Technical Report 49

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

NATIONAL CENTER ON EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

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David R. Johnson • Martha L. Thurlow • Karen E. Stout

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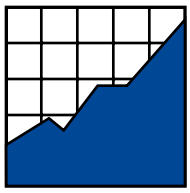

NATIONAL CENTER ON EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

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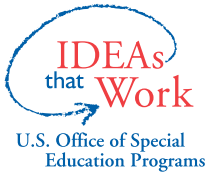

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National Center on Educational Outcomes
University of Minnesota • 350 Elliott Hall
75 East River Road • Minneapolis, MN 55455
Phone 612/626-1530 • Fax 612/624-0879
http://www.nceo.info

Executive Summary

Changes in graduation policies and requirements that specifically call for raised academic standards for all students, as well as the development of exit exams linked to a student's eligibility to receive a standard high school diploma, are strategies that states have used to increase student learning. Both state and federal attention to graduation rates demonstrate the perceived link between completing school with a standard diploma and successful future adult roles. How to successfully include students with disabilities in these policies, whether to provide other types of exit documents, and then determining the consequences of various policy approaches has always been a challenge for states.

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

The present study was undertaken to update the status of graduation policies across the nation. It follows up on previous work, the last study having been conducted in 2002, just after the implementation of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Three research questions served as the focus of this national study of high school graduation requirements and diploma options for students with and without disabilities:

(1) What is the range and variation in state graduation requirements and diploma options across the United States for students with and without disabilities?

(2) What are the intended and unintended consequences that result for students when they are required to pass exit exams to receive a high school diploma?

(3) What are the intended and unintended consequences of using single or multiple diploma options for students with disabilities?

Responses were collected from states via an online survey that contained questions aligned to previous surveys. Respondents were state directors of special education or their designees in all 50 states and the District of Columbia; the return rate was 100%.

Results indicated some changes in graduation requirements and diploma options from the previous survey. For example, fewer states seemed to be using exit exams as part of their requirements. In addition, states seemed to be decreasing the use of some diploma options, such as the IEP diploma, while increasing others, such as honors diplomas. Still, there continued to be an array of diploma options available to students with disabilities; these may or may not benefit

students with respect to future opportunities for postsecondary access and employment. States do have options for students who do not pass high stakes exit exams, including scoring options and testing options.

Recommendations produced from this study are as follows:

- Clarify the assumptions underlying state graduation requirements and diploma options.
- Ensure students with disabilities an opportunity to learn the materials they will be tested on in state and local assessments.
- Make high school graduation decisions based on multiple indicators of students' learning and skills.
- Clarify the implications of developing and granting alternative diploma options for students with disabilities.

It will be important to study the consequences – beyond the perceptions of those setting policies and those working with students – by examining data on the scores of students on high school exit exams, for example, and by following students across time. Continued attention to this important policy area for students with disabilities is essential.

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Introduction

For more than two decades, state and local education agencies have developed and implemented standards-based education reforms in response to growing public criticism that students exit America's high schools lacking the skills and knowledge required to be productive citizens. The movement to standards-based education dates from the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, and its message, that we were "falling behind" our international counterparts, was further reinforced in 1990 by the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). Other evidence also suggested that America's schools were "falling short" in providing equitable opportunities for all of its children (as in *The Forgotten Half*, or *The Scans Report for America 2000*). Such reports and others lead to a general consensus that there are serious things wrong with public education, that the problems are systemic rather than problematic, and that nothing short of major structural change will fix these problems (Cobb & Johnson, 1997).

In response to the critique of public education and the movement to standards-based education, states have implemented graduation policies and requirements that call for raised academic standards for all students, state, and local district testing; development of exit exams linked to a student's eligibility to receive a high school diploma; and a focus on increasing student graduation rates. All of these strategies are intended to increase the level of student learning and achievement essential to entering future adult roles.

One of the major challenges in implementing such rigorous high school graduation policies is how to include students with disabilities (Center on Education Policy, 2003; Policy Information Clearinghouse, 1997; Lehr, Clapper, & Thurlow, 2005). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Amendments of 1997 and 2004 require that students with disabilities participate in state and district assessments and that their performance be reported. In addition, state special education units are held accountable for identifying targets for improvement through 2011 in State Performance Plans (SPPs), with graduation rate as Indicator 1, and are reviewed for approval by the Secretary of Education. Each state subsequently submits an Annual Performance Reports (APR) with graduation performance data and a comparison of performance to targets. The APRs are reviewed by the Secretary and after review each state is designated as Meets Requirements, Needs Assistance, Needs Intervention, or Needs Substantial Intervention. Additionally the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, signed into law in 2002, requires that schools and school districts demonstrate that all students are making adequate yearly progress (AYP), as benchmarked by average test scores and other measures. Further, schools and districts that fail to show achievement gains among students with disabilities, English language learners, minority students, and low-income groups are subject to various district and state interventions.

NCLB focuses on school accountability measures and does not require that such assessments be used for promotion or graduation. It does, however, require that the graduation rate be an-

other indicator that states use to determine whether districts are making AYP. Graduation rate is calculated as the number of students who complete high school in four years with a standard high school diploma, although states submit the specific way in which they calculate this rate for NCLB (Forte & Erpenbach, 2006). States and districts are responding to all of these new requirements with broad-based policies and administrative efforts to address how all students, including students with disabilities, will be included.

The courts have ruled in favor of the participation of students with disabilities in state and local testing programs, including the use of high school exit exams. In *Debra P. v. Turlington* (1981), a group of African-American students challenged the Florida exit exam as being racially biased. In this landmark case, a U.S. Court of Appeals established that a high school diploma is a property interest, which makes it subject to protection under the Fourteenth Amendment. The decision in this case imposed requirements of curricular validity and adequate notice of high school exit exams. Further in *Brookhart v. Illinois State Board of Education* (1983), the court found that students with disabilities can be held to the same graduation requirements as non-disabled students, but schools must guarantee students with disabilities the opportunity to learn the required material (Center on Education Policy, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2002). In this case, the court recognized that students with disabilities might require more advanced notice and opportunities to prepare for such testing than other general education students.

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

More recently, in *Chapman v. California Department of Education* (2002), the federal courts ordered California to allow accommodations in testing procedures for students with disabilities. In this case, California students with disabilities filed a lawsuit challenging the state exit exam. The courts also ordered the state of California to develop an alternative form of the test for students who cannot be appropriately assessed by a standardized test. This ruling represented the first time a state has been ordered to adjust its high school exit exam for students with disabilities. In May of 2007 California's board of education recommended to the state legislature that all students take and pass the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) and that the

state not develop alternative exit assessments (Samuels, 2007). If students with disabilities are unable to pass the test or decide not to take it, certificates of attendance or achievement will be available to them instead.

One response to demands for better graduates is the use of high school exit exams to determine whether a student earns a high school diploma. Such tests are considered "high stakes" since earning or not earning a high school diploma directly affects an individual's future economic self-sufficiency and well-being as an adult. Though exit exams have evolved with considerable controversy, there has been a trend toward increasing the use of exit exams in recent years. In 1997, 16 states had exit exams in place as a condition for receiving a standard diploma (McDonnell, McLaughlin, & Morison, 1997). This number increased to 18 states in 1998 (Heubert & Hauser, 1999), 22 states in 2000 (Olson, Jones, & Bond, 2001), and 27 in 2003 (Johnson & Thurlow, 2003).

