims, however, will likely be unsuccessful because, as noted, classifications based on disability need only be rationally related to a legitimate state interest. Consequently, a state will likely prevail in arguing that it has a legitimate governmental interest in maintaining the integrity of the diploma (*Ambach I*, 458 N.Y.S.2d at 688-89).

There have been a number of challenges brought before the OCR and the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) regarding a school district's use of differentiated diplomas based on violation of federal disability statutes. OSEP has explained that students with disabilities do not have a guaranteed right to receive a regular high school diploma (Letter to Anonymous, 1994; Salem-Keizer School District). OCR has also found that school districts are not obligated to award diplomas to students with disabilities who have not met the graduation requirements even when those students have completed the goals and requirements of their IEPs (Special School District, 1989).

The IDEA regulations make reference to exit documents in the statement that receipt of a "regular high school diploma" ends the entitlement to special education [34 CFR § 300.122

(a) (3) (i) ]. The regulations also note that graduation constitutes a change in placement for a student on an IEP (Letter to Richards, 1990). OSEP has explained that school districts should re-evaluate the student's IEP prior to graduation in order to assess whether the student has met all of the requirements necessary for receipt of a diploma (Letter to Richards, 1990). With respect to a decision concerning graduation, particularly when students have successfully completed their IEPs but will not receive a diploma, parents are entitled to the due process protections afforded under IDEA - namely, the right to prior written notice and the right to an impartial due process hearing (34 CFR § 300.503-300.514).

OCR has further concluded that diplomas awarded to all students must be the same in "significant respects" (Letter to Runkel, 1996). Some modifications in the wording of diplomas are permissible and are not a violation per se of Section 504 or Title II of the ADA; however, the changes cannot be based on "disability as a category of students" (Letter to Runkel). In Salem-Kaiser School District, the hearing officer approved of the school district's use of three types of exit documents: a "standard diploma," an "alternate diploma" and a "certificate of attainment." Moreover, the hearing officer found that the school district was not required to use the term "diploma" in reference to a particular exit document.

### **Implications for the Implementation of Assessments**

An analysis of the legal and public policy issues pertaining to exit exams and students with disabilities raises a number of important considerations:

1. The denial of a diploma to students with disabilities has a negative effect on future educational and occupational attainment and can thwart the underlying goals of IDEA and the ADA. Although a public policy goal relates to the value of the diploma itself and the state's right to define state education standards, it is important for judges and policymakers to remember that the denial of a diploma may directly contradict the public policy goals expressed in IDEA and the ADA of helping students with disabilities lead active lives as adults in the community (Pullin, 1984).

2. Decisions about the participation of an individual student with disabilities in a state or local assessment program should be made by the student's IEP team. The IDEA requires an appropriate education for each student with a disability in need of special education, with decisions about appropriateness to be individualized and determined by a student's IEP team.

According to the Section 504 regulations, students with disabilities who do not need special education are also entitled to appropriate education as spelled out in each student's 504 plan. Here also, an individualized determination by the student's planning team is necessary (Freedman, 2000).

3. Students with disabilities must receive adequate notification of the testing requirement and the date of the test to enable the students' IEPs to be adjusted to include the material being tested. Procedural due process requires states to provide students with adequate notice of the testing requirement that is a prerequisite for receipt of a diploma. A review of the case law reveals the following: (1) courts have not set specific time periods that would constitute adequate notice; (2) the sufficiency of notice for a testing requirement will depend upon the curriculum and instructional opportunities provided to prepare students for the test; (3) in assessing adequacy of notice, courts will consider whether there were opportunities for retesting and remediation; (4) students with disabilities may require a longer notice period than students without disabilities in order for there to be adequate time to incorporate the content of the test into the students' IEP goals. In the future, when faced with a challenge to exit exams, states will be required to show that they provided adequate notice, with opportunities for remediation.

4. Students with disabilities must be afforded the opportunity to learn the material covered on exit exams. An important measure of the fairness of an exit exam is whether curriculum and instruction are aligned with what the test measures (National Research Council, 1999). As challenges to exit exams continue, states will have the burden of presenting substantial evidence that the students have actually had the opportunity to learn the material on which an exam is based.

For students with disabilities, the issue is more complex. One of the major premises underlying IDEA is that instruction should be tailored to meet the individual needs of each student. Educators are left to grapple with how an individual's IEP goals

fit into the overall scheme of uniform state standards used to determine curricular validity for a state exit exam. Ensuring the provision of the opportunity to learn the material being tested has become more significant in light of the new requirement under the IDEA that a student's IEP include a statement of how the student will be involved in and progress in the general education curriculum [20 U.S.C. § 1414(d)(1)(A)(i)-(iv); 34 C.F.R. § 300.347(a)(1)-(4)].

**5. Students with disabilities must receive appropriate accommodations on exit exams.** The IDEA requires the participation of students with disabilities in state and district-wide assessments, with appropriate accommodations where necessary [20 U.S.C. § 1412(a)(17)(A); 34 C.F.R. § 300.138(a)]. Similarly, Title II of the ADA and Section 504 require states and school districts to provide students with disabilities with reasonable accommodations on exit exams [42 U.S.C. § 12132; 28 C.F.R. § 35.130(b)(7); 29 U.S.C. § 794(a); 28 C.F.R. § 41.53].

Courts and OCR hearing officers have tended to find that accommodations that have an impact on the integrity of the test by altering the construct being measured, thereby affecting the construct validity of the test, are not required by law and have not been upheld as appropriate accommodations (e.g., *Brookhart*, 697 F.2d at 184).

From a legal and public policy standpoint, there is a need for more discussion concerning which accommodations are appropriate, understanding that there should not be a one-size-fits-all model and remembering the individualized determinations on appropriate education required by IDEA. At present, accommodations vary from state to state (National Research Council, 1999). There is a real need for training and outreach to help states, local school districts, and parents better understand the concept of accommodations.

**6. If an exit exam is not appropriate for a student with a disability, with reasonable accommodations, the student must receive an alternate assessment.** The IDEA mandates the provision of alternate assessments for students who are unable to take the exam with appropriate accommodations [20 U.S.C. § 1412(a)(17)(A)(i); 34 C.F.R. § 300.138(b)(3)]. Moreover, IDEA specifies that states must have developed such alternate assessment measures by July 1, 2000 and must include proce-

dures for the reporting of scores [20 U.S.C. § 1412(a)(17)(A)(ii); 34 C.F.R. § 300.138(b)(3)]. As with accommodations, there are difficult public policy questions here. For example, how should the scores of students taking alternate assessments be aggregated, if at all, with the scores of other students? The use of alternate assessment measures will most likely play a pivotal role in future challenges to exit exams by students with disabilities.

## **Conclusion**

The participation of students with disabilities in state and local assessment programs presents a complex set of legal and public policy issues, and many have not yet been addressed by either the courts or administrative hearing officers. There are some clear legal standards set forth here to guide practitioners; the unresolved legal, public policy, and educational issues that remain will present considerable challenges for both IEP teams as well as state and local policy-makers. These decision-makers can be guided, however, by the goals set forth in the laws governing the education of these students.

Given the large numbers of students with disabilities who drop out of high school each year without meeting exit requirements, much concern has been expressed about the outcomes for these youth. Wagner (1991) compared the dropout rates of students with disabilities who were included in the National Longitudinal Transition Study of Special Education Students (NLTS) to general education students from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY). Wagner reported that students with disabilities had an average dropout rate of 43% compared to 32% for general education youth with similar demographic characteristics and 24% for general education youth in general. Similarly, Lichenstein (1987) analyzed data from the High School and Beyond database and reported that 37% of the students with self-reported disabilities were considered dropouts, compared to 19% of students without disabilities. In a later analysis of NLTS data, Wagner, Blackorby, Cameto, and Newman (1993) reported a dropout rate of 30% for youth with disabilities who were enrolled in high school during the data collection period, with dropout rates for youth receiving services in the high incidence categories particularly high. An additional 8% of the youth with disabilities dropped out before reaching the 9th grade (Wagner et al.).

The relatively high dropout rates for students with disabilities are of concern because of the negative outcomes associated with dropping out of school in general. For instance, youth who drop out of school have increased rates of unplanned parenthood (Upchurch, Astone, & McCarthy, 1990), higher levels of unemployment or underemployment (Catterall, 1987; William T. Grant Foundation, 1988), and higher rates of incarceration (Kunisawa, 1988; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1995).

In addition to these general risks, students with disabilities who leave school before graduation lose access to specialized transition education and vocational programs designed to improve their postschool outcomes. The programs may be among those Benz, Lindstrom, and Yovanoff (2000) found to be associated with improved postschool outcomes for students with disabilities: 1) direct, non-stigmatizing support in general education classes; 2) participation in paid work experiences related to career interests; 3) instruction in vocational education, functional academic, and other transition content; and 4) comple-

tion of student-identified transition goals. When students with disabilities drop out of school they lose access to these individualized, “value-added” programs, in addition to forfeiting the other more traditional benefits associated with high school completion in general. To determine whether concerns about the high dropout rate for students with disabilities are justified, we reviewed the literature to compare postschool outcomes of dropouts versus graduates on five measures of postschool functioning: employment, wage earning, engagement, postsecondary school attendance, and residential independence. Evidence pertaining to each of these outcome measures is summarized in the following sections.

### Employment

While success in employment does not necessarily translate to success in other life arenas (Halpern, 1985), it does enhance a youth’s ability to achieve economic and residential independence (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). A recent examination of general education trends showed that the unemployment rate for individuals who had dropped out of school was twice that of high school graduates (Mincer, 1989).

Blackorby and Wagner (1996) analyzed data from the NLTS and reported that high school graduates with disabilities were significantly more likely than those who had dropped out of school to be employed at both NLTS data collection points. When youth had been out of school 3-5 years, 65% of those who had graduated and 47% of those who had dropped out were employed, with this difference being statistically significant at the  $p < .001$  level. The advantage in rates of employment for graduates over dropouts has been noted for youth without disabilities as well. One difference, however, is that the overall employment rate for youth without disabilities is higher than it is for youth with disabilities. Data from the NLSY revealed that youth from the general education population were employed at a rate of 69% compared to an employment rate of 57% for youth with disabilities 3-5 years after leaving school (Blackorby & Wagner). A second difference is that the gap between employment rates for nondisabled graduates vs. dropouts actually decreased over the first five years out of school, while the gap in employment between graduates and dropouts with disabilities increased over this same time period (Blackorby & Wagner).

### **Youth with Learning Disabilities (LD).**

Within the population of students with disabilities, employment outcomes for dropouts vs. graduates vary somewhat by category of disability. Surveying youth within a year of their exit from secondary school, Kortering and Braziel (1998) compared the employment rate of 35 youth with LD who had dropped out of school with that of 60 youth without LD who had also dropped out. Rates of employment for both groups were similarly low, with 51% of the dropouts with LD vs. 47% of those without LD being employed. Similarly, Sitlington & Frank (1993) reported an employment rate of 56% for 101 dropouts with LD. In contrast, several other studies have reported high rates of employment for high school graduates with LD. For example, Sitlington and Frank (1990) examined the employment rates of 909 high school graduates with LD one year after graduation and found that 77% were employed. Two years later, Frank, Sitlington, and Carson (1995) examined a subgroup of the 909 graduates and found that 85% were employed.

Other researchers have noted employment rates for graduates with LD at varying post-graduation points. Schalock, Wolzen, Ross, Elliott, Werbel, and Peterson (1986) found 72% of their sample of 65 graduates with LD was employed (collapsing data for youth out of school anywhere from 1-5 years). Shapiro and Lentz (1991) examined outcomes for two cohorts of youth with LD who graduated from a vocational-technical education program in 1986 and 1987 and found employment rates of 51% and 73% at the time of graduation. Data were collected a second time, when the 1986 cohort had been out of school 2 years and the 1987 cohort had been out one year. By that time, employment rates for the two cohorts had risen to 91% and 93% respectively. While none of these studies used a non-disabled comparison group, the reported rates of employment compare relatively favorably to the 69% employment rate reported in the NLSY database for students from general education 3-5 years out of school.

In the only study reporting employment rates for youth with LD at a point greater than 5 years out of high school, Murray, Goldstein, and Edgar (1997) compared employment rates for graduates with LD and their non-disabled counterparts and found no significant differences in rates of employment for 9 out of 10 comparison years. In the first 5 years post-graduation, the

rate of employment for graduates with LD ranged from 60% to 72%, compared to rates ranging from 59% to 79% for nondisabled graduates. For the period 6-10 years out, the employment rates for graduates with LD ranged from 73% to 85%, compared to a range of 79% to 88% for the nondisabled graduates.

Overall, youth with LD who exit from high school with a diploma seem to do as well as youth without disabilities in terms of employment status, at least in the first 10 years post-graduation. Evidence from those studies that examined the employment status of youth with LD who dropped out of school suggests that these youth do not fare well as the graduates — but at least fare no worse than their nondisabled counterparts who also drop out of school.

### **Youth with Emotional or Behavioral Disorders (EBD).**

Students with EBD experience the highest dropout rate of any single category of disability. Of those students with EBD who entered 9th grade during the NELS data collection period, 48% subsequently dropped out (Wagner et al., 1993). If dropout status affects post-school employment rates, it is logical to assume that this issue is particularly salient for students with EBD.

