



Transcript of NCSET Conference Call Presentation

Pathways to the Diploma

presented by:

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Mrs. Stenhjem: Thank you. Hi, everyone, and welcome to our teleconference call sponsored by the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition. My name is Pam Stenhjem and I am one of several associate directors at the Center. I coordinate the Youth and Family Network here and I will be the moderator for this teleconference call. The title of our call today is “Pathways to the Diploma” and our presenter is Sue Gronewold, an educational administrator for the Special Education Bureau of the New Mexico Public Education Department.

I am going to read a little bit from what we had on our Web site so you can understand what we will be talking about today, then go over a few logistics for the call, and then we will turn this over to our presenter. Here is an overview of the topic:

New Mexico defines the “pathway” as the planned program of study, designed to address the needs of individual students. Students receiving special education services are able to earn the standard high school diploma by following one of three pathways: standard (the regular high school program of study), and one of two alternative options: the career readiness pathway or the ability pathway. IEP teams may use a certificate with the follow-up plan of action in the form of an IEP when a student has completed high school and is on track for graduation but still has transition needs. The certificate with the follow-up plan of action entitles the student to participate in graduation activities, but does not end a student’s entitlement to a free and appropriate public education. Successful completion of the selected pathway earns the student a high school diploma and the right to participate equally in all graduation activities. Ms. Gronewold will explain each of these three pathways and their implications for students with disabilities.

Now, as far as logistics before we get started, I would just like to reiterate that our presentation begins with an approximately 45-minute presentation by our speaker and then we will take questions. Another announcement at this time is that the Division on Career Development and Transition (DCDT) will hold their conference this year (2005) in Albuquerque, New Mexico around October 20-22 and we probably will have information about that on the NCSET Web site at <http://www.ncset.org/> so

if you want more information on that, I am sure you can find it there. Now I am going to turn the call over to Ms. Gronewold and have her get us started.

Mrs. Gronewold: Hello, everyone. I am Sue Gronewold and I work for the New Mexico Public Education Department. In my presentation today I will provide background information on graduation issues in New Mexico, describe the three graduation options for students with disabilities, discuss each pathway’s graduation regulations and guidelines for implementation, and other related state and federal regulations connected to New Mexico’s graduation options for students with disabilities. You will be able to access the pathways technical assistance document and the PowerPoint at <http://www.ncset.org/>. The matrix on pages 22 and 23 of the technical assistance document provides a brief overview of the requirements for each of the three pathways and guidelines for using the certificate with a follow-up plan of action.

Mrs. Stenhjem: We have both documents on our Web site at <http://www.ncset.org/>. If you go to the Teleconference page, at the bottom of the page you will find a PowerPoint presentation as well as a link to their guidebook on this topic.

Mrs. Gronewold: New Mexico is one of many states with a high stakes graduation exam. However, New Mexico is the only state that provides graduation options for students with disabilities to earn a standard diploma. These options or pathways enable the IEP team to develop a program of study that is most conducive to preparing a student to achieve his/her postschool goals while maintaining the integrity of the high school diploma. Prior to the development of Pathways to the Diploma there were significant concerns surrounding the issuance of diplomas to students with disabilities.

Previous state regulations regarding IEP graduation read as follows: “Districts shall establish policies for awarding a diploma or certificate of completion in situations where students do not meet graduation requirements. In accordance with local policy, districts may award a diploma to a student receiving special education services upon completion of a planned course of study based upon IEP objectives in lieu of required criteria for a high school diploma. The student’s IEP team is re-

sponsible for recommending to the local board whether it is appropriate for the student to receive a high school diploma or certificate of completion.”

Some districts gave students with disabilities a certificate of completion if the student was in full-day special education classes, had good attendance, and achieved their IEP goals. Other districts awarded diplomas to students even though they had not completed their IEP goals or earned enough credits. In some cases, students with accommodations or assistive technology received certificates of completion even though they had met all the graduation requirements. The drop-out rate for students with disabilities was higher than students without disabilities. Finally, some local school boards were unwilling to approve the issuance of a high school diploma to students in special education programs after the student's successful completion of the goals and objectives outlined in the student's IEP. Basically, local school boards were overriding the decisions made by IEP teams.