High stakes exit exams and other measures to improve the quality of high school graduates place pressure on all students, but that pressure falls particularly hard on certain groups of students: students with disabilities, minority students, English language learners, and economically disadvantaged students (Center on Education Policy, 2005). Thus states are experimenting with an array of differentiated or alternative diplomas, and not all are alike. The array of diploma options ranges from honors diplomas, to the standard diploma, to certificates of completion or attendance, and others. Some states offer special diplomas to students who take rigorous course work, achieve a high grade point average, or post high scores on state exams (Martinez & Bray, 2002). In addition, some diploma options and certificates are just for students receiving special education services (Guy, Shin, Lee, & Thurlow, 1999). Whether options such as certificates, IEP/special education diplomas, occupational/vocational diplomas, and other alternative responses will equate to a high school diploma—particularly in relation to future adult outcomes, and access to postsecondary education and to future employment and earnings (Johnson & Thurlow, 2003) —has not been well examined, although investigators are beginning to attempt to study this issue (Gaumer, 2003)

There is a critical need to examine the current and future implications of varied state graduation requirements and diploma options. This has become important because of the findings that students with disabilities experience significant negative outcomes when they do not earn a high school or equivalent diploma (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Bruininks, Thurlow, Lewis, & Larson, 1988; Edgar, 1987; Hasazi, Gordon, & Roe, 1985; Johnson, McGrew, Bloomberg, Bruininks, & Lin, 1997; Wagner, 1992). There are also data to suggest that more stringent graduation requirements may be related to higher rates of dropping out of school among students with disabilities, compared with the drop-out rates of students without disabilities (Education Trust, 2003; Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004; Wagner et al., 1991).

This paper examines the results of a national study on the current status of state graduation policies and diploma options for youth with disabilities. We examined state policies in relation to their intended benefits as well as possible unintended consequences, and compared the findings with a similar study conducted by Johnson and Thurlow in 2002. The rationale for both studies was based on the following assumptions:

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

Graduation Requirements

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

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

served as a template, in many respects, for the standards-based reform initiatives that began in the early 1990s.

Over the years, graduation requirements have taken many forms. Requirements that states set for graduation can range from Carnegie unit requirements (a certain number of class credits earned in specific areas) to the successful passing of minimum competency tests, high school exit exams, and/or a series of benchmark exams (Guy et al., 1999; Thurlow, Ysseldyke, & Anderson, 1995). States also vary in their use and application of these requirements for graduation. The alignment of exit exams with state and local graduation requirements has increased across the United States. The Center on Education Policy (2006) reported that 22 states required students to pass an exit exam to receive a diploma in 2006, with 25 states expected to have these exams in place by 2012. This is an increase from 16 states in 1997 (National Research Council, 1997), 18 in 1998 (Heubert & Hauser, 1999), and 22 states in 2000 (Olson, Jones, & Bond, 2001), and a decrease from 27 in 2003 in the survey conducted by Johnson and Thurlow (2003).

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

Proponents of the use of high-stakes exit exams believe that such exams motivate students and teachers to work harder and focus more attention on important learning goals, so that students will learn more and be better prepared for later life (Center on Education Policy, 2002). Others believe that students with disabilities and minority students are often victims of low expectations and weak instruction and stand to benefit from efforts to provide high-quality instruction for all students (National Research Council, 1997). Critics of high-stakes exit exams point to several observable negative consequences that students may experience. These include:

- increased drop-out rate, particularly among minority and poor students and students with disabilities;
- retention of students within grades until they demonstrate improved performance on state and local district exams;
- increased referrals of general education students to special education, due to increased pressures to pass exit exams;

- narrowing of the curriculum and instruction to focus on specific learning outcomes assessed in state and local district tests;

- limitations in the range of curricular and program options students can participate in because of intensified efforts to concentrate on areas of weakness identified by testing (consequently limiting options for participation in vocational education, work-study, instruction in adult living skills, and others); and

- unknown impact of receiving an alternative or different diploma option other than the standard diploma in terms of future postsecondary education and employment opportunities (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1992; Education Commission of the States, 1998; Heubert, 2002; Johnson, Stodden, Emanuel, Luecking, & Mack, 2002; Lane, Park, & Stone, 1998; Langenfeld, Thurlow, & Scott, 1997; Marchant & Paulson, 2005).

Existing research on the consequences of high-stakes exit testing is limited and inconclusive, and the debate and controversy regarding use of high-stakes testing continues in the absence of empirical findings.

Given the controversy over high school exit examinations, 19 states have developed or are developing multiple measures of performance as the basis for graduation (Darling-Hammond, Rustique-Forrester, & Pecheone, 2005). In addition to state exit examinations, these measures include performance assessments and other indicators of student learning such as course grades tied to state standards or student exhibitions of learning. Although such states have tended to maintain higher and steadier rates of graduation, the effects of using multiple measures for students with disabilities, minorities, and English language learners has not been studied.

Across the United States, state and local district graduation policies continue to evolve, with a concerted move toward increasing requirements for graduation. State legislatures have also continued to experiment with state standards policies, graduation requirements, and the use of exit exams as a requirement for receiving a diploma. Revisions and modifications of graduation requirements across states are commonplace. The No Child Left Behind Act requires that states must test all students annually in grades 3-8 in reading and math, and must test students at least once between grades 10 and 12; science testing also began in 2007-2008, with that content area tested one time at each school level (elementary, middle, and high). This means that all states must have high school tests, although they need not be “high stakes” exit exams tied to graduation. This legislation, however, continues to influence the discussions of states and local districts regarding the use of tests in relation to monitoring student progress, graduation, and other forms of accountability. It will also affect discussions about what it means to graduate due to its definition of graduation as earning a standard diploma in four years.

Alternative Diploma Options

The value of a high school diploma is currently under debate nationally. Many argue that its value has depreciated due to lowered academic expectations and to social promotions of ill-prepared students. Complaints from employers that the standard diploma has little or no meaning as an exit credential have heightened the debate. The meaning of a high school diploma today is far different from its meaning 30 or 40 years ago. Over the years, increasingly larger numbers of students have gone on to complete high school and enter college. Today, 85% of adults have completed high school and 28% have finished four or more years of college or university training (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). By contrast in 1960, only 41% of adults aged 25 and older had completed high school, and 8% had finished four or more years of college (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). Currently, access to a good job is contingent upon far more knowledge, skills, and education than ever before. But, there is no measure to indicate that the larger numbers graduating and going on to postsecondary educational settings translates to higher skill levels. The use of state exit exams aligned with state standards has been an attempt, in part, to ensure that a diploma means something in terms of a student's knowledge and skills.

Not all high school diplomas are alike, however; some states offer differentiated diplomas, including diplomas of high distinction and honors diplomas, to students who take rigorous course work, achieve a high grade point average, or post high scores on state exams (Martinez & Bray, 2002). At the other end of the spectrum, students who fail state exit exams or who cannot meet other graduation requirements may receive certificates of completion or attendance, IEP diplomas, occupational diplomas, and others. States also vary in the number of the diploma options they extend to students. Diploma options range from one option only (standard diploma) to up to five or more different options.

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

Proponents of multiple diploma options base their argument for this approach on claims of "fairness" and "reasonableness." They contend that when students experience difficulties in passing state exit exams it is only fair and reasonable to create additional options with alternative or different performance expectations. Offering such options is intended to maintain student motivation and reduce frustrations that could otherwise lead students to drop out. Unfortunately, there is little research on the value or merit of alternative diplomas in terms of a student's future opportunities for education or employment (Heubert, 2002; Thurlow & Johnson, 2000). Some research on this issue that is emerging (Gaumer, 2003) suggests post-secondary education institutions often have not heard of certificates of completion; those that have and are willing to accept them generally do not offer financial aid unless students have a standard diploma or earn a General Educational Development (GED) diploma.

Overview of the Study

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

(1) What is the range and variation in state graduation requirements and diploma options across the United States for students with and without disabilities?

(2) What are the intended and unintended consequences that result for students with disabilities when they are required to pass exit exams to receive a high school diploma?

(3) What are the intended and unintended consequences of using single or multiple diploma options for students with disabilities?

Method

A survey was developed to obtain information on individual state graduation policies and practices, including respondent perceptions of the intended and unintended consequences or impact

of these policies on students with disabilities. Survey questions were also developed to align, in part, with the three prior studies by Thurlow et al. (1995), Guy et al. (1999), and Johnson and Thurlow (2003). The survey instrument was submitted for limited review to selected state and local special education directors for feedback on the appropriateness of the items included.

Respondents included the state directors of special education or their designees in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. In several cases, the state directors of special education delegated the task of completing the survey to other knowledgeable persons, including state education agency transition specialists, state assessment personnel, and others. Three options were extended to respondents for completing the survey. Choices included completing an online survey, completing a written copy of the survey and returning the response by mail, or requesting a phone interview from University of Minnesota research staff. No phone interviews were requested. Data collection occurred from May 2006 to April 2007. A total of 50 states and the District of Columbia responded to the survey, representing a 100% response rate. In some cases states did not respond to all survey questions. Summaries of all data gathered were compiled and transposed into tables.