Frank, Sitlington, and Carson (1991) reported employment rates for both high school graduates and dropouts with EBD from two statewide cohorts of Iowa students. Study participants were surveyed 1 year post-graduation, or 1 year post-scheduled graduation in the case of dropouts. Fifty-eight percent of the graduates were employed compared to only 30% of the dropouts. In a later analysis of a sub-set of participants from the Iowa study, Carson, Sitlington, and Frank (1995) reported employment rates for graduates and dropouts with EBD at both 1 and 3 years post-graduation. (It is important to note that since dropouts were surveyed with their graduating class, they could have been out of school anywhere from 3-7 years at the “3 years post-graduation” interview.) At the 1 year interview, 55% of the graduates and 36% of the dropouts were employed. Two years later, 68% of the graduates and 60% of the dropouts were employed. While the differences in employment rates at both data collection points favored the graduates, the differences were not statistically significant. In yet another follow-up analysis of the reported outcomes for the Iowa sample, Frank, Sitlington, and Carson (1995) reported that at the time of the 3

year post-graduation survey, 79% of youth with EBD who graduated from resource room programs were employed.

In 1988, Neel, Meadows, Levine, and Edgar examined outcomes for 160 high school graduates with EBD in Washington. Study participants had been out of school anywhere from 1-9 years at the time of data collection. Various outcomes for the graduates with EBD were compared to those of a non-disabled cohort ( $n = 542$ ) of randomly selected students who had been enrolled in a vocational track in high school and had graduated in the same years as the cohort of students with EBD. Sixty percent of the graduates with EBD were employed at the time of data collections, compared to 73% of the non-disabled graduates (Neel et al.).

Malmgren, Edgar, and Neel (1999) reported results of a 5-year longitudinal study of outcomes for two cohorts of graduates with EBD. Annual data were collected for each cohort (one cohort was out of school 1-5 years, the other had been out of school 6-10 years). Data on employment rates were compared to employment rates of two non-disabled groups. Employment rates for the graduates with EBD were significantly lower than for the non-disabled graduates in only 2 of the 10 comparison years. This finding suggests that, similar to the results reported for youth with LD, employment rates for graduates with EBD are not vastly different from those experienced by nondisabled graduates.

### Wages

In addition to data on employment status, the NITS provided information about the hourly earnings of special education graduates and dropouts. Analyzing these data, D'Amico (1991) reported that poverty wages were the norm for those youth with disabilities who were employed at the first NITS data collection point (i.e., less than 2 years out of school). However, the NLSY revealed that general education students were not faring much better (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996).

By the second NITS data collection point (when youth had been out of school 3-5 years), the percentage of young adults with disabilities earning more than \$6 per hour increased from 9% to 40% (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). This increase in wage earnings reflected the status of both graduates and dropouts and was significant at the  $p < .001$  level. While both special educa-

tion graduates and dropouts experienced significant increases in wage earnings, graduates experienced greater increases. While only 7% of the graduates with disabilities were earning more than \$6 per hour at the first NITS interview, the percentage jumped to 42% at the second interview ( $p < .001$ ). In comparison, 11% of the dropouts with disabilities were earning more than \$6 per hour at the first interview. While this initial percentage compares favorably to the figure for graduates (7%), the percentage of youth earning more than \$6 per hour at the second interview only increased to 38% for the dropouts. Though this increase was significant at the  $p < .05$  level, it was not as high as the increase experienced by the graduates with disabilities, (i.e., from 7% up to 42%) (Blackorby & Wagner). The increases in median wages of all employed youth with disabilities, regardless of graduation status, went up by 43% (not less than 31% for any single category of disability), which more than kept up with inflation during that period (Blackorby & Wagner).

Beyond the data reported in the NITS, only limited information regarding the wage earnings of graduates versus dropouts with disabilities is available from published outcomes studies. This may reflect the difficulty of accurately and reliably assessing hourly wages or weekly salary given data collection methods that rely upon a third party reporting information (see Murray, Goldstein, & Edgar, 1997), as many of the studies reviewed here were obliged to do (e.g., Malmgren et al., 1998; Neel et al., 1988; Sitlington, Frank, & Carson, 1992).

### Engagement

Wagner et al. (1993) reported that dropouts with disabilities were 20 percentage points less likely than high school graduates with disabilities to be fully participating in their communities and 9 percentage points more likely to be exhibiting low community participation. These reported relationships were strongest for youth with high incidence disabilities.

Sitlington and Frank (1990) operationalized "engagement" as participation in activities such as being a homemaker and attending school. In their study of 101 dropouts and 909 graduates with LD, they found that dropouts with LD had lower rates of employment than graduates with LD but comparable rates of being "otherwise meaningfully engaged." Using this definition, 12% of the graduates with LD were engaged versus 9% of the dropouts with LD. This finding is somewhat inconsistent with

Wagner et al.'s (1993) finding that the dropouts exhibited significantly lower rates of community involvement. However, the inconsistency might be attributed to the use of differing definitions of engagement.

Examining the post-school engagement status of graduates only, Murray et al. (1997) compared the engagement rates of graduates with and without LD using two different definitions of engagement. The first definition resulted in participants being coded as "engaged" if they were employed, attending postsecondary school, or both. Comparing rates of engagement for youth with LD and their nondisabled peers across 5 years for two separate cohorts, (one cohort out of school 1-5 years, the other out of school 6-10 years), they found significant differences in favor of the nondisabled participants in all but one comparison. At that one comparison, (8 years out of school), the nondisabled graduates still had a higher rate of engagement, though the difference was not statistically significant.

After noticing a high rate of mothering in the women with LD in their sample, Murray et al. (1997) analyzed rates using a second definition of "engagement" that included mothering in addition to the previously defined activities. Using this definition, nondisabled graduates were still significantly more engaged than their peers with LD in six of the ten comparisons. As would be expected, the 2nd definition of engagement, affected the engagement rates of the female participants specifically. Examining the rates of the female participants only, Murray et al. reported that participants without LD were significantly more engaged than those with LD in only two of the ten comparisons (i.e., years 4 & 5). Under the first definition, the engagement rates for female nondisabled graduates were significantly higher than for female graduates with LD in seven of the ten comparisons (i.e., years 1-6 and 9). Overall, when mothering was added as a qualifying activity, the engagement rate of graduates with LD in the 1990 cohort (out of school 1-5 years) increased but remained significantly lower than the rate for the nondisabled graduates. For the 1985 cohort (out of school 6-10 years), the addition of mothering resulted in engagement rates of 85%-95% for graduates with LD, which were high enough to overlap the engagement rates posted by the nondisabled graduates (92%-97%). The finding that female graduates with LD become mothers at higher rates than their nondisabled gradu-

ates in those early years post-graduation could possibly have impact on other longer-term outcomes, such as wage earnings and postsecondary school completion, and should be kept in mind.

Malmgren et al. (1999) compared rates of engagement over 5 years for two cohorts of high school graduates with and without EBD. Those cohorts (as was true of the Murray et al., 1997 cohorts described above), represented a subset of the participants in a larger longitudinal study in Washington. Under a definition of engagement that included being employed, going to postsecondary school, or both as engaged behaviors, the nondisabled graduates posted significantly higher rates of engagement in six of the ten comparisons (years 1, 2-6, and 10). Actual rates of engagement ranged from 69%-85% for the graduates with EBD who were out of school 1-5 years and 57%-71% for those graduates with EBD who were out of school 6-10 years. By contrast, the rates of engagement for the nondisabled graduates ranged from 94%-98% when they were out of school 1-5 years and 90%-95% when they were out of school 6-10 years. Unlike the findings for individuals with LD (i.e., Murray et al., 1997), the gap in rates of engagement between the graduates with and without EBD did not shrink over time. It should also be noted the addition of "mothering" to the definition of engagement would not have affected the results for the EBD/non-EBD comparison because of the disproportionately low number of females served in the EBD category.

### **Postsecondary School Attendance**

In their comparison of data from the NITS and the NLSY, Blackorby and Wagner (1996) reported that only 14% of youth with disabilities had attended some type of postsecondary school when they were out of school less than 2 years, compared to 53% of the nondisabled youth. This difference in rates was significant at the  $p < .001$  level. Three years later the percentage of youth with disabilities reported to have attended postsecondary school almost doubled, to 26.7%, with the implication being that youth with disabilities delayed postsecondary school enrollment. However, an additional 15% of the nondisabled youth also attended postsecondary school 3 years later. Therefore, the gap between the percentage of youth with and without disabilities who attended postsecondary school did not diminish over the first 3-5 years out of high school. At 3-5 years out, 27% of

youth with disabilities compared to 68% of the nondisabled population had attended some type of postsecondary school ( $p < .001$ ).

Carson et al. (1995) analyzed postsecondary school attendance for graduates vs. dropouts with EBD at 1 year post-graduation and 3 years post-graduation. (Note: For youth considered dropouts, data were collected when the youth would have been out of school 1 and 3 years if they had graduated.) Reported postsecondary school attendance rates were similar for graduates and dropouts at both data collection points, with neither comparison yielding statistically significant differences. At one year out, 40% of the graduates with EBD and 50% of the dropouts had attended some type of postsecondary school. At 3 years out, 49% of the graduates and 52% of the dropouts had done so. While Carson et al.'s results indicate much higher rates of post-secondary school attendance for their disabled population than Blackorby and Wagner's (1996) study, it should be noted that Carson et al. utilized a much smaller pool of participants. For example, Carson et al. interviewed only 25 dropouts at their Year 3 interview and 57 graduates. Blackorby and Wagner's participant pool of participants (from the NLTS) was much larger and nationally representative.

It is likely that low rates of postsecondary school attendance are especially problematic for students with disabilities, as they often leave school poorly prepared for work because they've dropped out or had inadequate programming (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). Adding fuel to this argument, Blackorby (1993) reported that only about one-third of students with disabilities who graduate have a concentration of vocational courses in a particular skill area and only slightly more than that have work experience as part of their vocational training.

### **Independent Living**

Blackorby and Wagner (1996) defined "independent" as living alone, with a spouse or roommate, in a college dorm, or in military housing not as a dependent. Using this definition, they reported that 36% of nondisabled youth were living independently less than 2 years after leaving school compared to only 13% of youth with disabilities. Three to five years out, both groups gained 26 percentage points, with 60% of nondisabled youth versus 37% of youth with disabilities living independently ( $p < .001$ ). Less than 2 years out, dropouts with disabilities

were more likely to be living independently than graduates with disabilities (31% vs. 20%,  $p < .05$ ). By the time of the 2nd interview, however, when youth had been out of school 3-5 years, the graduates with disabilities had made gains in rates of independent living. At that point 41% of the graduates and 35% of the dropouts were living on their own, which made the difference in rates no longer statistically significant.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, while youth with disabilities rated well on some outcome measures when compared to their nondisabled peers, one noteworthy area of discrepancy was in postsecondary school attendance. Dropouts were less likely than their peers who graduated to enroll in postsecondary programs, either vocational or academic. Additionally, this relationship was most significant for youth with high incidence disabilities, who were also those most likely to have dropped out. Young adults without disabilities, who attend postsecondary school programs at rates significantly higher than youth with disabilities, could be expected to make strides in earnings and other areas as they enter the workforce. An earnings gap between youth with and without disabilities could therefore likely be expected to widen over time. The little documentation that we have at this point of the earning power of young adults with disabilities suggests that they frequently earn poverty wages immediately upon exiting high school, but that graduates tend to earn more over time (i.e., 3-5 years post-school) than those who drop out.

It should also be noted that youth representing different categories of disability fared differently on the various outcome measures. For instance, youth with LD and speech and language impairments had high rates of employment, wages, and residential independence, but low rates of postsecondary school attendance. On the other hand, deaf and visually impaired youth experienced no significant gain in wages over the course of the two NLTS interviews, but had a 60% rate of postsecondary school attendance - which almost matches that of the nondisabled population (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). One implication might be that these groups could be expected to experience higher wages later on as they leave postsecondary school.

Youth with mental retardation made significant gains in employment between NLTS interviews but still lagged far behind youth in other categories of disability. Employment and inde-

pendent living rates for youth with multiple disabilities, other health impairments, and orthopedic impairments were lower than rates for youth from other categories of disability and showed little change between the first and second NITS interviews (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). All of this variability in terms of outcomes makes it clear that we still have much to learn about the variable effects of programming and postsecondary school attendance for youth with different manifestations of both high and low incidence disabilities.

In attempting to determine what causes students with disabilities to leave school before graduating, several researchers have pointed to a lack of relevancy of the high school curriculum (Kaufman, Klein, & Frase, 1999; Lange & Ysseldyke, 1998; Lichtenstein, 1993). Along with the recent emphasis on standards-based assessment has come a desire to include students with disabilities in the push to meet higher and higher academic standards. However, research has shown that achievement of academic skills alone is not sufficient to improve postschool outcomes for youth with disabilities (Benz, Lindstrom, & Yovanoff, 2000). Teachers and students have long found it difficult to incorporate a functional transition education with community-based instruction into a curriculum that satisfies the academic requirements for a standard high school diploma (Benz & Kochhar, 1996; Hasazi, Furney, & DeStefano, 1999). Additionally, school personnel vary considerably in what they view as their main role in serving students with disabilities; only a small minority (5.2%) report that their primary task is to train students for employment (Marder, 1992).

Most of the postschool outcomes studies have only tracked students' progress for up to 5 years after leaving school. Even in that short window of time, results associated with several different measures changed differentially over time. The changing landscape makes it imperative that longer-term studies be undertaken. Looking specifically at the effect of time on several postschool outcomes, Wagner et al. (1993) found that the explanatory power of school program factors (e.g., concentration in a vocational content area in high school) did not show a marked decline over time. By contrast, the usefulness of factors associated with student behaviors or choices in high school (e.g., dropping out) in predicting outcomes declined over time. For example, Wagner et al. reported that the negative effect of

dropping out on employment declined from a 17 percentage point difference in the first year after high school ( $p < .10$ ) to virtually no difference 2 years later. While the explanatory power of program completion may yet again change over time, Wagner et al.'s findings underscore the idea that the direction and magnitude of differences in outcomes observed in the early postschool years cannot necessarily be assumed to be a predictor of continued outcomes in the later years.

In general, youth with disabilities who graduated from high school fared better than those who dropped out — in employment, wage earnings, and engagement. However, youth with disabilities still lagged far behind their nondisabled peers on most measures of economic impact noted earlier in this section. It should also be noted that fluctuations in results and outcomes were reported for different disability subgroups and at different data collection points. At least some of these fluctuations may be the result of local programmatic variables that are largely unmeasured by large-scale outcomes studies. Because of the varying results reported - and because of the fact that in some cases dropouts with disabilities seem to fare just as well as the graduates, (e.g., Murray et al.'s results regarding the employment status of dropouts vs. graduates with LD), it seems premature to assert that acquisition of a diploma alone is the key to equity in economic outcomes for students with disabilities.

## 5. High School Graduation and Disabilities: The Current Situation

Today, high school enrollment is virtually universal, although access to quality secondary education remains problematic. Eight in ten young adults have a high school diploma or its equivalent, and more than six in ten enroll in college immediately after graduation (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2001).

Now, the notion of what is required to obtain a good job has shifted; the emphasis is on a college education, while possession of a high school diploma is taken for granted. As a result, students who do not have a high school diploma, or who receive a non-standard diploma, may have difficulty finding employment.

### High School Graduation Rates

**Table 1 Public High School Graduation Rates**

Table 1 is a display of public high school graduation rates for 1998. States are ranked from 1-51 based on the percentage of students who graduate with a high school diploma or better.

Rank	State	Percent With HS Diploma
1	Washington	92.0%
2	Alaska	90.6%
3	Wyoming	90.0%
4	Colorado	89.6%
5	Minnesota	89.4%
6	Utah	89.3%
7	Kansas	89.2%
8	Montana	89.1%
9	Nevada	89.1%
10	Wisconsin	88.0%
11	Iowa	87.7%
12	Nebraska	87.7%
13	Maine	86.7%
14	Vermont	86.7%
15	New Jersey	86.5%
16	South Dakota	86.3%
17	Ohio	86.2%
18	Massachusetts	85.6%
19	Oregon	85.5%
20	Michigan	85.4%
21	Washington,DC	85.2%
22	Maryland	84.7%
23	Hawaii	84.6%
24	Oklahoma	84.6%
25	North Dakota	84.3%
26	Illinois	84.2%

Rank	State	Percent With HS Diploma
27	Pennsylvania	84.1%
28	New Hampshire	84.0%
29	Delaware	83.8%
30	Connecticut	83.7%
31	Indiana	83.5%
32	Missouri	82.9%
33	Idaho	82.7%
34	Virginia	82.6%
35	Arizona	81.9%
36	Florida	81.9%
37	New York	81.5%
38	North Carolina	81.4%
39	Rhode Island	80.7%
40	California	80.1%
41	Georgia	80.0%
42	New Mexico	79.6%
43	Alabama	78.8%
44	Louisiana	78.6%
45	South Carolina	78.6
46	Texas	78.3%
47	Kentucky	77.9%
48	Mississippi	77.3%
49	Tennessee	76.9%
50	Arkansas	76.8%
51	West Virginia	76.4%
	United States	82.8%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics Retrieved from <http://www.njbrc.org/education/primary/graduate.html> 3/7/2001

High school graduation rates range from 92% in Washington to 76.4 % in West Virginia. Thirty-two states were above the overall graduation rate of 82.8% and 22 states had graduation rates between 85%-92%. Only ten states had a graduation rate below 80%.

The data in Table 2 show that graduation rates for students age 14 and older with disabilities varied by disability category. Students with visual impairments graduated at the highest rate

(75.1 percent), followed by students with traumatic brain injury (70.3 percent) and students with hearing impairments (69.4 percent). Students in five disability categories graduated at rates lower than the 57.4 percent observed for all students with disabilities. Graduation was least likely among students 14 and older who had mental retardation (41.7 percent) and emotional disturbance (41.9 percent).

**Table 2**  
**Number and Percentage of Students Ages 14 and Older with Disabilities Graduating with a Standard Diploma: 1998-99**

Note: The percentages in this table were calculated by dividing the number of students age 14 and older who graduated with a standard diploma or dropped out by the number of students age 14 and older who are known to have left school (i.e., graduated with a standard diploma, received a certificate of completion, reached the maximum age for services, died, or dropped out.)

Disability	Number	Percent with HS Diploma
Specific learning disabilities	100,738	63.3%
Speech or language impairments	4260	64.8%
Mental retardation	16,086	41.7%
Emotional disturbance	13,735	41.9%
Multiple disabilities	2,075	47.0%
Hearing impairments	2,610	69.4%
Orthopedic impairments	1830	63.4%
Other health impairments	5706	66.8%
Visual impairments	1,172	75.1%
Autism	418	47.1%
Deaf-blindness	52	54.2%
Traumatic brain injury	790	70.3%
All disabilities	149,472	57.4%

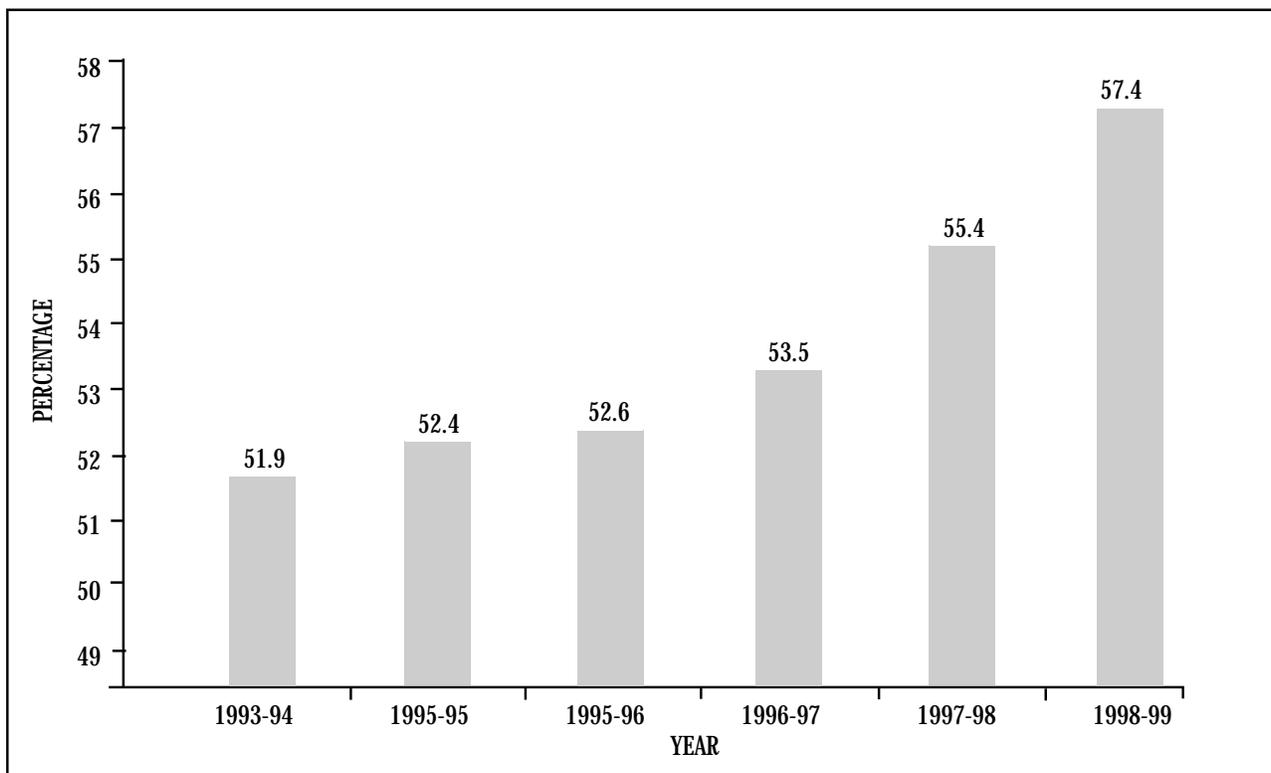
Source: U.S Department of Education. (2001) *Twenty third Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*. Washington D.C: US Government Printing Office. <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/OSEP/Products/OSEP2001AnlRpt>

As Figure 1 shows, there has been a gradual rise in the proportion of students with disabilities earning high school diplomas as a percentage of all such students ages 17 to 21 who exit

their states' education systems. Whether this trend will continue in the climate of high stakes testing is a matter of concern.

**Figure 1 Percentage of Students Age 14 and Older Graduating with a Standard Diploma, 1993-94 to 1998-99**

Note: Graduation rates were calculated by dividing the number of students 14 and older who graduated with a diploma by the number of students 14 and older who graduated with a diploma, received a certificate, reached the maximum age for services, died, and dropped out.



Source: *Twenty-third Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*. Washington D.C: US Government Printing Office. <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/OSEP/Products/OSEP2001AnlRpt>

The next section will look in greater depth at how youth exit high school. States vary considerably in graduation requirements and the type of exit documents available for all students.

Students with disabilities may have options that are unavailable to peers without disabilities.

### Exit Options Available

Table 3 provides the most recent summary of exit options available to students with and without disabilities. The information reported in Table 3 is part of a collaborative effort of the National Transition Network (NTN) and the National Center for

Educational Outcomes (NCEO). Information was collected via surveys. The respondents were state assessment directors and transition specialists from each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

**Table 3 Exit Options Available in Each State**

Notes: Exit options with minus marks (✓-) were identified only by assessment directors (not by transition specialists). Exit options with plus marks (✓+) were identified only by transition specialists (not by assessment directors). Exit options without marks (✓) were identified by both assessment directors and transition specialists.

a Other exit options include an occupational diploma (Alabama), a work/study diploma (Colorado), a GED diploma (Connecticut, Indiana, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia), a certificate of achievement for special education students for whom a diploma track is not appropriate (Indiana), a locally-determined modified diploma (Nebraska), a career readiness diploma (New Mexico), an annotated local diploma (New York), an adult diploma (Nevada), a diploma of adult education (Ohio), a special diploma (Virginia), and a locally determined diploma (Kansas).

b Data may be incomplete (LEAs determine exit options for students with disabilities).

State	Standard Diploma	IEP Diploma	Certificate of Attendance	Honors Diploma	Other Options <sup>a</sup>
Alabama	✓	✓	✓+	✓	✓
Alaska	✓	✓+	✓		
Arizona	✓				
Arkansas	✓	✓+	✓+		
California	✓			✓-	
Colorado	✓	✓+			✓+
Connecticut	✓	✓+	✓+		✓-
Delaware	✓		✓		
Florida	✓	✓	✓-	✓-	
Georgia	✓	✓	✓		
Hawaii	✓	✓+	✓-	✓-	
Idaho	✓				
Illinois	✓		✓+		
Indiana	✓			✓	✓+
Iowa	✓	✓			
Kansas	✓				✓-
Kentucky	✓	✓+		✓-	
Louisiana	✓		✓		
Maine	✓	✓+			
Maryland	✓	✓+	✓		✓+

(Table 3 Continued)

State	Standard Diploma	IEP Diploma	Certificate of Attendance	Honors Diploma	Other Options <sup>a</sup>
Massachusetts <sup>b</sup>	✓				
Michigan	✓	✓+	✓		
Minnesota	✓				
Mississippi	✓		✓		
Missouri	✓		✓	✓-	
Montana	✓	✓+			
Nebraska	✓		✓+		✓-
Nevada	✓	✓	✓+		✓-
New Hampshire	✓	✓+	✓+		
New Jersey	✓				
New Mexico	✓	✓+	✓+		✓+
New York	✓	✓	✓+	✓	✓-
North Carolina	✓	✓	✓	✓-	
North Dakota	✓	✓+	✓+		
Ohio	✓			✓-	✓-
Oklahoma	✓				
Oregon	✓		✓		
Pennsylvania	✓				✓+
Rhode Island	✓				
South Carolina	✓		✓+		
South Dakota	✓				
Tennessee	✓	✓	✓	✓-	
Texas	✓		✓+		
Utah	✓		✓+		
Vermont	✓		✓+		
Virginia	✓	✓+	✓	✓-	✓
Washington	✓				
West Virginia	✓	✓			
Wisconsin	✓		✓+		
Wyoming	✓		✓+		
Dist. of Columbia	✓	✓+	✓+		
<b>Totals</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>

Source: Guy, B., Shin, H., Lee, S. Y., & Thurlow M. L. (1999). State graduation requirements for students with and without disabilities (Technical Report No. 24). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes. Retrieved [01/11/02] from the World Wide Web: <http://education.umn.edu/NCEO/OnlinePubs/Technical24.html>

A standard diploma option is available in every state although the requirements for one vary (see Table 5). In nine states, the standard diploma is the only exit document available. Twelve states offer, in addition to the standard diploma, an honors or advanced diploma option for all students who complete additional course credits in specific advanced courses. Of these 12, California offers only a standard or honors diploma and does not offer, at the state level, an alternative exit document.