Results

Survey responses from the state directors of special education or their designees are summarized in this section of the report. The data presented here represent the status of state graduation policies and diploma options at the time the survey was completed by state education agency personnel (May 2006 – April 2007). Given the dynamic nature of policy discussions across the United States concerning state graduation policies and diploma options, it is highly likely that changes in these policies have occurred since the time of data collection. Previous surveys (Guy et al., 1999; Johnson & Thurlow, 2003; Thurlow et al., 1995) provide evidence of the extreme variation and ever-changing political environments of states regarding student graduation requirements.

Range and Variation in State Graduation Requirements and Diploma Options for Students with and without Disabilities

State Graduation Requirements for Youth with and without Disabilities. States vary in relation to the locus of control over requirements that are set for graduation from high school. Table 1 identifies the relationship between state and local education agencies in terms of who establishes graduation requirements for youth with disabilities. Options include:

- the state provides minimum requirements, and the Local Education Agency (LEA) may add to them;

- the state provides minimum requirements, and the LEAs may not add to them;
- the state provides guidelines, and the LEAs may set their own requirements;
- no state requirements are imposed, and the LEAs set their own requirements;
- requirements are established by IEP teams; and
- the state is in transition from local to statewide assessments.

The variation in the relationship between state and local education agencies in controlling the setting of high school graduation requirements is noted in Table 1. The most common observed practice across states is for the state to provide minimum requirements and extend options to the LEAs to add to them. A total of 34 states currently have graduation policies reflecting this practice. Seven states (Hawaii, Louisiana, New Hampshire, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia) and the District of Columbia set requirements for graduation, and the LEAs are not permitted to change them. The states of Illinois, Iowa, Rhode Island, and Vermont provide guidelines, but LEAs may set their own requirements. Colorado reported having no minimum state requirements for high school graduation, rather LEAs are responsible for setting their own graduation requirements. Two states, Montana and Nebraska, allow IEP teams to establish the requirements. Connecticut reported that it is in transition from having LEAs determine graduation requirements to having the state set these requirements.

The 2002 survey conducted by Johnson and Thurlow (2003) noted that 31 states provide minimum requirements with LEAs having the option to add to them, whereas the present survey notes 34 such states. Additionally, in the present survey eight states set minimum requirements and LEAs may *not* add to them, up from five states in 2002. The 2002 survey also noted more variation overall in who sets graduation requirements. In the present survey only one state reported having no state minimum requirements while the 2002 survey reported six states as not having minimum requirements. These changes suggest increasing codification of graduation policies at the state level.

Increase in Graduation Requirements

In the present survey, states were asked whether there had been an increase in graduation requirements to receive a standard diploma in the past three years. Table 2 shows that 28 states increased their graduation requirements to receive a standard diploma for both students with and without disabilities. Idaho and Illinois increased the requirements only for students without disabilities; Kentucky is the only state that has increased the requirements for students with disabilities. Seventeen states have not increased the graduation requirements for any students.

Table 1. High School Graduation Requirements for Youth with Disabilities

State	State Provides Minimum Requirements and LEAs (local districts) May Add to Them	State Requirements Must be Followed and LEAs Cannot Add to Them	State Provides Guidelines and LEAs May Set Their Own Requirements	No State Requirements Exist—LEAs Set Their Own Requirements	No State Requirements Exist—Requirements Are Established by IEP Teams	State is in Transition From Local to Statewide Assessments	No Response
Alabama	●						
Alaska	●						
Arizona	●						
Arkansas	●						
California	●						
Colorado				●			
Connecticut						●	
Delaware	●						
District of Columbia		●					
Florida	●						
Georgia	●						
Hawaii		●					
Idaho	●						
Illinois			●				
Indiana	●						
Iowa			●				
Kansas	●						
Kentucky	●						
Louisiana		●					
Maine	●						
Maryland	●						
Massachusetts	●						
Michigan	●						
Minnesota	●						
Mississippi	●						
Missouri	●						
Montana					●		
Nebraska					●		
Nevada	●						
New Hampshire		●					
New Jersey	●						
New Mexico	●						

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

State	State Provides Minimum Requirements and LEAs (local districts) May Add to Them	State Requirements Must be Followed and LEAs Cannot Add to Them	State Provides Guidelines and LEAs May Set Their Own Requirements	No State Requirements Exist—LEAs Set Their Own Requirements	No State Requirements Exist—Requirements Are Established by IEP Teams	State is in Transition From Local to Statewide Assessments	No Response
New York	●						
North Carolina							●
North Dakota	●						
Ohio	●						
Oklahoma	●						
Oregon	●						
Pennsylvania	●						
Rhode Island			●				
South Carolina		●					
South Dakota	●						
Tennessee		●					
Texas	●						
Utah	●						
Vermont			●				
Virginia		●					
Washington	●						
West Virginia		●					
Wisconsin	●						
Wyoming	●						
Total	**34**	**8**	**4**	**1**	**2**	**1**	**1**

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

State	No	Yes, Just for Students with Disabilities	Yes, Just for Students Without Disabilities	Yes, for Both Students with and Without Disabilities	Change
Alabama				●	
Alaska	●				
Arizona				●	
Arkansas				●	
California				●	
Colorado	●				
Connecticut				●	
Delaware				●	
District of Columbia				●	
Florida	●				
Georgia	●				
Hawaii				●	
Idaho			●		
Illinois			●		
Indiana				●	
Iowa	●				
Kansas				●	
Kentucky		●			
Louisiana	●				
Maine				●	
Maryland				●	
Massachusetts	●				
Michigan				●	
Minnesota				●	
Mississippi	●				
Missouri				●	
Montana	●				
Nebraska	●				
Nevada					●a
New Hampshire				●	
New Jersey	●				
New Mexico				●	
New York				●	
North Carolina					●b
North Dakota				●	

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

State	No	Yes, Just for Students with Disabilities	Yes, Just for Students Without Disabilities	Yes, for Both Students with and Without Disabilities	Change
Ohio					●[c]
Oklahoma	●				
Oregon				●	
Pennsylvania				●	
Rhode Island				●	
South Carolina	●				
South Dakota				●	
Tennessee	●				
Texas				●	
Utah	●				
Vermont	●				
Virginia	●				
Washington				●	
West Virginia				●	
Wisconsin				●	
Wyoming				●	
Total	**17**	**1**	**2**	**28**	**3**

[a] Nevada has a high stakes exit exam that has increased in rigor.

[b] North Carolina's State Board of Education has increased graduation requirements beginning with the entering high school class of 2006-2007.Students will be required to pass 5 End-of-Course Tests in the following subjects: English I, Algebra I, Biology, Civics/Economics and US History. Students will also be required to complete a graduation project.

[c] Graduation credits and Ohio graduation test.

Diploma Options

Table 3 illustrates the range of diploma options for high school graduates with disabilities across the 50 states and District of Columbia. The differentiated diploma options include honors diplomas, regular/standard diplomas, IEP/special education diplomas, certificates of attendance, certificates of achievement, occupational diplomas, and other variations. All 51 respondents reported that they offered a standard or regular diploma for students with and without disabilities. Of these, 16 states offered honors diplomas, 6 states offered IEP/special education diplomas, 19 states granted certificates of attendance, 10 states granted certificates of achievement, 3 states offered occupational diplomas, and 10 states provided variations of these diploma options.

Eighteen states offer only the single diploma option, the regular/standard diploma, to both students with and without disabilities. Thirty-three of the respondents offered multiple diploma options to their high school graduates. The highest in total number of diploma options is Oregon, reporting five different diploma options. Nine states reported four options and 10 states reported offering three options.

In response to a variety of state and local interests, states are clearly experimenting with alternative diploma options. The general trend since the previous survey (Johnson & Thurlow, 2003) was conducted has been for states to decrease some of their diploma options (such as IEP diplomas) and to increase other diploma options (such as Honors diplomas). A good example of the trend to fewer options is Nebraska, which, in the previous survey, offered seven diploma options. Nebraska now offers three options. Also note that in the previous survey, 13 states offered only the single diploma option, the regular/standard diploma, to students with and without disabilities, whereas in this survey, the number of states with only one option has increased to 18.