For students with disabilities, 23 states and the District of Columbia have diploma options beyond the standard diploma,

described as IEP diplomas. Of these 23 states, 17 and the District of Columbia offer both an IEP diploma and a certificate of attendance. In four states, only a standard diploma and an IEP diploma are offered as exit documents. In 11 states a standard diploma is the only diploma option, although these states also offer a certificate of attendance. A certificate of attendance is an option in 31 states and in some states can be available to students without disabilities who fulfill their other graduation requirements. Table 4 summarizes the arguments for and against multiple exit documents.

**Table 4 Advantages and Disadvantages of Four Diploma Options**

Diploma Option/Policy	Advantages	Disadvantages
<p><b>Standard Diploma or Better; Single Criteria.</b> A standard diploma or a more rigorous option (e.g., honors diploma) is available to all students. All must meet the same criteria for earning the diploma.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Provides students the “key” to entry into post-secondary institutions or employment.</li> <li>* Meaning of earning a diploma is clear because there is only one set of criteria.</li> <li>* Maintains high expectations and a focus on the general education curriculum.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Does not recognize the different learning styles of students with disabilities.</li> <li>* A significant number of students may not receive any kind of exit document from HS.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Standard Diploma or Better; Multiple Criteria.</b> Some students are allowed to meet one or more of the requirements in different ways (e.g., different courses, meeting IEP goals, exemption).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Recognizes that students have different learning styles and skills that may not align with typical graduation criteria.</li> <li>* Ensures that more students will get a diploma than would with a single set of criteria</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Reduces quality control over the knowledge and skills of students leaving schools.</li> <li>* Results in non-standard sets of knowledge and skills among students, all of whom have the same diploma.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Certificate Options.</b> Certificates for attendance, completion, achievement, etc. are available to all students. Requirements can vary considerably; options may or may not allow students with IEPs to meet requirements in different ways.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Maintains the integrity of requirements for earning a standard diploma.</li> <li>* Provides other exit options for students not meeting requirements for a standard diploma.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Little is known of the consequences of these diploma options on post-secondary schooling or employment.</li> <li>* Flags those students receiving special education services.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Special Education Diploma.</b> Diploma or certificate is available only to students with IEPs. This type of diploma typically is added to other options for non-IEP students.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Recognizes that students with disabilities may be working on standards different from other students’.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Does not promote access to the general education curriculum.</li> </ul>

Source: Thurlow, M., Thompson, S., (2000) *Diploma options and graduation policies for students with disabilities (Policy Directions No. 10)*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes.

**Graduation Requirements for a Standard Diploma**

There are three main categories of graduation requirements for a standard diploma (Guy et al., 1999). Some states require that students earn a certain number of course credits, some require students to pass an exit exam, and others require

both course credits and graduation exam requirements. In most states, students earn high school diplomas by accumulating Carnegie units (units based on number of hours spent in class). Table 5 shows standard diploma requirements across the United States.

**Table 5 Standard Diploma Requirements**

Requirements	Number of States	States
Credits Only	23 & District of Columbia	Arkansas, Connecticut, District of Columbia, Delaware, Hawaii <sup>a</sup> , Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Maine, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Vermont, Wisconsin, West Virginia, Wyoming
Credits+ Exam	24	Alaska, Alabama, Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania <sup>b</sup> , South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia, Washington
Exit Exam Only	1	Minnesota
LEA Determination	2	Colorado, Michigan,

Source: Guy, B., Shin, H., Lee, S. Y., & Thurlow M. L. (1999). State graduation requirements for students with and without disabilities (Technical Report No. 24). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes. Retrieved 02/15/2002, from the World Wide web : <http://education.umn.edu/NCEO/OnlinePubs/Technical24.html>

- a According to the State of Hawaii Department of Education web site, starting with the class of 2000, the department has abolished the state test of essential competencies as a requirement for a high school diploma (<http://arch.k12.hi.us/info/faq>)
- b Beginning in the school year 2002-03, Pennsylvania students must demonstrate performance at the proficient level or better in reading, writing and mathematics on either the State assessments administered in grade 11 or 12, or local assessments aligned with academic standards, or both. The local school district's board of directors must decide whether it will use the PSSA, its own local assessments, or both as one of its own graduation requirements. The only requirement that the Commonwealth mandates is, at a minimum, that students perform at the proficient level or better in reading, writing and mathematics in order to graduate. The methods used to make this determination remain the decision of the local school board.

Half the states required completion of course credits as the only requirement for graduation. Graduation credit requirements varied across the states and could be set at the state or

local level or both. Table 6 shows the variability in state course credit requirements.

**Table 6 State Course Credit Requirements for High School Graduation Credits Needed in Core Academic Subjects For Regular Diploma, 2000**

Note: L = local board determines

State	Math	Science	English	Social Studies	Arts	Total Credits (Core Subj. & Electives)
Alabama	4	4	4	4	0.5	24
Alaska	2	2	4	3	-	21
Arizona (1994)	2	2	4	2.5	-	20
Arkansas	3	3	4	3	0.5	21
California	2	2	3	3	1 foreign language	13 & L
Colorado	L	L	L	L	-	-
Connecticut	3	2	4	3	1	20
Delaware	3	3	4	3	-	22
Dept. of Defense	3	3	4	3	1	24
Florida	3	3	4	3	0.5	24
Georgia	3	3	4	3	1	19
Hawaii	3	3	4	4	-	22
Idaho	4	4	4	2.5	1	21
Illinois (1998)	2	1	3	2	1 foreign language	10.25
Indiana	4	4	4	4	-	22
Iowa	L	L	L	1.5	-	1.5 & L
Kansas	2	2	4	3	-	21
Kentucky	3	3	4	3	1	22
Louisiana	3	3	4	3	-	23
Maine	2	2	4	2	1	16
Maryland	3	3	4	3	1	21
Massachusetts	L	L	L	1	1	-2 & L
Michigan	L	L	L	0.5	L	0.5
Minnesota	Standards Based System					
Mississippi	3	2	4	3	1	20
Missouri	2	2	3	2	1	22
Montana	2	2	4	2	1	20
Nebraska	L	L	L	L	L	L

**Table 6 State Course Credit Requirements for High School Graduation Credits Needed in Core Academic Subjects For Regular Diploma, 2000 (Continued)**

State	Math	Science	English	Social Studies	Arts	Total Credits (Core Subj. & Electives)
Nevada	3	2	4	2	1	22.5
New Hampshire	2	2	4	2.5	0.5	19.75
New Jersey	3	3	4	3	1	22
New Mexico	3	2	4	3	-	23
New York (1996)	2	2	4	4	-	12
North Carolina	3	3	4	3	-	20
North Dakota	3	4	4	3	-	17
Ohio	2	1	3	2	-	17
Oklahoma	2	2	4	2	2	23
Oregon	2	2	3	3	1 foreign language	22
Pennsylvania	Requirements Under Revision					
Rhode Island	2	2	4	2	-	16
South Carolina	4	3	4	3	-	24
South Dakota	2	2	4	3	0.5	20
Tennessee	3	3	4	3	-	20
Texas	3	2	4	2.5	-	18.5
Utah	2	2	3	3	-	24
Vermont	5 Combined		4	3	1	12
Virginia	3	3	4	3	1	22
Washington (1998)	2	2	3	2.5	1	19
West Virginia	3	3	4	3	1	24
Wisconsin	2	2	4	3	-	13 & L
Wyoming	3	3	4	3	-	13 & L

Sources: State Departments of Education, CCSSO Policies and Practices Survey, 2000. Council of Chief State School Officers, State Education Assessment Center, Washington, DC.

Table 7 shows the changes allowed for students with disabilities in states that have credit requirements only. In all the states, if students with disabilities met the same criteria as students without disabilities, they would receive a standard diploma. Many states have established alternate pathways for students with disabilities to graduate with a standard diploma. The most

common alternate route was to allow modified coursework, for example, functional mathematics to count as regular coursework. In addition, completion of IEP goals and objectives was considered adequate to fulfill the requirements for a standard diploma.

**Table 7 Changes in Credit Requirements for Students with Disabilities in Credit Requirement States**

Changes Allowed	Number of States & D.C.	States
None	4	District of Columbia, Nebraska, Oregon, Rhode Island
Modified Coursework <sup>a</sup> and /or IEP Completion	14	Arkansas, Delaware, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Montana, North Dakota, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Vermont,
IEP/LEA Decision	4	Connecticut, Idaho, Maine, Wisconsin, Wyoming
Undefined	2	Hawaii, Kentucky
Other	1	West Virginia <sup>b</sup>

Source: Guy, B., Shin, H., Lee, S. Y., & Thurlow M. L. (1999). State graduation requirements for students with and without disabilities (Technical Report No. 24). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes. Retrieved 02/15/2002, from the World Wide Web : <http://education.umn.edu/NCEO/OnlinePubs/Technical24.html> (adapted).

a Coursework may be modified as reduced number of credits, credits approved for alternate courses, or lower performance criteria.

b Instructional modifications are allowed for students with disabilities.

A disadvantage of relying on credit requirements is that this does not accurately measure what a student has learned. In efforts to make the high school diploma more meaningful and rigorous, certification exams have, since the 1970s, been an increasingly popular strategy for testing students' levels of learning (Heubert & Hauser, 1999). However, the current emphasis on standards-based educational reform is shifting the nature of

assessments. Instead of a focus on multiple-choice measures of minimum competencies, assessments are emphasizing more challenging tasks at the exit level as a measure of a student's ability to master content standards. States that have adopted this type of policy reform are generating deep concerns for special populations.

Table 8 shows high school exam requirements. Currently 25 states either require students to pass a high school exit exam

in addition to fulfilling other graduation requirements or are in the process of developing these exams.

**Table 8 High School Exit Exam Requirements, 2000**  
(Note: Y=Yes, N=No, D=Developing)

State	Exit Exam	Name / Type of Assessment	State	Exit Exam	Name /Type of Assessment
Alabama	Y	High School Basic Skills Exam HS Graduation Exam	Missouri	N	
Alaska	D	Alaska High School Qualifying Exam, 2002	Montana	N	
Arizona	D	AZ Instrument to Measure Instruction, 2002	Nebraska	N	
Arkansas	N		Nevada	Y	NV HS proficiency exam
California	D	For graduating class 2004	New Hampshire	N	
Colorado	N		New Jersey	Y	Grade 11 high school proficiency test
Connecticut	N	Students receive a "certification of mastery" on HS transcripts from CT Academic Perf. Test	New Mexico	Y	High school competency exam in grade 10
Delaware	N		New York	Y	High School test
Dept. of Defense	N		North Carolina	Y	NC competency tests in reading and mathematics & NC computer skills tests, 2002
District of Columbia	N		North Dakota	N	
Florida	Y	High school competency test/ Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test	Ohio	Y	State proficiency test
Georgia	Y	High school competency test	Oklahoma	D	Content area tests 2000-01
Guam	D	The "School To Work" initiative is being phased in. Course offerings are being reviewed and revised to reflect SCANS competencies	Oregon	D	Performance Based Admission System (PASS) 2001-02

**Table 8 High School Exit Exam Requirements, 2000 (Continued)**  
(Note: Y=Yes, N=No, D=Developing)

State	Exit Exam	Name / Type of Assessment	State	Exit Exam	Name /Type of Assessment
Hawaii	N		Pennsylvania	D	For 2003-3, either state or local proficiency levels
Idaho	N		Rhode Island	N	
Illinois	D	Prairie State Achievement Exam 2001, for grade 11	South Carolina	Y	Basic skills assessment program
Indiana	Y	Tests competence in applied and basic skills in math and English/ language arts.	South Dakota	N	
Iowa	N		Tennessee	Y	Competency test in math and language arts
Kansas	N		Texas	Y	TX assessment of Knowledge and Skills
Kentucky	N		Utah	D	Basic skills competency tests, 2002-03
Louisiana	Y	Exams in math, english, social studies, and science; LEAP 21 begins 2001.	Vermont	N	
Maine	D		Virgin Islands	N	
Maryland	Y	Functional skills tests. Maryland HS assessment, req. class 2005	Virginia	Y	Standards of Learning 2000-01.
Massachusetts	D	MA comprehensive assessment system; req. class of 2003.	Washington	D	Washington Assessment Student Learning 2007/8
Michigan	N		West Virginia	Y	Policy provides a warranty for students entering the workforce and one for students entering higher education.
Minnesota	Y	Competency tests: math, reading, writing composition, applied knowledge in 10 areas	Wisconsin	N	
Mississippi	Y	Functional literacy exam	Wyoming	N	

Sources: State Student Assessment Program Database, 1998-1999 school year, CCSSO. Council of Chief State School Officers, State Education Assessment Center, Washington, D.C.

Thurlow and Eshler (2000) provide information on the subject areas to be tested for high school graduation. It should be noted that although this data was complete as of 2000, some states were still in the process of determining the content areas to be included. Nineteen states with high school exit examina-

tions test English/language arts and math, and most also test writing (see Table 9). Seven states require subtests in a social studies content area and six have subtests in science (Thurlow & Esler, 2000).

**Table 9**  
**Subject Areas Included in States' Graduation Exams (2000 Data)**

States that Require A Graduation Exam	English Language Arts	Math	Social Studies	Science	Other Areas
Alabama	X	X			
Arizona	X	X			
Florida	<sup>a</sup>	X			X
Georgia	X	X	X	X	
Indiana	X	X			
Louisiana	X	X	X	X	
Maryland	X	X	X	X	
Minnesota	X	X			
Mississippi	X	X			
Nevada	X	X			
New Jersey	X	X			
New Mexico	X	X	X	X	
New York <sup>b</sup>	X	X	X	X	
North Carolina	X	X			X
Ohio	X	X	X	X	
South Carolina	X	X		X	
Tennessee	X	X	X	X	
Texas	X	X			
Virginia	X	X	X	X	

Source: Thurlow, M., Esler, A., (July, 2000) *Appeals processes for students who fail graduation exams: How do they apply to students with disabilities?* National Center on Educational Outcomes, Synthesis Report 36. Minneapolis, Minnesota.

<sup>a</sup> Florida does not require students to pass the content area of English/Language Arts; however, it does require students to pass a subtest in the area of Communications.

<sup>b</sup> New York education officials are considering whether a small number of schools can substitute individually-tailored projects for the graduation exams.

Critics of high stakes testing argue that using graduation exams as a requirement will lead to substantial numbers of students being denied a high school diploma (Heubert & Hauser, 1999). Students with disabilities, along with students in other

special groups, may be especially vulnerable to this risk. Given the academic nature of the high school exit exams and the nature of the assessment method, some states allow changes in their graduation requirements, as shown in Table 10.

**Table 10**  
**Changes in Exam Requirements to Permit Students with Disabilities to Earn a Regular Diploma**

Changes Allowed	Number of States	States
None	7	Alabama, Indiana, Louisiana, Nevada, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia
Modified Coursework/ Same Exam	3	Florida, New Mexico, New York
Modified Coursework/ Alternative Exam	1	Texas
Same Coursework/ Exemption from Exam	3	Minnesota, New Jersey, Ohio,
IEP Completion	1	Tennessee
IEP Team or LEA Decision	6	Arizona, Maryland, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Utah, Washington
Waiver	3	Alaska, California, Georgia, Mississippi

Source: Guy, B., Shin, H., Lee, S. Y., & Thurlow M. L. (1999). State graduation requirements for students with and without disabilities (Technical Report No. 24). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes. Retrieved 02/15/2002, from the World Wide Web : <http://education.umn.edu/NCEO/OnlinePubs/Technical24.html> (updated).

A small number of states with graduation exams have approaches that enable students with disabilities to graduate with a standard diploma. Examples include leaving the exit document decision to a multi-disciplinary team, allowing students with disabilities to take modified exams, and allowing students waivers or exemptions. Students with disabilities in New Jersey, Ohio, and Minnesota are able to graduate from high school with a standard diploma without taking all or part of the exit examinations.

Seven states do not allow changes in exam requirements for students with disabilities to obtain a standard diploma, and three will only allow changes in coursework requiring students with disabilities to pass the same exam at the same standard as students without disabilities (see Table 10). These states are Alabama, Florida, Indiana, Louisiana, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia. Although some of these states may offer alternative exit documents to students with disabilities, the only way that a student with a disability can obtain a standard state high school diploma is by taking and passing the state exit examination (Guy et. al., 1999).

**Table 11**  
**Can Students with Disabilities Receive a Standard Diploma if Exempted from the Graduation Exam if They Fulfill Other State Graduation Requirements?**

State	Standard Diploma	State	Standard Diploma
Alabama	No	New Jersey	Yes <sup>b</sup>
Florida	No	New Mexico	No
Georgia	No	New York	No
Hawaii	No	North Carolina	No
Indiana	No	Ohio	Yes <sup>c</sup>
Louisiana	No	South Carolina	No
Maryland	No	Tennessee	No
Minnesota	Yes <sup>a</sup>	Texas	No <sup>d</sup>
Mississippi	No	Virginia	No
Nevada	No		

Guy B., Shin, H., Lee, S. Y., & Thurlow M. L. (1999). State graduation requirements for students with and without disabilities (Technical Report No. 24). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes. Retrieved 02/15/2002, from the World Wide Web : <http://education.umn.edu/NCEO/OnlinePubs/Technical24.html> Source: Guy et al. (1999), p.18 (adapted).

a Completion of IEP goals and objectives.

b If exempted by IEP.

c Must meet core competencies and core courses.

d Must participate in an alternative assessment determined by IEP team.

Table 11 reveals that most states with high school exit exams do not have exemption waivers for students with disabilities if they wish to receive a state standard high school diploma. In Minnesota, New Jersey and Ohio students with disabilities could be exempted from the examination and still receive a standard diploma. In addition, in Minnesota, students with dis-

abilities could pass the exam with lower scores than their peers without disabilities and receive a standard diploma. In Texas, although students with disabilities could be exempt from the graduation exam per se, they had to participate in an alternate assessment.

Table 12 shows, some states require students with disabilities to pass the same exit exams with the same passing score as

students without disabilities in order to obtain a standard diploma.

**Table 12**

**Who is Required to Pass the Same Exam with the Same Score as Those Students without Disabilities to Earn a High School Diploma**

(Note: S= Same as students without disabilities; D= Different from students without disabilities)

State	Mild Disability	Moderate Disability	Severe Disability
Alabama	S	S	S
Florida	S	S	S
Georgia	S	S	S
Hawaii	S	S	S
Indiana	S	S	S
Louisiana	S	D	D
Maryland	S	S	D
Minnesota	D	D	D
Mississippi	S	S	S
Nevada	S	S	S
New Jersey	D	D	D
New Mexico	S	S	S
New York	S	S	S
North Carolina	S	S	S
Ohio	D	D	D
South Carolina	S	S	S
Tennessee	S	D	D
Texas	D	D	D
Virginia	S	S	S

Source: Guy, B., Shin, H., Lee, S. Y., & Thurlow M. L. (1999). State graduation requirements for students with and without disabilities (Technical Report No. 24). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes. Retrieved 02/15/2002, from the World Wide Web : <http://education.umn.edu/NCEO/OnlinePubs/Technical24.html>(updated).

Eleven states, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Mississippi, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia require students with disabilities, regardless of the severity levels of their disabilities, to pass the same graduation tests with the same passing score as students without disabilities. In Louisiana, Maryland, and Tennessee the use of the same graduation test with the same passing score depends on the severity of the student's disability. In Louisiana and Tennessee, students with mild disabilities are required to reach the same passing score as students without disabilities to receive a standard diploma. In Maryland, students with mild and moderate disabilities have to reach the same score to receive a standard diploma.

In Minnesota, New Jersey, Ohio, and Texas, special arrangements were made for students with disabilities to enable them to obtain a standard diploma. In Minnesota, students with disabilities could take the same test and pass with a lower score, take a different test, or be exempted from the examination requirement and still obtain a high school diploma. In New Jersey and Ohio, students with disabilities could be exempted from the graduation exam and receive a standard diploma. In Texas, in order to receive a standard diploma, students with disabilities had to take some form of alternate assessment if they could not take the standard assessment.

### **Conclusion**

Many kinds of diplomas and certificates are used in the United States to show that a student with disabilities has completed school. In addition, a variety of ways exist for students with disabilities to earn a standard diploma or an alternative exit document. In some states, a student with a disability who completes his or her IEP objectives may graduate with a standard diploma, while in another state, a similar student may leave school with a certificate instead. Given the continued importance of a high school diploma for employment and further education, discussions of diploma options for students with disabilities become heated and emotional. Controversy is likely to increase as more states implement graduation tests.

At the heart of the dilemma is the notion that anything other than a standard high school diploma automatically conveys a lesser status on its holder. Special education professor Ellen Bratlinger argued, "A diploma has never measured academic achievement. It has never meant more than that a student completed (the coursework). . . . once a kid spends 12 precious years of their life in school, they deserve a diploma" (USA Today, pg. A04, June 8th, 2001). Commentators point out that graduation tests may be in formats that do not allow students with disabilities to demonstrate their knowledge and skills (Thurlow & Thompson, 1999). Others suggest that students with disabilities, along with other special populations, may not have had the opportunity to learn the general education curriculum and are therefore unable to perform well on graduation exams (Herbert & Hauser, 1999).

The next section presents a review of how selected European countries deal with the issues of exit documents. The information can add a new dimension to the search for innovative solutions for students with disabilities.



This section provides information on how and at what age youth in different countries transition from the classroom to the workforce, and the extent to which students with disabilities are an integral part of this process. We review high school exit pathways of four developed nations: the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and Sweden. As with all comparative education studies, it is important for the reader to consider the country-specific factors that have contributed to the adoption of a particular approach (Meijer & Pijl, 1994).

When most countries in the western world made educational provision for students with disabilities, they established separate systems. Now most of those separate systems are being or have been dismantled, and students with disabilities are being integrated into the mainstream, which includes taking part in mandated assessments. A number of countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, France, and Japan, experienced a crisis of confidence in their education systems and responded by initiating educational reform at a structural level (Kennedy, 1995). This period of change in regular education coincided with the calls for greater integration of people with disabilities in the wider society. Education was seen by many people with disabilities as being one of the institutional barriers they faced in their attempts to be part of the mainstream (Oliver, 1996).

The theme throughout these reforms at the national level was concern about future economic growth and competitiveness. During the eighties, all advanced industrial nations made efforts to maintain or regain their economic position by reassessing not only their economic policies, but their education policies as well. The premise for dual reform is that countries can only compete in a global economy if their schools produce highly trained, skilled, and adaptable workers. Thus, schools became the location for significant reform, and education and training became micro-economic tools to enable governments to exert control over the economy (Kennedy, 1995).

### THE UNITED KINGDOM

In the United Kingdom, children have to attend school from age 5-16. Schools for children 5-11 are called primary schools and are divided into two departments: infants and juniors. Infants are aged 5-7 and juniors are 7-11. At approximately age 11, children leave primary school for secondary school, which

is compulsory until age 16. Education resurfaced as a high profile political issue in the UK during the 1970s as policy makers responded to fears that Britain was falling behind other developed nations industrially (McLaughlin & Tilstone, 2000). Competition between schools for pupils, parental choice, and value for money were central themes of the Education Reform Act 1988 (ERA) which removed local control of education and placed it firmly in the hands of the central government.

Within the local education authority's boundaries, parents are able to choose which school they want their child to attend. Schools that perform well on the National Curriculum key stage examinations find themselves extremely popular. The number of pupils enrolled determines the amount of money that the school receives; those with falling enrollments and poor examination results find their funding base reduced and risk take over by the Department of Education. If the schools cannot improve their performance on assessments they risk closure because the government does not wish to put any more resources into failing schools that do not give the tax payer value for money (Broadfoot, 1996).

The ERA radically altered the face of public education in the UK. Since 1944, children had taken the 11+ examination, which determined the type of secondary school each would attend. Those who passed the 11+ were admitted to a grammar school, which was academic in orientation, and prepared for further academic studies. Those who failed would attend more vocationally-based secondary modern schools to be prepared for employment. Due to the ERA, secondary schools in the UK are now by and large comprehensive with parental choice the determining factor. However, education in the UK remains heavily dependent on public examinations at key points of selection.

### A. Exit Documents

#### The School Certificate.

The use of national public examinations to select the brightest students for further education is deeply rooted in the education system. It originated in the development of the Lower and High School Certificates in 1917. The Lower School Certificate was taken at age 16 and enabled a student to remain in school and work toward a Higher School Certificate, taken at age 18. The two School Certificates were grouped certificates that required passes in five or more academic subjects drawn

from each of five content areas: English, languages, science, and mathematics, with music or manual subjects a fifth optional group. This certificate gave formal recognition to the primacy of academic subjects and written assessments. The practical and non-cognitive aspects of schooling were, and still are, accorded a low status. The School Certificate was replaced in 1951 by new non-grouped examinations known as the General Certificate of Education, Ordinary and Advanced Levels.

Although the Secondary Schools Examination Council was set up at the national level to advise the Board of Education, the real determiners of the school certificate were the regional universities who controlled the School Certificate examining boards. Because universities were at the pinnacle of the education system, it was assumed that they were the best placed to determine what should be tested and how. Public examinations, such as the School Certificate and progeny, rapidly became the means by which the higher levels of the education system could select the types of students they wished to accept. The increasing use of examinations to determine the awarding of scholarships and admission to universities led to competition between students at all levels of the education system because performance at one key level determined entry into the next.

### **The General Certificate of Education.**

In 1951, in response to calls for greater access to educational opportunity, the General Certificate of Education (GCE) Ordinary and Advanced Levels, replaced the School Certificate. All students aged 16 in either grammar or secondary modern schools could take a selected number of GCEs in a variety of subjects. These examinations were graded A-E with A the highest grade available, and were formulated, administered and scored by independent regional examining boards. Those students in secondary modern schools who performed well on their GCEs O Levels in at least five subjects could then be admitted to a grammar school and continue on to GCE Advanced Levels. These subject-based examinations were taken at age 18, and students could take from one to four examinations. Each examination was graded A-E with points (5-1) awarded for each. Depending on the number of points earned and the subject studied, students could then apply for further education at a university or polytechnic.

The GCE was a non-grouped certificate that facilitated

greater flexibility in the curriculum and allowed students to demonstrate their strengths in particular subjects. Student performance in each subject area was graded 1-6, with grade 1 the highest. This permitted more students to demonstrate academic achievement, validated by external certification, but it also allowed a more detailed ranking of achievement in terms of the number and status of subjects passed as well as the grades achieved in each.

In 1965, a new Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) was introduced with the goal of a pass in at least one subject for about 60 percent of the year group. The CSE was regarded as less rigorously demanding in academic terms, with the top grade being equivalent to an O level pass. Students who were not expected to do well in GCE exams at aged 16 generally took the CSE examinations.

The UK has clung tenaciously to its traditional forms of selection, and the A Level system for the brightest students retains a high level of support in the government and with the public. However, many feel that the needs for a suitably skilled and socialized workforce (Broadfoot, 1996) were not being met and the subsequent reforms in education were designed to address these deficiencies. The dual GCE/CSE system created both administrative and curricula dilemmas for schools in deciding which students to enter for each exam and led to calls for a common system of examining at 16 +.