Table 3. High School Graduation Diplomas Available for Youth with Disabilities

State	Honors Diploma	Regular/ Standard Diploma	IEP/Special Education Diploma	Certificate of Attendance	Certificate of Achievement	Occupational/ Vocational Diploma	Other
Alabama	●	●			●	●	
Alaska		●					
Arizona		●					
Arkansas	●	●					
California		●		●	●		
Colorado		●		●			
Connecticut	●	●		●	●		
Delaware	●	●		●			
District of Columbia		●		●	●		
Florida		●	●	●			
Georgia		●	●	●		●	
Hawaii	●	●		●			
Idaho		●					●a
Illinois		●		●	●		
Indiana	●	●		●	●		
Iowa	●	●		●	●		
Kansas		●					●b
Kentucky	●	●		●			●c
Louisiana		●			●		
Maine		●					
Maryland		●					

Table 3. High School Graduation Diplomas Available for Youth with Disabilities (continued)

State	Honors Diploma	Regular/ Standard Diploma	IEP/Special Education Diploma	Certificate of Attendance	Certificate of Achievement	Occupational/ Vocational Diploma	Other
Massachusetts		●					●d
Michigan		●					
Minnesota		●					
Mississippi		●		●		●	
Missouri		●		●			
Montana	●	●					●e
Nebraska		●		●	●		
Nevada	●	●	●	●			
New Hampshire		●					
New Jersey		●					
New Mexico		●					
New York	●	●	●				
North Carolina		●					
North Dakota		●					
Ohio	●	●					
Oklahoma		●					
Oregon	●	●		●	●		●e
Pennsylvania		●					
Rhode Island		●					
South Carolina		●					
South Dakota		●					
Tennessee	●	●	●	●			
Texas	●	●					
Utah		●					●f
Vermont		●					
Virginia	●	●	●				●g
Washington		●					
West Virginia		●					●a
Wisconsin		●					●h
Wyoming		●		●			
Total	**16**	**51**	**6**	**19**	**10**	**3**	**10**

[a] Diplomas/certificates developed by LEAs (Idaho, West Virginia)

[b] Local certificates of attendance, not state endorsed (Kansas)

[c] Occupational coursework (Kentucky)

[d] Certificates made available by local communities, though such certificates do not equate to a H.S. diploma (Massachusetts)

[e] Modified diplomas but not specifying "special education." (Montana, Oregon)

[f] Certificate of Completion available to students who have not completed all graduation requirements, as mandated by statute (Utah)

[g] Certificate of Program Completion (Virginia)

[h] Other available diplomas as dictated by local school board policy (Wisconsin)

Allowances Made for Youth with Disabilities to Receive a Standard Diploma

States vary in the allowances they make for youth with disabilities to receive a standard diploma. Variations include making no allowances and holding all students to the same standards, reducing the number of credits that a student needs, making available alternate courses that can be used to earn required course-credits, lowering performance criteria, permitting the IEP team to make allowances, granting extensions, and other alternatives. Table 4 reports on state practices in making allowances for youth with disabilities to receive a standard diploma. Some states, such as Iowa, Nebraska, and Washington reported wide diversity in options extended to students with disabilities. As shown in Table 4, the most common state allowance made for students with disabilities (32 states) is to permit the IEP team to address the issue.

Twenty-two states reported that they grant extensions and 21 states reported that they allow the use of alternate courses to earn required course credits. Three states (Indiana, Mississippi, and New Hampshire) make no allowances for students with disabilities and hold all students to the same graduation requirements. Other states have opted to reduce the total number of credits required (5 states) or lower performance criteria (10 states) for students with disabilities.

The data evidences a trend toward fewer options. In the previous survey (Johnson & Thurlow, 2003) 30 states reported using "other" allowances; however that number is down to 9 states in this survey. The 2002 survey noted that 13 states allowed the IEP team to address the issue of modifications or changes, whereas this present survey reports that 32 states do. Additionally, though the list is smaller, it reflects different policies labeled as "other" than the last survey noted.

The previous survey also noted that five states (Louisiana, Mississippi, New York, Ohio, and West Virginia) and the District of Columbia allowed no exceptions to graduation requirements for students with disabilities, while the present survey found that only three states (Indiana, Mississippi, and New Hampshire) make no allowances for students with disabilities, with Mississippi the only state from the previous survey continuing with that policy. This again reflects the changing environment for high school graduation policies. The reader should also note that some differences may have resulted from how the two surveys asked the question about allowances. Drawing on the findings from 2002, the present survey provided more options for respondents.

Table 4. Allowances Made for Youth with Disabilities to Receive Standard Diploma

State	None	Number of Credits May be Reduced	Alternate Courses Can be Used to Earn Required Course Credits	Perform-ance Criteria May be Lowered	Addressed Individually in IEP (e.g., different coursework criteria set for individual)	Extensions are Granted (e.g., more time is given to complete required standards)	Other
Alabama							Exception Rule that allows students with disabilities to be awarded the standard diploma if they meet the requirements identified in the rule
Alaska					●		
Arizona			●	●	●	●	
Arkansas			●		●	●	
California					●		
Colorado			●	●	●		
Connecticut					●		
Delaware						●	
District of Columbia					●	●	
Florida							Exit exam waiver
Georgia						●	
Hawaii						●	
Idaho					●	●	
Illinois		●			●		
Indiana	●						
Iowa		●	●	●	●	●	
Kansas			●	●	●	●	
Kentucky							Alternate courses
Louisiana							A waiver for one component of the exit exam if related to the disability and if the student took the Graduation Exit Exam (GEE) every time it was available
Maine			●		●	●	
Maryland					●	●	
Massachusetts							Appeals option available to all students, including students with disabilities, to defend their performance

Table 4. Allowances Made for Youth with Disabilities to Receive Standard Diploma (continued)

State	None	Number of Credits May be Reduced	Alternate Courses Can be Used to Earn Required Course Credits	Perform-ance Criteria May be Lowered	Addressed Individually in IEP (e.g., different coursework criteria set for individual)	Extensions are Granted (e.g., more time is given to complete required standards)	Other
Michigan							Personal curriculum option for all students
Minnesota					●		
Mississippi	●						
Missouri					●		
Montana			●		●	●	
Nebraska		●	●	●	●	●	
Nevada					●		
New Hampshire	●						
New Jersey					●		
New Mexico			●				
New York							Alternate tests used to meet testing requirements
North Carolina						●	Extensive test accommodations for students
North Dakota			●	●	●		
Ohio					●		
Oklahoma			●		●	●	
Oregon						●	
Pennsylvania		●	●		●	●	
Rhode Island					●		
South Carolina			●			●	
South Dakota			●	●	●		
Tennessee					●		
Texas			●		●		
Utah			●		●	●	
Vermont			●	●	●		
Virginia						●	
Washington		●	●	●	●	●	
West Virginia			●				
Wisconsin			●		●		Competency in lieu of Carnegie units
Wyoming			●	●	●	●	
Total	**3**	**5**	**21**	**10**	**32**	**22**	**9**

Involvement of Community Stakeholders

Respondents were requested to provide information about the involvement of community stakeholders in discussions and decisions about the use of alternative diplomas. As states and LEAs adopt alternative diplomas, a pressing question is how different diplomas are valued by key community stakeholders. Postsecondary education institutions and employers represent two critical groups of stakeholders, and their views and perspectives about alternative diploma options need to be considered. The issue is whether graduating from high school with a standard diploma, alternative diploma, or certificate grants students access to postsecondary education programs and future meaningful employment. Table 5 identifies states that involve community stakeholders in discussions concerning alternative diplomas. Few states currently involve either postsecondary education representatives or employers in such discussions. As shown in Table 5, for those states responding, nine states currently involve postsecondary education institutions and seven states involve the business community. Seven states (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, and Nevada) indicated that they include both postsecondary education and business community representatives in a dialogue on alternative diploma options. Involving both of these stakeholder groups helps to ensure that these alternative diploma options are understood in terms of their meaning and rigor in relation to the standard diploma.