### **The General Certificate of Secondary Education.**

In 1971, the Schools Council presented its plans for a new 16 + examination to be introduced in 1980. The examination was to be part of a common system of assessment to preserve the ability to discriminate adequately across the ability range in a variety of content areas. In 1978, the Secretary of State initiated further study by establishing the Waddell Committee, which recommended that a seven point grading scale (A-G) be run by three or four regional consortia that combined the old GCE and CSE examining boards. In addition, the Waddell Committee recommended that national criteria on subject titles and syllabi be established (Broadfoot, 1996).

The General Certificate of Secondary Education examination was finally introduced in 1988 and replaced the GCE and CSE examinations taken at age 16. This move marked the advent of

centralized control of the education system. The National Curriculum laid down a detailed and restrictive framework with a common core for each subject and detailed assessment objectives and methods, including marking schemes and compulsory coursework assessment by teachers.

Broadfoot (1996) revealed that attempts to reform the 16+ examination system and to make the curricula studied by students in their post compulsory school years (sixth form) broader by introducing some kind of two stage examination in place of A Levels was attempted several times. However, these attempts were defeated by the vested interests of the examining boards, the universities, and the teachers unions (Broadfoot). The result was a division between the old sixth and new sixth form institutions with the former continuing to take A levels and the latter taking the Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education (CPVE).

### **The Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education.**

The CPVE was more explicitly vocational in orientation and was a unitary qualification that could not be taken in courses. It contained a strong emphasis on profile assessment in specified target areas and included work experience as an important element. The General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) replaced the CPVE in 1972. The rationale behind the GNVQ was the government's stated desire to establish parity of esteem between the academic and vocational routes. Level 3 GNVQs were intended to be equal to two A level passes, and level 2 GNVQs to be equivalent to four GCSEs. Level 1 GNVQs are now being offered at pre GCSE level, beginning at age 14 (Cockett, 1996).

Although GNVQs are intended to be equivalent to academic examinations, early research suggests that GNVQs tend to be taken by lower achieving GCSE candidates which belies the attempt at equivalency and reinforces existing educational divisions (Broadfoot, 1996). On the other hand, in theory, students starting at the lowest levels of the GNVQ could amass sufficient credentials to enter university. At least some of the average or below average pupils could see some increase in post-18 educational access.

Cockett (1996) paints a disquieting picture that may have relevance to the issue of alternative diplomas in the US. In the UK, despite the rhetoric of equivalency, the provision of alternative credentials aimed at the lower achieving student does not

change the educational context for these students. However interesting or relevant the new curriculum may be, or however holistically it is assessed, it requires a shift from long established presuppositions about the kinds of achievement that schools and society value.

Courses and qualifications introduced as alternatives are frequently targeted toward lower achieving students and more often than not, take on the low status of the students recruited into them (Cockett, 1996). Students who take GNVQs may be stigmatized by employers - who continue to define "value" in terms of examination success - as less able and less desirable. In the U.S., individuals with "special" rather than regular diplomas may face the same situation.

### **B. Special Education**

In the UK, schools identify approximately 20% of school age children as having special needs at some time in their educational careers (Wedell, 1990). Of this number, only students with the most severe disabilities, about 2-3%, are given a statement of special educational need (SEN). In 1996, 56% of students with statements were placed in special schools (Meijer, 1998). Students with a statement are eligible for more intensive help, and the local education authority has to provide financial support to their schools. Mainstream schools do not have to accept students with special educational needs, and many with the most severe disabilities and sensory impairments are educated in special schools. Thomas (1997) reported that there were 1028 special schools and 3985 mainstreamed schools in England. Some schools focus on students with moderate and severe cognitive impairments, some are for students with sensory or physical impairments, and others are for students with behavioral problems.

The UK government's adoption of the National Curriculum (1988) for regular schools in England took much of the responsibility for curriculum away from mainstream schools. The National Curriculum was largely based on the grammar school model of subject-based curriculum and imposed attainment targets, key stage assessments, and standardized tests. The 1989 National Curriculum Committee made it clear that all students were to be taught the National Curriculum which gave an

unanticipated inclusive aura to the law (Booth & Dyson, 1998).

The ERA of 1988, which introduced the National Curriculum, required mainstream schools to publish GCSE and GNVQ examination results. Mainstream schools have to include all enrolled children in their results tables whether or not they took the examinations, although recently admitted students from overseas who do not speak English are discounted from the figures and take their examinations at a later date.

Data concerning the number of students with SEN with and without statements are reported, as their inclusion in the results tables may affect an individual school's or local education authority's aggregate performance. However, it is not possible to disaggregate the performance of students with SEN in mainstream schools to determine their performance compared to their non-disabled peers. Thus it was not possible to discover how many GCSEs or GNVQs students with SEN took on average compared to their nondisabled peers.

Although special schools are required to follow the National Curriculum they are not required to enter their students in GCSE examinations. Thomas (1997) reported 1996 performance results at GCSE level. Almost 70% of special schools did not enroll any of their pupils in GCSE examinations. The achievement figures for students with SEN in special schools were also low; only 16% achieved one or more grade A to G GCSEs compared to the same age group in mainstreamed schools. Only 4% of students in special schools achieved 5 or more grade A to G at GCSE, compared to 87% of all students in mainstreamed schools. In addition, only .4% of students in special schools achieved 5 or more grade A to Cs at GCSE, compared to 48% in mainstreamed schools.

Thomas concluded that many students with SEN in special schools are denied the opportunity to participate in assessment systems, and those who do meet with little success. A possible explanation for the results may be that special schools cater to students with moderate or severe learning difficulties who cannot be expected to take part in GCSE level work. However, one third of special schools, such as those for the visually impaired, cater to children who do not have cognitive problems. These students could be expected to perform better than the study reported (Thomas, 1997).

Thomas suggests two possible reasons for his findings. First, special schools may perceive their students as less likely to perform well in examinations and, therefore do, not let them take part. Second, special schools may not be able to provide a full range of higher level curricula experiences, and, therefore, students do not have access to the knowledge tested by the GCSE or the GNVQ.

An earlier study by Grant, Noble, Carne, and Bowker (1993) reached similar conclusions concerning the ability of special schools to provide the national curriculum to students with special education needs. Although teachers in special schools wanted to deliver at least one core subject, this was tempered by the recognition that other skills needed to be emphasized too. This study concluded that while pupils with SEN in mainstream schools may have had increased access to credentials as a result of the new vocational examinations and the concomitant changes in assessment, access to educational credentials for students with SEN in special schools remained problematic (Grant et al., 1993).

#### FRANCE

The French general education system consists of three levels: primary (*l'école primaire*) from 5-11 years; secondary from 11-15 (college); and a non-compulsory 3 year period of study at a *lycée* leading to a baccalaureate certificate and automatic acceptance into a university (Broadfoot, 1996; Meijer, 1998). Although the public education system in France faces criticism on the same lines as does the American, the policy of improving educational standards and economic competitiveness by holding teachers and schools responsible for student learning is not feasible in the French context. Teachers in France are members of the civil service, employed and accountable to the ministry of education, not to principals, school superintendents, or parents.

Since the mid 1970s, the National Education Administration has been thoroughly reorganized and decentralized, with authority over education transferred to regional and local National Education services (Meijer, 1998). This change could enable the system to direct educational activity toward more vocational and industrial needs at the local level. However, the move conflicts with the institutionalized role of teachers in society (Broadfoot, 1996). The beliefs that education should serve the needs of industry or that parents should have a measure of control in their children's education are not generally accepted

by teachers or the education system. Teachers are accountable to the Department of Education by way of regional ministries, which assess the extent to which teachers teach the standard curriculum by making periodic visits to schools to observe teachers in the classroom. The idea that teachers in France could make curricula decisions and be held accountable by the public for the results of their students is anathema to the profession (Broadfoot).

During the 1990s the role of the evaluation and planning division of the Ministry of Education gained a higher profile with the introduction of mass testing on entry to each stage of schooling. This testing was to provide teachers with diagnostic information to improve individual student achievement. Most results of this testing are confidential and not used for school comparison purposes. The results in the important Baccalaureate examination at age 18 are published in the newspapers, but again, the results are not used to judge the effectiveness of teachers or school districts. When the public is given access to detailed statistical information, the Ministry of Education makes a great effort to provide multiple indicators of quality rather than simply provide raw scores on national tests (Broadfoot, 1996).

#### **A. Exit Documents**

In France, the development of the public education system was shaped by the struggle between church and state for control over the curriculum to be taught in schools and, as a result, the curriculum is determined by the central government. Assessment procedures consisting of public examinations played a key role in this struggle and allowed state notions of competence, measured by performance on examinations, to gain ascendancy after the Revolution (Broadfoot, 1996).

The emphasis on examination performance continued up to the mid twentieth century as the French system was dominated by a series of selection hurdles to determine progress, the phenomenon of redoublement or repeating a year, and examinations for selection into various kinds of secondary schooling with different employment destinations. However, assessment by public examination was accompanied and later supplanted by continuous assessment up to Baccalaureate level.

#### **Public Examinations.**

One of the key selection points was at age 16 with the Brevet d'Études du Premier Cycle (BEPC). This was a pass/fail device that determined which students would continue on to the baccalaureate examinations at age 18. The BEPC was abandoned in 1980 and replaced by the Diplôme National Brevet (DNB). The DNB result is based on a public examination in French, math, history and geography, and the results of continuous assessment. The DNB attests that the student has achieved a certain standard in his or her studies. Although the locally set examination is rigorously standardized, there is little monitoring of the continuous assessment awarded by the schools, leading to considerable variation in actual standard achieved by individual schools.

Several options are open to students after college and the end of compulsory education. Some may continue toward Baccalaureat General or Technologique, which is the path to further higher education. Others may go to a professional lycee for two years and receive a Certificate d'Aptitude Professionnel (CAP) or a Brevet d'Études Professionnelles (BEP). The CAP and the BEP put emphasis on vocational and technical skills for the workplace. The lycées also offer a Baccalaureat Professionnel which, along with the other Baccalaureats, automatically provides the matriculation requirement for university entrance. Students working toward Baccalaureate Generale have five discipline areas to choose from, with some options having a higher status than others, leading to considerable competition for places in these courses. Students working toward the Baccalaureate Technologique have three certificate options. Students who narrowly fail the Baccalaureate are allowed to retake the exam. If they fail on the second occasion they receive a Certificate de fin Études Secondaires (Elliot, Shin, Thurlow, & Ysseldyke, 1995).

#### **Continuous Assessment.**

Before the reforms of the 1970s, the formal examination system at the secondary level was accompanied by continuous assessment known as orientation. Each student had a livret scolaire made up of academic assessments and teacher comments concerning application, discipline, and other qualities. Based on the livret, students were placed in one of three streams: classical, modern, or technical. During the 1960s, as a result of calls

for greater educational opportunity, comprehensive schooling up to age 16 in college was instituted in mixed ability classes. Students followed a common core curriculum, and each individual student was subject to continuous assessment by a group of people, the conseil d'orientation, which included teachers, a guidance counselor, a psychologist, and a parent representative. Each student received guidance and direction concerning the educational path most appropriate for him or her after age 16. Those who were chosen to continue in formal schooling were accompanied by their livret, which continued to play an important role in determining the choice of Baccalaureat option available at the secondary school or lycee. In 1985, 40% of youth aged 16 went on to Baccalaureat examinations. The current goal of the Department of Education is that 80% will go on to study for the Baccalaureate.

In theory, because the curriculum taught in France is centralized, students in all regions have access to the same education and are held to the same standard on public examinations. However, the responsibility for administering the Baccalaureat rests with regional bodies that have to set and mark the examinations in a short period of time. As in the UK and at the state level in the US, the curriculum may be standard, but the quality of the schools varies enormously. Regional variations in Baccalaureat standards have led to calls for its reform or even abolition (Broadfoot, 1996).

As a result of the problems with the Baccalaureat, the livret de scolaire is becoming more important to employers and to institutions of higher education; this reveals another tension in the French system. The current teacher education curriculum places strong emphasis on academic disciplines, and thus, teachers are not trained to respond to demands for greater vocational and industrially-based courses or to make assessments of individual students that speak to vocational issues. Broadfoot comments, "At the root of the problem is the inability of the traditional basis for system control-central prescription and monitoring-to provide for a sufficient degree of flexibility and public acceptability in the rapidly changing social context in which it now operates" (1996, p.163).

## **B. Special Education**

Students with special education needs in France have a statutory right to be educated in the least restrictive setting at no cost to the parents. Students with SEN in regular schools and transition classes have to follow the regular curriculum; however, students with SEN in special schools do not. Secondary school students with special education needs have three alternative paths at the end of primary school. They may remain with their non-disabled peers and progress through college and lycee and on to Baccalaureate. Alternatively, they may stay at the primary school and prepare for a DNB, and leave for further training or employment at a lycee d'enseignement professionnel to study for the CAP. Students with SEN, especially those with cognitive disabilities, may attend institutions designed to provide general and vocational adapted teaching, which are attached to a college and lead to a CAP qualification. Students with SEN can also attend regional establishments of adapted education which are independent institutions. Again students can work toward a CAP or even a Baccalaureate Technologie. The third option is to enter the cours complémentaire, which is an extension of primary school, and work toward a DNB.

It is unclear the extent to which students with disabilities have access to the same exit documents as regular students. Public reporting of examination results does not disaggregate by individual students and no guidelines are laid down for reporting assessment results for specific populations, such as students with disabilities. Given that a separate ministry, the Ministry of Social Affairs, oversees special schools, the inclusion of students with more severe disabilities in regular education assessments seems to be problematic.