Table 5. Involvement of Community Stakeholders in Discussions

State	State Involved Postsecondary Institutions		State Involved Business Community		No Response/ NA
	Yes	No	Yes	No	
Alabama	●		●		
Alaska					●
Arizona					●
Arkansas					●
California		●		●	
Colorado					●
Connecticut		●		●	
Delaware					●
District of Columbia		●		●	
Florida	●		●		
Georgia	●		●		
Hawaii		●		●	
Idaho					●
Illinois					●
Indiana					●
Iowa		●		●	
Kansas					●

Table 5. Involvement of Community Stakeholders in Discussions (continued)

State	State Involved Postsecondary Institutions		State Involved Business Community		No Response/ NA
	Yes	No	Yes	No	
Kentucky	●		●		
Louisiana					●
Maine					●
Maryland	●		●		
Massachusetts					●
Michigan					●
Minnesota					●
Mississippi	●		●		
Missouri		●		●	
Montana					●
Nebraska					●
Nevada	●		●		
New Hampshire					●
New Jersey					●
New Mexico					●
New York					●
North Carolina					●
North Dakota					●
Ohio					●
Oklahoma					●
Oregon	●			●	
Pennsylvania					●
Rhode Island					●
South Carolina					●
South Dakota					●
Tennessee		●		●	
Texas					●
Utah					●
Vermont					●
Virginia	●			●	
Washington		●		●	
West Virginia					●
Wisconsin					●
Wyoming		●		●	
Total	**9**	**9**	**7**	**11**	**33**

These numbers do not evidence major change from the previous survey, which found that eight states involved post-secondary representatives, seven involved the business community, and six involved both. Additionally the number of non-responses suggest that respondents, in many cases, may not know about involvement of community representatives as such involvement is often behind the scenes (Mazzoni, 1995).

State Use of Exit Exams—"High-Stakes" Testing

As noted earlier in this report, exit exams are not a new idea. During the 1970s and 80s, a number of states adopted policies and implemented minimum competency tests to ensure that students graduate from high school with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in postsecondary education programs, employment, and as citizens. The No Child Left Behind Act and the standards-based reform movement have revitalized discussions concerning the use of exit exams as a means of benchmarking student performance and as a means for receiving a high school diploma. The term "high-stakes testing" has been associated with the use of these exit exams. When the stakes are high for students, such as having the receipt of a high school diploma contingent on passing certain exit exams, the term "high-stakes testing" applies.

Several questions were posed to state special education directors about their states' use of exit exams. As shown in Table 6, respondents indicated that 21 states require youth with and without disabilities to pass an exit exam to receive a high school diploma, and 3 states require only those youth without disabilities to pass their exit exams to receive a high school diploma; overall 24 states have exit exams. Twenty-seven states (including the District of Columbia) do not have exit exams. This is a change from the 2002 survey when Johnson and Thurlow (2003) reported that 27 states required students with disabilities to pass an exit exam to graduate.

Previous to the 2003 study, Thurlow et al. (1995) identified 16 states where exit exams were linked to the student's receipt of a diploma, and Guy et al. (1999) found 20 states with these policies. These findings are generally consistent with other national studies that have examined states' use of graduation tests as a condition of receiving the standard diploma. In 1997, the National Research Council identified 16 states using exit exams, and 18 states in 1998 (Heubert & Hauser, 1999). In other studies, Olson et al. (2001) identified 20 states requiring students to pass exit exams as a requirement for receiving a high school diploma, and the Center on Education Policy (2006) reported that 22 states required students to pass an exit exam to receive a diploma in 2006, with 25 states expected to have these exams in place by 2012. Discrepancies in numbers reported by different sources are sometimes due to different interpretations of what an "exit exam" is or to differences in the date of implementation considered (for example, the graduation class versus legislation of the requirement).

Scores for passing the exit exams are determined by the states in all instances where they are administered. Also indicated in Table 6 is the graduating class year first held to the exit exam requirement. Of the 24 states, a majority (21) currently have their exit examinations underway for graduating seniors. The remaining three states plan to implement their tests in the near future (2008-2010). Some of these states, however, previously had exams in place, but have new exams that will affect future classes.

Table 6. States Requiring Youth to Pass a State Exit Exam in Order to Receive High School Diploma

State	No	Yes, Just for Students with Disabilities	Yes, Just for Students Without Disabilities	Yes, for Both Students with and Without Disabilities	Graduating Class Year[a]
Alabama				●	2001
Alaska				●	2004
Arizona			●		2006
Arkansas	●				
California				●	2006[b]
Colorado	●				
Connecticut	●				
Delaware	●				
District of Columbia	●				
Florida				●	2003
Georgia				●	1994
Hawaii	●				
Idaho			●		2006
Illinois	●				
Indiana				●	2000
Iowa	●				
Kansas	●				
Kentucky	●				
Louisiana				●	2003
Maine	●				
Maryland				●	2009
Massachusetts				●	2003
Michigan	●				
Minnesota				●	2010
Mississippi				●	2006
Missouri	●				

Table 6. States Requiring Youth to Pass a State Exit Exam in Order to Receive High School Diploma (continued)

State	No	Yes, Just for Students with Disabilities	Yes, Just for Students Without Disabilities	Yes, for Both Students with and Without Disabilities	Graduating Class Year[a]
Montana	●				
Nebraska	●				
Nevada				●	2003
New Hampshire	●				
New Jersey				●	2003
New Mexico				●	1990
New York				●	2000[b]
North Carolina				●	1982 (M/R) 2001 (Computer Skills)
North Dakota	●				
Ohio				●	2007
Oklahoma[c]	●				
Oregon	●				
Pennsylvania	●				
Rhode Island	●				
South Carolina				●	2006
South Dakota	●				
Tennessee				●	2005
Texas			●		2005
Utah	●				
Vermont	●				
Virginia				●	2004
Washington				●	2008
West Virginia	●				
Wisconsin	●				
Wyoming	●				
Total	**27**	**0**	**3**	**21**	

[a] Graduating year is based on information from Center for Education Policy (2006).

[b] Graduating class for students with disabilities is later in these states (CA: 2008 rather than 2006; NY 2010 rather than 2000).

[c] Oklahoma will have exit exams starting with 9th grade students in 2008-09, graduating in 2012. IEP students will be exempt **unless** taking part is required by their IEP.

Table 7 reports the graduation examination policies and practices by state for high school youth with and without disabilities. Eighteen states require the same passing score for students with and without disabilities. In Minnesota, New Mexico, New York, and Washington, the same test is given to both groups but different passing scores are permitted. Arizona, Idaho, New York, and Washington give different tests to different groups of students.

Table 7: Passing Scores on High School Exit Exam by States With Exit Exams

State	The Same Test and Same Passing Scores are Used for Students With and Without Disabilities	The Same Test is Used for Both Groups, but Different Passing Scores are Permitted	Different Tests and Different Scores are Used with Each Group
Alabama	■		
Alaska	■		
Arizona	■		■
California	■		
Florida	■		
Georgia	■		
Idaho	■		■
Louisiana	■		
Maryland	■		
Minnesota		■	
Mississippi	■		
Nevada	■		
New Mexico	■	■	
New York		■	■
North Carolina	■		
Ohio	■		
South Carolina	■		
Texas	■		
Virginia	■		
Washington	■	■	■
Total	**18**	**4**	**4**

One trend noted is the back and forth change in states offering different examination policies. In their study of state policies and practices in 1998, Guy et al. (1999) found that only 12 of 20 states with exams held students with and without disabilities to the same tests and passing scores. In the 2002 survey (Johnson & Thurlow, 2003), 23 states held students to the same testing standards, and only one state used different passing scores, and two offered different tests and

passing score options. The findings from the present survey show a slight increase in states using different passing scores (4) and offering different tests and passing score options (4). Note that Arizona, Idaho, New York, and Washington have marked two or more of the columns in Table 7. Respondents were permitted to "check all that apply" which resulted in overlap in findings.