## **ITALY**

Compulsory schooling applies to all students ages 6-14, or 15, without an intermediate leaving certificate (Fressura, 1993). Compulsory schooling consists of two cycles: primary school, which lasts for 5 years, and intermediate school, which lasts for 3. Second-degree secondary education consists of various study options, each having different lengths and aims. There are 21 basic types of secondary schools offering more than 100 types of streams.

The public education system in Italy is centralized, with the Ministry of Public Education determining the legislation, curricula, and general administration of nursery, compulsory, and secondary education systems. The ministry is also responsible for the administration of examinations, and the certification of diplomas granted at the end of primary education and first and second-degree secondary education in all areas of study. At the local level, the Ministry of Public Education operates through local offices, *Provveditorati degli Studi*, which have administrative functions, such as the allocation of class and support systems, the planning of education, and inspections (Abbring & Meijer, 1994).

#### **A. Exit Documents**

Compared to other European Union (EU) countries, Italy has had a large number of changes in government since 1945. Shifts in education policy have been frequent, although a progressive theme has run throughout them. Regional differences in development, especially between the prosperous and industrialized north and the much poorer south, have made implementation patchy (Abbring & Meijer, 1994).

##### **Primary Leaving Certificate.**

The first public examination of pupil progress occurs at age 11 for the Primary Leaving Certificate (PLC) (Fressura, 1993). The PLC consists of 7 subject areas: Italian language, mathematics, science, history/geography/social studies and knowledge of social life, sound and music education, physical education, and religion. The examination consists of two written tests and an oral presentation of two research projects that the student has been involved in. Pupils who are successful are granted a PLC, which constitutes a certificate of admission to intermediate school. According to Fressura, failures in the PLC are practically non-existent.

##### **Intermediate Leaving Certificate.**

At the end of the intermediate school course, students take a single session state examination leading to the intermediate school leaving certificate. The examination has three written parts: a composition in Italian, a test in mathematics, and a foreign language test. In addition, there is an oral component. The examination is only part of the criteria for the award of an intermediate certificate, which is also dependent on the student's

personal report and evaluation certificate (a record of continuous assessment throughout intermediate school).

##### **Continuous Assessment.**

Every four months, an assessment is made of each student's participation in all aspects of school life. The final report at the end of each year determines whether the student is promoted; few students are refused admission to the next level. The final assessment report also contains an orientation proposal to continue education in a particular stream, for example, humanities, technical, vocational, or artistic (Fressura, 1993). The intermediate leaving certificate gives access to upper secondary school, apprenticeships, or vocational training courses in each region.

##### **Second-degree Secondary Education.**

In this level of education, student progress and promotion is determined by continuous assessment. The student report card is issued every four months and consists of academic and conduct assessments that determine whether individual students pass to the next level or repeat the year. At the end of the course of study, students take a single session state examination leading to a matriculation diploma in one of the streams available. The diploma exam consists of a written and an oral section. The matriculation diploma gives access to all university faculties except those that are reserved for graduates of particular streams. Graduates are also given access to vocational courses and apprenticeships.

##### **State Technical School Diplomas.**

Students with intermediate leaving certificates who wish to follow a course of study in agriculture, industry and craft, social service, or marine activities can attend state technical and vocational institutes. Through vocational schools, students can acquire a special diploma by way of an intermediate state examination. This diploma does not qualify the recipient for admission to higher secondary education, but it is evidence of a practical skill.

##### **Vocational Education Qualifications.**

Admission to vocational courses is possible via two means. Students with an Intermediate Leaving Certificate are admitted automatically, but if a student does not have this, he or she can take an entrance examination. Usually courses are shorter and

are part theoretical, part practical. The courses culminate in a diploma qualification in each particular branch of study.

## **B. Special Education**

Special education policy in Italy is based on full integration for all students (Meijer, 1998). This policy has been in place since 1976 and was strengthened in 1992, with the right of people with disabilities to be integrated in education from primary to university level. Students with disabilities have guaranteed places in mainstreamed schools throughout compulsory schooling. If students with disabilities graduate from school, they are guaranteed admission in mainstream classes in post compulsory secondary schools, and when they have completed this level, they are guaranteed access to higher education (Abbring & Meijer, 1994).

Students with disabilities study the same curricula as students without disabilities until the end of compulsory education. Students with severe disabilities are not eligible for an intermediate leaving certificate; instead, they receive a certificate of frequency. However, students with certificates of frequency remain eligible for post compulsory vocational education (UNESCO, 1996).

## **SWEDEN**

Since 1962, Sweden has had a centralized system of education in which the national objectives and guidelines are defined by the central government. The government decides on the curriculum, the syllabi for compulsory schools, and the core subjects in upper secondary schools and adult education (Hjorth, 1994). Each municipality has control of the schools within its jurisdiction and determines which teachers are hired and how resources are distributed.

Compulsory education begins at age 7 and continues through age 16. It takes place in one of three types of establishments: compulsory basic school, Lapp nomad school, and special schools for students with sensory, speech, and cognitive impairments. Compulsory schooling was divided into 3 levels: junior (grades 1-3), intermediate (4-6), and senior (7-9). But in sweeping reforms begun in 1992, the levels were abolished, and local schools were left to determine the allocation of time between the grades (Hjorth, 1994). The only restrictions were those laid down by the syllabi to be achieved by grade 5 and

grade 9. At age 16, students may go on to post compulsory education (gymnasieskiola). Postsecondary courses are offered in academic and vocational areas to all students, and these institutions are totally integrated (Elliot et al., 1995).

## **A. Exit Documents**

The purpose of compulsory education is to develop proficiency in basic skills, such as reading, writing, and arithmetic and to give students an understanding of world issues, such as the environment. In compulsory education, centrally determined tests measuring the results of individual students do not exist, although they do exist in some subjects at the post compulsory level. Standardized tests are administered at grades 8 and 9, but results are not attached to students' final certificates. Instead, they are used to compare schools and classes countrywide (Zanotti & Dickey, 1995).

## **Compulsory School Leaving Certificates.**

Students take compulsory courses in Swedish, English, mathematics, civics, religious education, general science, physical education, and arts. In addition, they are able to take elective subjects. In English and mathematics, students are able to choose between regular and more advanced courses. At the end of grade 9, students receive a leaving certificate, the *avgångsbeleg*, which lists the final marks in all courses. Students have to pass English, Swedish, and mathematics in order to continue on to upper secondary schooling. If they do not pass all these subjects, they start upper school in an individual program to obtain remedial help (Hjorth, 1994). The percentage of students leaving compulsory education with incomplete certificates has remained stable at 7.4%.

## **Upper Secondary Exit Documents.**

Ninety-seven percent of Swedish youth enroll in some type of post-compulsory education. Reform of upper secondary education was put in place during the early 1990s. The purpose behind the reforms at the post compulsory level was to retain the individual right to choice while making the link between education and the workplace more explicit (Hjorth, 1994). Vocational education was integrated in the ordinary upper secondary school, and the number of general subjects available in vocational courses were increased.

Currently upper secondary schools offer 16 national programs. Two of these, national sciences and social sciences are primarily academic programs that prepare students for higher education. Thirteen are vocational programs, and the remaining one is an arts program. All 16 last for 3 years, and in theory, if a student successfully completes a line of study, he or she is eligible for further study at the postsecondary level (Hjorth, 1994). However, universities are able to determine their own entrance requirements, and many make completion of one of the two academic lines a prerequisite of acceptance (Hjorth).

Until 1969, students were required to pass a set of national achievement tests for their chosen line of study. After 1969, a system of continuous assessment was introduced. Most subjects were graded 1-5 with 5 the highest, although a few subjects were not graded. In key subjects, students were required to take national standardized achievement tests, the results of which were entered on the individual student's certificate. Those subjects that were not graded received special notation on the leaving certificate.

As part of the education reform in Sweden, a new goal and achievement system was introduced in 1994. In the courses taken, students received one of four grades: pass with high distinction; pass with distinction; pass; and fail. Each certificate shows the line of study taken, the required courses and the optional courses taken, and the grades received. The certificate also shows whether the student followed normal studies, reduced studies in order to concentrate in an area, or extra subjects or courses. Students who follow reduced lines have to take the required courses in order to qualify automatically for further post secondary education.

## **B. Special Education**

Until the 1960s, most children with disabilities were educated in separate schools. Policy since then has valued equal educational opportunity for all children, including those with disabilities (Meijer & Pilj., 1994). The exact number of children receiving special education is unknown although it is estimated that at least 10% of children aged 7-17 receive some form of special help within the working unit. It is difficult to assess the extent to which inclusion is practiced on a day to day basis in Sweden. Some commentators suggest that hard-to-teach children, especially those with social and behavioral problems, are

passed on to the special teacher within the working group (Eklindh, 1985; Meijer, 1998; Pilj, 1994).

The number of separate schools has declined sharply, and many students with severe disabilities attend special classes in their local schools. For students with multiple disabilities, three types of special schools are available: one for deaf children who are cognitively impaired; one for deaf children with speech disorders; and one for blind children with cognitive disabilities. Most children with severe cognitive impairments attend schools for students with intellectual disabilities at both the compulsory and upper secondary school levels. Emphasis is placed on the individual needs of the student and includes social training and practical skills (Elliot et al., 1995).

Swedish education is highly individualized, and this, in theory, enables many students with disabilities to be successful. However, the reforms of the late 1990s may have affected the extent to which students with disabilities have access to courses valued by institutions of higher education. In addition, students who take on reduced course loads at the compulsory school level now have to make up the courses lost to automatically qualify for upper secondary education. Successful completion of compulsory schooling is now increasingly important, as are the grades and results recorded on the exit document (Hjorth, 1994).

Sweden does not count its special education students, in an attempt to further include most students with disabilities in the regular class. The extent to which they are included in large-scale assessments, the accommodations given, and consideration of students with disabilities in overall education reform is unclear.

## Conclusion

This section has briefly reviewed the assessment systems and exit documents in selected western European countries. Like the United States, the countries reviewed recognized the need to improve educational outcomes to remain economically competitive, and each uses exit documents as a form of quality assurance and control. However, there is considerable variety in the approaches used. Sweden and Italy emphasize quality control by developing the expertise of teachers regarding assessments and then trusting them to assess their students. The United Kingdom and France put heavier reliance on externally set examinations and, in the UK in particular, the results of external examinations have both negative and positive consequences.

Exit documents reflect the differences in quality control adopted by individual countries, but all exit documents, to some degree, convey information regarding the performance of individual students in their courses. In France, Italy, and Sweden, the student report card provides a continuous record of both academic and personal development on an individual level. In the UK, external examination certificates represent purely academic achievement and are perhaps the most differentiated in terms of ability levels. Unlike the US, exit documents from the countries reviewed are customarily used as a measure of ability and skills.

The introduction of new courses, especially vocational courses, into the curriculum in the UK, Sweden, and France, made explicit the link between the economy and educational reform. It also made explicit the tension between traditional academic courses and more work oriented courses. Attempts to equalize exit documents from vocational courses and those from more traditional academic lines proved problematic in these countries. It is possible that any move to develop a results-based, differentiated high school diploma may serve to stigmatize students who do not take the valued classes.

Several of the countries reviewed saw the need to decentralize the education system to give greater control to local school districts. For example, in France it was believed that greater autonomy would give schools the ability to respond quickly to local needs. However, as in the US, the quality of the French baccalaureate diploma varies from region to region and has ceased to be a reliable measure of quality control due to differences in assessment standards. In the UK, the opposite solution was preferred as the central government took control of curriculum, assessments, and in some cases, the running of schools themselves.

The extent to which students with disabilities are explicitly included in educational policy reform efforts varies from country to country, but none of the countries reviewed gave the issue as high a profile as it receives in the United States. For example, although the United Kingdom, France, and Sweden collect data on assessments, no public provision is made for the disaggregating of data relating to students with disabilities. It could be argued that by not disaggregating the scores of students with disabilities, policy makers recognize the fact that students with disabilities are part of the overall education system. Thus attempts to improve educational outcomes for all students will automatically improve outcomes for students with disabilities. On the other hand, the lack of precise information on how students with disabilities fare in educational reforms makes it hard to alert policy makers to unforeseen consequences.

As the preceding sections show, the possession of a regular high school diploma conveys a valued status on individuals. Absent any other measure, it signals that its holder has completed a course of study in high school, and it implies that a basic level of competency has been achieved. In addition, it indicates that a student had sufficient “character” to complete the necessary requirements. In the minds of many, the absence of a regular diploma, either because the individual has dropped out or has received an alternative exit document, confers lesser status and implies a lack of basic skills, including persistence. In general, youth without high school diplomas cannot join the military, participate in formal postsecondary education, or have full access to high-paying employment (Guy et al., 1999). Given the emotional and practical considerations surrounding the regular diploma, states and local school districts face the difficult task of ensuring quality control by enforcing high standards and producing a document that recognizes the achievement of all students.

This section presents three existing models from the US and Europe, and the main features and implications of each. The intent is to help policy makers identify and think about desirable characteristics across these models.

### **The Single Diploma Model**

This model offers a standard high school diploma only and does not differentiate students, courses of study, or performance. The state sets minimum requirements that must be met, but local districts can set higher standards for local certificates. Maryland and Texas employ this model, which has the following characteristics:

- \* Provides common content for most students;
- \* Emphasizes academic skills;
- \* Holds all students to a higher standard;
- \* Provides access to higher education after high school requirements are met.

States differ in the way the single diploma is earned. Some require students to earn a certain number of credits, while others require that high school students pass an assessment as well as meet course requirements.