Table 8, which lists only states with exams linked to graduation, identifies the range and variation of options extended to youth if they fail exit exams. These include: retaking the test, using another procedure (e.g., portfolio, special coursework, special exam) to meet the requirement, petitioning for an exemption while still receiving a diploma, and taking an alternate, equivalent form of the exam. Of the 24 states with exit exams that responded to this question, 18 respondents indicated that the states allowed students to retake the test, 4 respondents indicated that the states offer an alternate form of the exam, and 5 respondents indicated that states allow students to petition for an exemption and still receive a diploma. Two states, Alaska and Idaho, allow students to use another procedure to meet the requirement.

The 2002 survey (Johnson & Thurlow, 2003) listed more options for students with disabilities who fail the exam. At that time several states were allowing LEAs to determine policies and practices concerning these options, and other states were in the process of discussing modifications of these options for students both with and without disabilities. Based on the 2002 survey, we were able to limit the options to four primary choices as shown in Table 8. States may be using additional options, but Table 8 reflects the primary ones.

Table 9 provides information on whether the use of accommodations has increased for students with disabilities taking state exit exams. Fourteen states reported an increase in the use of accommodations, while three reported no increase.

Table 10 lists those states that maintain records of how youth with disabilities perform on exams that must be passed to graduate. Of the 24 states with state exit exams, 19 maintain records of the performance of students taking the exam and 8 keep records by disability category. As shown in Table 11, 17 states maintain records for students with disabilities and 2 report by disability category.

Table 8: Options for Youth with Disabilities if They Fail the Exam

State	Alternate/ Equivalent Exam	Other Procedure to Meet the Requirement	Petition for Exemption, Allowed	Retake Same Exam	Number of Retakes Allowed in a Given Year
Alabama				●	The student takes the test for the first time in the 10th grade in spring, administration of the 11th grade for state accountability and again in the 12th.
Alaska		●			
Arizona				●	Twice
California				●	Three times each year
Florida			●		
Georgia			●	●	A total of five times with remedial instruction provided by the local school district
Idaho		●	●	●	Once
Indiana				●	No response
Louisiana			●	●	Exemption allowed only for one part of the test, special education only
Maryland				●	As many times as necessary when offered (three times per year)
Massachusetts	●		●	●	No response
Minnesota	●			●	Once per year
Mississippi				●	Three times
Nevada					
New Jersey	●			●	No response
New Mexico				●	Once except during 12th grade they may take it twice
New York				●	Tests are administered three times a year.
North Carolina				●	Twice per year
Ohio				●	Two to three times
South Carolina					
Tennessee					
Texas				●	Three times
Virginia				●	At least three times
Washington	●				
Total	**4**	**2**	**5**	**18**	

Table 9. Increases in Use of Accommodations

State	Yes, Accommodations Have Increased	No Increase
Alabama	●	
Alaska	●	
Arizona	●	
California	●	
Florida		●
Georgia	●	
Idaho	●	
Maryland	●	
Minnesota		●
Mississippi	●	
Nevada	●	
New Mexico		●
North Carolina	●	
Ohio	●	
South Carolina	●	
Texas	●	
Washington	●	
Total	**14**	**3**

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

State	Where Exam Performance is Recorded	Records on How Youth with Disabilities Perform on Exams That Must be Passed	Records Available by Disability Category
Alabama	The results of the exam are compiled by Student Assessment and the results are provided to each local education agency.	Y*	Y
Alaska	Alaska High School Graduation Qualifying Exam	Y*	Y
Arizona	State Performance Plan and Annual Performance Reports and on the ADE Web site	Y*	N
California	The performance of students with disabilities is recorded on the Internet. The specific site is called DataQuest.	Y*	N
Florida	http://www.fcatresults.com/demog/	Y*	Y

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

State	Where Exam Performance is Recorded	Records on How Youth with Disabilities Perform on Exams That Must be Passed	Records Available by Disability Category
Georgia	Office of School Achievement Report Card State Department of Education Report Card Division for Exceptional Students Data Report	Y*	Y
Idaho	No response	Y*	N
Louisiana	No response	Y	No response
Maryland	Student Record Card; State Report Card (aggregate)	Y*	N
Minnesota	Transcript, district report card and state Web site	Y*	Y
Mississippi	No response	Y	N
Nevada	State Accountability Report	Y*	N
New Mexico	Information can be found on the NM Public Education Departments Web site in a variety of places.	Y*	N
New York	School Report Card, SPP reporting for high school ELA and math	Y*	N
North Carolina	All testing data is reported in the document The North Carolina Testing Report: The Green Book. It is also available on the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction Web site.	Y*	Y
Ohio	EMIS	Y*	Y
South Carolina	No response	Y	N
Texas	AEIS	Y*	N
Virginia	Test document	Y*	Y
Washington	No response	N	
Total (Y)		**19**	**8**
Total (N)		**1**	**10**

Note: Four states with exit exams did not respond to this question (Indiana, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Tennessee).

Table 11. Does the State Keep Records of the Number of Students Taking the Exit Exam?

State	Where Numbers of Students Taking the Exit Exam are Reported	Records Available for Students with Disabilities	Records Available by Disability Category
Alabama	The numbers are reported in the Alabama Annual Performance Report.	Y	N
Alaska	http://www.eed.state.ak.us/tls/assessment/results.html	Y	N
Arizona	On our Web site. Note: the test is a state test administered by the school in which the student is enrolled.	Y	N
California	These numbers are reported to the State and reported on the Internet.	Y	N
Florida	http://www.fcatresults.com/demog/	Y	Y
Georgia	Office of School Achievement Report Cards State Department of Education Report Card	Y	N
Idaho	The statewide assessment developed to meet the requirements of NCLB is used to assess student's level of proficiency at the 10th grade. Students must demonstrate proficiency of the Idaho Achievement Standards at the 10th grade level prior to graduation and a receipt of a regular diploma.	Y	N
Louisiana	No response	No response	No response
Maryland	State Report Card; Student Record Card	Y	N
Minnesota	State Web site	Y	N
Mississippi	No response	Y	N
Nevada	State Accountability Report (available on our Web site at www.doe.nv.gov)	Y	N
New Mexico	District report cards and the mean statewide scale scores disaggregated for spring 2005 are located at the following URL http://www.ped.state.nm.us/div/acc.assess/assess/NMHSCE_released_items_2005.html.	Y	N
New York	School Report Card, State Performance Plan (SPP) reporting for high school ELA and mathematics.	Y	N
North Carolina	All testing data is reported in the document The North Carolina Testing Report: The Green Book. It is also available on the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction Web site.	Y	Y
Ohio	State Education Management System (EMIS)	No response	No response
South Carolina	On our state Web site, myscschools.com	Y	N

Table 11. Does the State Keep Records of the Number of Students Taking the Exit Exam? (continued)

State	Where Numbers of Students Taking the Exit Exam are Reported	Records Available for Students with Disabilities	Records Available by Disability Category
Tennessee	State Report Card	No response	No response
Texas	Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) on the TEA Web site	Y	N
Washington	State Web site	Y	N
Total (Y)		**17**	**2**
Total (N)		**0**	**15**

Intended and Unintended Consequences of State Graduation Requirements and Diploma Options

As noted throughout this report, the range and variation in state graduation requirement policies and practices and the use of diploma options is extensive. Perceived intended and unintended consequences of state graduation requirements and use of alternative diploma options for youth with disabilities were also examined in this national survey. State education agency personnel were requested to respond to several questions on the intended and unintended consequences of: (a) requiring students with disabilities to pass exit exams to receive a standard diploma, (b) use of single diploma options, and (c) use of multiple diploma options. In this section of the survey, respondents were given a list of statements derived from findings of past surveys and asked to check all that applied to their state. The following summarizes state responses in relation to these policies and practices.

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

Intended Consequences

- More students with disabilities participate in the general education curriculum and achieve results (17 states);
- Preparation for adult life and future independence is improved by accessing postsecondary education and employment (15 states); and

- Differences between general education and special education students are reduced – all students are held to the same standards, are required to pass the same exams, and receive the same diploma (12 states).

Unintended Consequences

- Some students with disabilities will fail to receive a diploma (12 states);
- Higher dropout rates may result (13 states);
- Student self-esteem is lowered by repeated failures on exit exams (14 states);
- Dissatisfaction and conflicts with parents sometimes result (15 states);
- Some students may need to remain in school longer to meet the requirements of the standard diploma (16 states); and
- States and local school districts are forced to create alternative diplomas and pathways to ensure that students exit with some form of a high school credential (3 states).