Typically, states following the single model exert total control over graduation requirements or share control with the local education authority for students without disabilities. Both Maryland and Texas offer a certificate of coursework attendance or completion to students who complete all graduation requirements except the exit level assessments. In relation to students with disabilities, though, state policies vary in requirements for a standard diploma. Several states allowed the IEP team to decide how a student with disabilities would meet the requirements. Some counted modified coursework, exemption from course or exam requirements in some areas, or completion of IEP goals.

Outside the United States, two countries reviewed have a single exit document available at the end of compulsory education. In Sweden, at age 16, all students receive a compulsory school-leaving certificate, but do not “officially” complete compulsory schooling unless they pass English, Swedish, and mathematics. Without a pass in these key subjects, students cannot formally enter upper secondary education. In France, the DNB marks the end of compulsory schooling and is based on a public examination in French, mathematics, history and geography, and the results of continuous assessment. The DNB attests that the student has achieved a certain standard in his or her studies, and is required for access to further study.

The all or nothing nature of the single model has created much debate, especially in the US. Most states that have adopted the model treat students with disabilities differently from their non-disabled peers by modifying the requirements for a standard diploma. This approach gives equal recognition to the efforts of students with disabilities and provides greater access to further education. However, it is argued that the approach is unfair to students without disabilities, some of whom may work extremely hard without being acknowledged for their efforts or without receiving a diploma.

An additional implication of the single model diploma relates to the appropriateness of coursework and requirements intended for all students. Guy et al. (1999) pointed out that students with disabilities may concentrate on their academic needs to the exclusion of other needs, such as vocational, social, and behavioral skills, and leave high school with a diploma but few marketable job skills.

States offering the single exit document option may also be at risk for legal challenges as the stakes are extremely high in this model. In a situation where only one document is available, states must ensure that students have the opportunity to meet the necessary requirements. The courts in *Debra P. and Brookhart* recognized the stigma attached to individuals who failed to graduate from high school and the concomitant reduction in post school opportunities. However, courts have also recognized the states’ need to assure quality control as a legitimate reason for enforcing graduation standards.

### **The Multiple Exit Document Model**

In this model, two or more exit documents are offered to all students or specifically to students with disabilities. States tend to offer a common curriculum with performance differentiation allowed. Multiple diplomas may include standard diplomas and IEP diplomas, standard diplomas and local diplomas, or standard diplomas and honors diplomas. New York, for example, has extended its “safety net” for students with disabilities until 2008 by allowing them to take the Regents Competency Tests and thus obtain a local diploma. California offers a standard diploma and an honors diploma.

This model has in common the following characteristics:

- \* Requires similar core content for standard and honors diplomas, while core content is allowed to vary for IEP diplomas;
- \* Allows varying performance expectations;
- \* Gives recognition to differences in student performance;
- \* May provide alternative access routes to higher education.

None of the selected countries studied offered the array of exit documents available in the majority of the American states. However, before the 1988 Education Reform Act, the United Kingdom offered two types of exit documents: the general certificate of education and the certificate of secondary education. In the UK system, students took single subject examinations, which covered different curricula and were assessed differently, both in terms of method of assessment and level of competency achieved.

One of the main dilemmas of multiple diplomas is the difficulty of maintaining quality control and setting standards for each one. In this model, policy makers need to establish different but equally challenging standards for all candidates. A related problem is how - in a system that focuses heavily on academics - to place equal value on each option to avoid stigmatizing exit documents with a more practical, less academic emphasis.

An additional issue is the placement of certain students into diploma tracks that have “lower” standards. This is of particular concern for students with disabilities but is also an issue for students who are ethnically or racially different and for those from low socio-economic groups.

### **Separate Track Exit Document Model**

Examples of the separate track exit document model would have these characteristics in common:

- \* Offers different curricula;
- \* Is available in settings other than schools;
- \* Is assessed very differently;
- \* Provides options for a second chance at education for post school youth;
- \* Is not tied to age (as in UK alternatives and the GED).

Historically in the United States, a separate track model existed but was not accompanied by two diploma types. Students followed either a predominantly academic course of study or a practical or vocational one. At the end of compulsory schooling, an individual student would receive a high school diploma. In this system, different curricula were studied and courses were

assessed differently; not surprisingly, the value placed by society on each track was also different.

In the United States, although the concept of tracking has been abandoned, the existence of the General Educational Development (GED) exit document is reminiscent of the earlier separate system in some ways. The GED is offered by both high schools and community colleges, and, although it is equivalent to a high school diploma, it is not the same in terms of what is assessed and how it is assessed. Neither does it offer the same post school opportunities as a regular high school diploma; however, it offers access to training programs not available to drop outs (Murnane, Willett, & Parker-Boudett, 1995).

Recent reforms in the United Kingdom have established two types of exit documents to mark the completion of different areas of study at age 16. The General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) has joined the General Certificate of Education (GCSE), with its strong focus on academics. The GNVQ, unlike the separate subject based GCSE, contains a strong emphasis on profile assessment in specified targets and includes work experience as an important element. The rationale behind the GNVQ was the government’s desire to establish parity of esteem between the academic and vocational routes. Level 3 GNVQs were intended to be equal to two A levels, and level 2 GNVQs equivalent to four GCSEs.

### **Conclusion**

The cultural and historical forces guiding education in the US require universal access to opportunities: the same curriculum in the same place and for the same result - a high school diploma. In the US, standards-based reform has created dissonance in some states for those students who do follow the same curriculum, in the same place, but do not get the same diploma. In the UK, tracking based on socio-economic status and other student-level variables is common and may severely limit the life chances of students who are perceived to be on a lesser track. On the other hand, early research from the UK suggests that the system may provide low achieving youth with an alternate means of accessing higher education when equivalency of the credentials is accepted at post school institutions.

In theory, students up to age 14 in the UK have access to the same curriculum and performance expectations. Student self-determination guides the future study plan, and students are able to take a mixture of academic and vocational classes in a variety of settings. However, in practice, evidence is mixed as some research suggests that low achieving students who are not expected to do well at the GCSE level make up the majority of students who take the GNVQs (Broadfoot, 1996). However, there is evidence that students are taking a mix of GNVQs and GCSEs and are accessing higher education based on the equivalency of their credentials to A Level GCSEs.

The dilemma for policy makers involved in standards-based education is to develop a system in which all students find their post school options widened or at least not substantially narrowed. Each model reviewed brings both risks and opportunities. A system that offers only one diploma risks excluding students who cannot reach the standard expected, but offers opportunity for equity in outcomes to those who can. In systems that offer multiple exit documents, the stakes are less high in the sense that most students, whether with or without disabilities, have a chance to leave school with some form of credential. However, the existence of multiple forms of exit documents representing different types and levels of achievement may generate a hierarchy of exit documents that ascribes greater value to those granted for academic excellence.

This section presents the findings of EPRRI's policy symposium on students with disabilities and exit documents held in Washington, DC, in October 2001. Participants included representatives from three of EPRRI's core study states and six core study districts.

Participants were asked two questions: (1) How can states and school systems maximize the number of students with disabilities who receive a standard diploma? and (2) How can states and school systems address the needs of students with disabilities who will not receive a standard diploma or will not earn the diploma in the standard way due to increased requirements? The discussion generated the following recommendations:

### **1. Alter or modify requirements for a standard diploma.**

- Decrease the amount of content to be covered and tested by identifying the essential core elements;
- Increase the time allotted for meeting the standards;
- Allow individualized time frames (e.g., 3, 4, or 5 year programs);
- Select alternate methods of demonstrating competence, for example, a portfolio assessment.

### **2. Provide accommodations.**

- Use accommodations before an actual test.

### **3. Retest.**

- Allow for retesting of specific exam components;
- Provide remediation of skills related to specific problem areas;
- Use early test results to inform instruction;
- Make retests a test of basic skills;
- Allow for appeals;
- Use a waiver process for all students.

### **4. Change the way we report, share, and analyze existing assessments at the state and school level.**

- Look carefully at the distribution of scores;
- Prepare and present assessment data in ways that are user-friendly for teachers;
- Collect and use data formatively - don't wait for the high stakes test;
- Rethink time frames so that schools don't have to wait long to get their results (this might involve changing testing schedules);
- Perform component analysis;
- Increase the capability of building-level leadership to understand and use data for school improvement;
- Regardless of whether individual students with disabilities get a diploma, make the scores on high school assessments available to relevant parties.

### **5. Build assessments from the ground up with students with disabilities in mind.**

- Use what we learn in creating alternative assessments to inform later iterations of standard assessments;
- Make sure the IEP is aligned with the standards, and that diagnostic information gleaned from assessments is incorporated into the IEP;
- Streamline planning tools and processes;
- Use a compensatory model (takes into account that a child may be close in one area and above the standard in another);
- Design all measures so they ultimately help a child function in the labor market and get a job that offers opportunities for advancement. Ultimately, this strategy will provide society with a fund of capital and ensure that individuals have a higher standard of living and contribute to society.

## **6. Monitor performance.**

- Monitor process (includes effective instruction and participation) as well as outcomes at the state level;
- Monitor instructional programs;
- Collect and publicly report disaggregated data;
- Set performance targets based on self-analysis of data;
- Focus on creating the opportunity for children to earn a diploma. Look at incremental progress and honor/applaud students for that progress, even if they did not achieve the set standards;
- Think of ways students who can't participate in the traditional sense can still achieve the end result.

## **7. Make changes in the early childhood and elementary years.**

- Employ standards-based models in early grades;
- Identify children for services earlier;
- Identify specialized intervention programs and make them available early.

## **8. Improve instruction and the instructional environment.**

- Ensure that students have access to “quality” programming delivered by qualified, certified staff;
- Require secondary special educators to be content experts;
- Improve teacher education, which may include alternative routes to certification;
- Create a link between teacher education and standards;
- Make sure teachers know how to use data to improve student outcomes in a timely fashion;
- Ensure that students with disabilities have access to a rigorous curriculum - academic with vocational training;
- Modify or differentiate content standards, even if this will require differentiated assessments;
- Introduce alternatives for students who do not “fit in nicely”. They must have a way to achieve the same standards, regardless of the route they take.

**9. Redesign the standard diploma.**

- Do not rely on the false notion that every child with an IEP is on track to the same IEP diploma. IEP graduation sets different standards for every child, and one child's IEP diploma is not necessarily the same as another's;
- Remember that the ability to check off the, "Do you have a high school diploma?" box on employment applications is important;
- Formulate a uniform way to measure the value/quality of a high school diploma. For example, the Regents Diploma of NY will clearly be valued more than another state's high school diploma;
- Reward participation - sometimes, this involves just showing up - because potential employers value it;
- Consider a three pronged diploma: presence, participation, and performance. Students may not do well in all three areas, but reward them for whichever areas they have done well in;
- Certify proficiencies in some areas, even though a student may not be able to achieve proficiencies in all areas;
- Give students appreciation and credit for whichever components they have achieved proficiency in.

**10. Plan for the future**

- Remember that high school is not the final stopping point. In most cases, it is an interim step;
- Allow children to choose a program that fits their future goals. The child should be given an option to go to college, but if he or she does not want to go, that's all right. In the past, children were not given a choice - their track was predetermined.



**Summary**

This topical review has looked at the issues surrounding students with disabilities and the exit documents available to them after high school. The contentious issue of exit documents and students with disabilities is unlikely to disappear in the near future. In all likelihood, the debate will become increasingly strident as the effects of accountability reform are felt at the individual and systems level.

As the section detailing the historical origins of the high school diploma revealed, the current accountability reforms in public education mark a departure from previous practice. Originally, to receive a high school diploma in most states, students had to accumulate a specified number of course credits; now, however, depending on geographic location, students have the additional requirement of passing a graduation exam. States are not only enforcing increased graduation requirements, but are also demanding a high level of performance from high school students. It seems inevitable that in a number of states, some students will not be able to pass the tests and thus will not receive a standard diploma.

This fact has raised the ire of those concerned about students with disabilities. For some involved, a student with a disability deserves a standard high school diploma if he or she is successful in the chosen program of study. This may mean completing coursework requirements or completing the goals and objectives laid out in an IEP. High school graduation exams measure only one aspect of the school experience and ignore other ones, such as participation in the life of the school and community, and regular attendance. Advocates for students with disabilities argue that when other graduation requirements have been met, pinning a high school diploma on examination performance is an unfair way to mark the end of twelve years of belonging to a community of learning. They suggest that this approach ignores the value that society and employers place on being a team player.

For others the issue involved is one of fairness to students with disabilities. If students with disabilities have not had access to the general education curriculum in terms of qualified teachers who can teach to high standards in the content areas, they have not had an equal opportunity to learn. Without an equal opportunity to learn, it is unfair to expect students with disabilities to master the content covered in exit level exams. A related point concerns how graduation exams are structured and the extent to which the effects of a student's disability are mitigated to allow them to demonstrate their skills in alternative ways. Students with disabilities in states that use standardized tests may find their access to a test limited by the type and range of accommodations allowed on the norming sample.

Balancing the desire to increase educational standards against the need to develop an equitable system of education in American public schools is extremely difficult. Few people would argue against improving the quality and rigor of education, but major concerns arise as reform efforts have taken on the predictable form of standardized tests. As states and school districts consider their options regarding graduation requirements, they need to step back and consider the intended and unintended consequences of each alternative. The information and considerations presented in this topical review can play a part in that process.

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1308 Benjamin Building  
College Park, Maryland 20742-1161  
tel: 301.405.6509 • fax: 301.314.9158 • [www.eprri.org](http://www.eprri.org)