Consequences of a Single Diploma Option on Students with Disabilities

Intended Consequences

- High expectations for all students, including students with disabilities, are maintained (28 states);
- More students with disabilities earn a standard diploma (25 states);
- Having a single diploma option helps build consistency regarding the meaning of the requirements associated with the diploma – all students work on the same state standards (25 states);
- The single option creates an important sense of equity – all students are extended the same options, tested on the same standards, and viewed by school personnel, as well as community members, as equally participating (20 states); and
- The single option provides future employers and postsecondary education institutions a clearer and more detailed record of the student's performance (15 states).

Unintended Consequences

- The numbers of special education students remaining in school up through age 21 may be increased because they cannot meet all of the requirements for the standard diploma earlier (21 states);
- The dropout rate may be increased if students who cannot meet high standards or who cannot pass statewide tests opt to drop out (18 states)
- As graduation requirements increase, fewer students (both general education and special education) actually receive the standard diploma (15 states);
- The standard diploma may become perceived as too general and watered down (7 states); and
- In order to help students with disabilities to meet the requirements for a standard diploma, states may be lowering their overall standards for general education students (3 states).

Consequences of Multiple Diploma Options on Students with Disabilities

Intended Consequences

- Numbers of students within a state receiving some form of a high school diploma are increased (12 states);
- Local school districts have more flexibility in determining the manner of student exit (12 states);
- Creating options that are viewed as motivating and engaging for students with disabilities reduces the dropout rate (11 states);
- The ability to recognize students (typically general education students) for high performance in relation to honors diplomas is increased (9 states); and
- A state is better able to maintain "high" academic standards for its regular or standard diploma when alternative diploma options are available (4 states).

Unintended Consequences

- Alternative diploma options are viewed as substandard (12 states);

- Communicating different options to parents and students is problematic (10 states);
- There is a perception that the use of multiple diplomas will result in developing "special" tracks for students to follow (9 states);
- Gauging the meaning of different diploma options in terms of students' skills and abilities is confusing for employers (8 states);
- IEP teams fail to hold students with disabilities accountable to pass high-school exit exams—expectations are lowered for some students with disabilities (8 states);
- Access to postsecondary education programs for students with diplomas other than the standard diploma are limited if the alternative diplomas are viewed as watered-down in content or of little meaning to postsecondary education admissions staff (7 states).

Discussion

For more than two decades, state and local education agencies have been evolving standards-based education reforms in response to growing public criticisms that students are exiting our high schools lacking the skills and knowledge required to be productive citizens. In response to this criticism, states have implemented graduation policies and requirements that call for raised academic standards for all students, state, and local district testing, development of exit exams linked to a student's eligibility for a diploma, and a focus on increasing student graduation rates. All of these strategies are intended to increase the student's level of learning and achievement essential to entering future adult roles. One strategy, high-stakes accountability, has come to dominate the educational landscape (Voke, 2002). High-stakes accountability involves rewarding or sanctioning students, teachers, and schools on the basis of changes in the student's test scores.

The notion of "educational accountability" is the centerpiece of the No Child Left Behind Act. This federal act requires that states test all students including students with disabilities annually in grades 3-8 and in high school in reading and math, and, in 2007-2008, in science in elementary, middle, and high school. Although the law does not require that high-stakes exit exams are tied to graduation, it does require extensive use of testing as a means of demonstrating educational accountability. Further, the act obligates schools and school districts to demonstrate that their students are making "adequate yearly progress" (AYP), as determined by average test scores and other measures. Failure to demonstrate achievement gains among all major racial, ethnic, disability, and income groups will be subject to various district and state interventions. High-

stakes accountability is, however, only one component of a larger standards-based strategy to improve student achievement.

Developing appropriate graduation policies and testing approaches for students with disabilities continues to be a challenge for states and local districts across the nation. The challenge has principally been one of how best to include these students within current and future educational accountability systems and policies, rather than establishing separate assessment practices. The requirement that students with disabilities participate in general education testing and accountability systems was specifically addressed within the IDEA Amendments of 1997. As a requirement of this federal legislation, states must document the number of students participating in the test, report on their performance, and develop alternate assessments for students unable to participate in existing state or district tests. The reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 underscores the importance of these requirements in relation to the No Child Left Behind Act.

Any attempt to document policies and practice is necessarily affected by the volatility of the topic. Although graduation requirements were at one time a fairly stable part of education policy, this is no longer the case. Perhaps since the report *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), the impetus to examine and alter graduation requirements has increased. And, though not specifically documented, the concern seems to have been heightened in the past decade with the Improving America's Schools Act and the No Child Left Behind Act, even though they do not specifically address graduation requirements. The No Child Left Behind Act does, however, require that graduation rate be one of the indicators for high school accountability and defines the graduation rate as including those students who receive a standard diploma within four years.

Attempts to document graduation requirements are going to be caught in the quickly changing context that surrounds the topic. Nevertheless, it is important to continue to document policies and practices at points in time. This national survey, replicating a similar 2002 survey, examined the status of state graduation policies and diploma options for youth with and without disabilities in 2006. These state policies were also examined in relation to their intended benefits as well as possible unintended, negative consequences. In the following sections, the results of this study are summarized and discussed, and several recommendations focused on current policies and practices are offered.

High-stakes testing and diploma options continue to challenge educators to include students with disabilities.

The challenge of developing appropriate graduation policies and testing approaches for students with disabilities has principally been one of how best to include these students within current and future educational accountability systems and policies. Nowhere is this challenge more important than it is in the realm of graduation requirements where we know that there

are significant negative outcomes for students with disabilities who do not earn a high school or equivalent diploma (e.g., Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Levine, & Garza, 2006). Even though graduation requirements are part of a quickly changing context, it is important to continue to document policies and practices at points in time. Comparing this national survey, which examined the status of state graduation policies and diploma options for youth with and without disabilities in 2006-2007, to our 2002 survey (Johnson & Thurlow, 2003), two major trends were identified.

Trend: The trend toward the use of "high-stakes" exit exams as a requirement for receiving a high school diploma has leveled off. The push to align exit exams with students' eligibility has remained steady since 2003. In the present study, 24 states required youth with and without disabilities to pass a state exit exam in order to receive a high school diploma. Although these numbers are an increase over those in the studies by Thurlow et al. (1995); Thurlow, Ysseldyke, & Reid (1997), which found 16 states where exit exams were linked to the student's receipt of a high school diploma, and Guy et al. (1999), which identified 20 states, they evidence a decrease from the Johnson and Thurlow 2003 study, which found 27 states requiring exit exams. As previously mentioned, a 2006 study by the Center on Education Policy noted that by 2012, 25 states expect to have exit exams in place, which is one fewer than it previously reported. Taken together, it appears that the use of exit exams may be leveling off.

There have been compelling arguments for and against high stakes testing (see, for example, Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Center on Education Policy, 2003). The requirements to include students with disabilities in state and local district assessments, including "high-stakes" testing, suggest that with accommodations, appropriate instruction, support, and collaboration with general education teachers, students with disabilities can meet high academic standards for graduation. Both sides of the debate offer arguments that raise important questions for schools and local districts to resolve. For example, what do schools need to consider about using exit exams as a criterion for receiving a high school diploma? What are the implications of state exit exams in relation to the use of alternative diploma options? How do we ensure that results on exit exams do not unnecessarily limit learning opportunities for students with disabilities? What other measures of student performance should be used in making critical decisions about a student's eligibility for receiving a standard diploma? These and other questions pose challenges, and must be answered to produce viable solutions for including students with disabilities in "high-stakes" assessments.

The urgent need to answer these questions is highlighted by the implication of the No Child Left Behind Act that only students who earn standard diplomas within four years count in the graduation rate required in high school AYP formulas. Although there may be some small adjustments in the definition for students with disabilities (see Forte and Erpenbach, 2006), the

extent to which the definition affects policy and potentially dropout rates among students with disabilities must be tracked over time.

Trend: A wide range of diploma options are available to students with and without disabilities. Over the past 15 years of the standards-based education movement, states have been experimenting with a wide range of high school diploma options for students with and without disabilities. The challenge for school leaders is how to address the diversity of student abilities and needs, and extend to these students a valued exit credential – the standard high school diploma (Dorn, 1996, 2003; Labaree, 1988). One past organizational response to this challenge was to create new categories of diplomas for students who fall short of meeting standard diploma requirements. With the emphasis on the standard diploma for NCLB accountability, the trend seems to be changing, and a downturn in the number of diploma options other than the honors diploma now seems to be occurring.

Still, this study identified a wide variety of diploma options that exist in states – clearly there is not one model that satisfies everyone. Twenty-one states offer only a single diploma option (or the standard diploma and honors diploma only), with the remaining states offering multiple options for youth with and without disabilities. Unfortunately, there is limited research on the value of certificates and alternate, non-standard diplomas in terms of a student's future opportunities for education and employment (DeStefano & Metzer, 1991; Guy et al., 1999; Heubert, 2002; Thurlow et al., 1995). Preliminary data from a study in New Mexico (Gaumer, 2003) indicated that most college admissions offices had not encountered or heard of the certificate of completion available to students with disabilities. In fact, junior colleges in the state, which had open admissions policies, indicated a willingness to admit students with certificates, but also noted that financial aid probably would not be available to them until they earned a General Educational Development (GED) diploma.

Though certificates are a relatively new option, some research is emerging that shows the effects of them on students with disabilities. Using data sets from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Gaumer-Erickson, Kleinhammer-Tramill, and Thurlow (2007) found that students with disabilities exited public education with non-traditional exit certificates significantly more often than the exiting population as a whole. Additionally, students with disabilities in states that use high stakes exit exams were more likely to receive exit certificates than their peers in non- exit exam states. These authors also noted that the figures on exit certificates for students with disabilities are increasing.

Gaumer-Erickson et al. (2007) also found a negative correlation between diploma rates and nontraditional exit certificate rates. Although policymakers argue that diploma options provide alternatives, these alternatives, in fact, may induce a negative incentive for graduating with the traditional high school diploma.

This latest survey confirms that states generally are proceeding with an array of alternative or differentiated diploma options that may or may not benefit students in relation to future post-high school opportunities for postsecondary education access and employment.

Recommendations

As illustrated within this study, as well as others cited in this report, the range and variation in state graduation requirements for students with and without disabilities is extensive. Changes in graduation policies and requirements are also occurring frequently across states. Further, many states continue to use the array of alternative or differentiated diplomas identified in the 2003 report (Johnson & Thurlow) in response to a variety of needs and pressures. The meaning and value of all these graduation requirements are, however, still not well understood. Although there is some evidence that states are rethinking "high stakes testing," it also continues to be an accountability strategy for ensuring that students graduate with a diploma that acknowledges what they have learned. These trends in state policies and practices are all moving forward without careful study or examination of their consequences for students, families, professionals, or school systems. Offered here are several recommendations that may help to guide state and local district decision-making when adopting state graduation requirements and alternative diploma options.

Clarify the assumptions underlying state graduation requirements and diploma options. It is important to ask what is required for students with disabilities to take high stakes assessments in a way that best reflects what they have learned – what they know and can do (Thurlow & Johnson, 2000), as well as to ask about the diploma options. Some of the questions that must be asked should focus on the appropriateness of the assessments for students with disabilities. Many of these tests were developed for students in general education, without much consideration for how well special education students would fare. Further, as these tests were developed, little attention was focused on how accommodations or alternative assessments would be used to support their participation. Controversy continues to surround the use of accommodations, as well as the use of alternative assessments.

Similarly, assumptions have been made about the adoption and use of alternative diploma options for students with disabilities. It is assumed that such options create the additional flexibility needed by certain subgroups of students to successfully earn an exit credential at the end of high school. Questions about the rationale, specific requirements, and criteria used for each of these diploma options, and who receives them, must be fully addressed. If the basic assumption is that it is beneficial for students with disabilities to participate in and be held accountable to the full

range of state graduation requirements and diploma options, then these policies and practices must be carefully scrutinized, with broad public input and evidence that proves their efficacy.

Ensure students with disabilities an opportunity to learn the material they will be tested on in state and local assessments. Ensuring students an "adequate opportunity to learn" the requisite knowledge and skills before participating in state and local district assessments is at the heart of the debate over testing policies and practices. These concerns have been shared by leading national organizations (AERA, APA, NCME, 1999). Many students with disabilities will need access to special services and supports to learn the material covered by the test. These supports will include effective instruction by highly qualified teachers and support services personnel, a curriculum that is aligned with state standards, accommodations (extra learning time, special teaching methods, others), and other resources and supports. For these students, instruction on material and content to be tested will likely need to occur within general education classrooms and is a shared responsibility among grades K-12 (Education Trust, 2003; Lehr et al., 2005).

Make high school graduation decisions based on multiple indicators of students' learning and skills. Requirements that states set for graduation can range from Carnegie unit requirements (a certain number of class credits earned in specific areas), to successfully passing a competency test, high school exit exams, or a series of benchmark exams. States may also require almost any combination of these to earn a high school diploma. Failure to meet minimum requirements in any one of these areas denies the student the opportunity to graduate with a standard diploma. Some states and districts have developed special testing provisions for students with disabilities. These include: use of accommodations during test situations, use of alternative assessments, and providing waivers or appeals processes (Krentz, Thurlow, Shyyan, & Scott., 2005; Thurlow & Esler, 2000), as well as use of multiple opportunities for retesting (which is available to all students). States are beginning to address the need for validity and fairness of reaching a graduation decision by not relying on a single measure of a student's test performance, which is viewed as inconsistent with what we know about effective and reasonable testing practices (AERA, APA, NCME, 1999; Haertel, 1999; Heubert & Hauser, 1999; Lewis, 2000).

Clarify the implications of developing and granting alternative diploma options for students with disabilities. The question here is whether receiving something other than a standard high school diploma limits a student's access to future postsecondary education, employment, and other adult life opportunities (Johnson, et al., 2002). There is little research on the value of alternative diplomas in terms of a student's future opportunities for education and employment (Gaumer, 2003; Heubert, 2002). State and local districts need to thoroughly discuss and reach consensus on the "meaning" and "rigor" of these alternative diplomas with, at a minimum, postsecondary education program representatives and employers. Students and families need to know whether graduating from high school with a document other than a standard diploma grants them access to postsecondary education programs. This issue is not the same as concerns about the mean-

ing of grade point averages or class ranks earned by students to meet postsecondary programs' enrollment criteria (regardless of disability) who have taken earlier classes or programs of study (Thurlow & Johnson, 2000). Employers also need to be consulted and engaged in discussions about the meaning of these alternative diplomas. If members of the business community are not engaged in discussions about plans to use in the array of alternative diplomas, they may view alternative diplomas as a convenient screening mechanism for new employees.

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

Conduct on-going research on the intended and unintended consequences of state graduation requirements and diploma options. There is a critical need to undertake research that examines the current and future implications of varied state graduation requirements and diploma options for students with disabilities. Several unintended negative consequences of such policies have been documented and reported in the past. High failure rates on state and local district assessments, potentially unnecessary grade-level retention of students, increased drop-out rates, students not receiving a standard diploma at the end of their high school education, and other difficulties have been identified. Despite the apparent potential for unintended consequences, there are also intended benefits to students and others. The impact of these policies on students and families, teachers and schools, and communities needs to be more fully understood as state and local districts proceed to implement graduation requirements and varied diploma options. Exploration of these has been initiated through work that asks for changes on observable events from the perspectives of general education teachers, special education teachers, and school psychologists (Christenson, Decker, Triezenberg, Ysseldyke, & Reschly, 2007). Further work based on independent observation of effects is needed.

Conclusion

The consequences and implications of graduation policies and practices for students with disabilities, particularly the use of tests to determine graduation status or type of diploma, are not well understood, and little research has been conducted to date to document their impact. The importance of promoting high expectations for all students by adopting evidence-based practices that help students with disabilities to successfully meet state graduation requirements is recognized as a national goal. The difficulties that students experience in passing state exit exams or meeting minimum criteria required for the receipt of a standard diploma should not result in lowered expectations, the narrowing of curricular or program options, or removal of the student from the general education curriculum.

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