In 1997, the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) received a complaint charging the New Mexico Public Education Department with discriminatory practices by allowing local school boards to override IEP team decisions in the area of awarding diplomas to students with disabilities. To address the inequities in graduation practices, the Public Education Department formed a task force that included advocates and parents, state-level consultants, regular and special educators, and other state agencies. I served on the task force representing district-level special educators. Our district served as a pilot district for the implementation of pathways. During year two, our dropout rate decreased and our graduation rate improved for students with disabilities. The goals of the task force were to bring consistency to graduation practices and procedures across the state, protect the integrity of the diploma, improve IEP team accountability, provide guidelines for curriculum development, and improve compliance with IDEA transition requirements. The diploma provides access to employment, training programs, military options, and higher education. We know that individuals who do not receive the diploma run the risk of becoming incarcerated and institutionalized.

The IEP team determines the most appropriate pathway based upon student needs and the impact of the disability. In the IEP, the team must document the rationale for selecting a particular pathway, and review and update goals and objectives annually. The IEP team is also responsible for verifying that the student achieved all program goals and objectives leading to graduation and the receipt of a high school diploma. Typically the

8th grade IEP team discusses graduation plans for the transition to high school and develops the multi-year program based on the student's strengths, needs, preferences, and postschool goals. These plans must be a part of the student's IEP. Students are able to earn their high school diploma by following one of three pathways.

The **standard pathway** is a program of study based upon meeting and surpassing all requirements for graduation as identified in the New Mexico Standards of Excellence, with or without reasonable modification of delivery and assessment method. The IEP team selects required courses and electives based on the student's postschool goals. If the IEP team chooses a pathway other than the standard, the team must provide documentation for selecting the career readiness or ability pathway.

The **career readiness pathway** is a program of study based upon meeting the State Board of Education's Career Readiness Standards with Benchmarks as defined in the IEP. The career readiness pathway takes into account the individual student's interest, career preference, and needs, and allows for the substitution of classes as appropriate. The IEP team must use the IEP to document mastery of the career readiness standards and benchmarks.

The **ability pathway** is a program of study based upon meeting or surpassing IEP goals and objectives and reference skill attainment at a student's ability level which may lead to meaningful employment. The IEP team designs the ability pathway to meet the student's needs. Typically, IEP teams develop the ability pathway for students with severe cognitive and/or physical disabilities or students with severe mental health challenges. The ability pathway varies from the standard high school graduation requirements.

Departures from the standard program of study for students with disabilities must be considered in the order listed. Any modified program of study may depart from the standard program only as far as necessary to meet the individual student's education needs as determined by the IEP team.

The receipt of a diploma terminates the service eligibility of students with disabilities. All diplomas awarded by a school district must be identical in appearance, content, and affect, except that symbols or notations may be added to individual diplomas to reflect official school honors or awards earned by students.

As I mentioned before, New Mexico is one of many states with a high stakes graduation exam. Prior to 2003, students on the career readiness and ability pathways were required to participate in all state and local district testing, meeting the requirements of IDEA. In 2003, the State Board of Education made changes to the pathways

regulations regarding the graduation exam. In addition to the previously mentioned requirements, students on the career readiness and ability pathways must take the current state graduation examination(s) and achieve a level of competency to be determined by the IEP team in order to earn a standard diploma. The current exit exam does not provide the IEP teams with enough information and using the results of the exam makes it difficult to determine the targeted proficiency level. We did contact and request guidance from the test company but they have not been able to provide us with information that would support IEP teams in making realistic decisions. New Mexico is in the process of replacing the current exam with a standards-based assessment which will provide specific information to assist IEP teams to establish realistic targeted proficiency scores.

At the exit IEP meeting for students graduating on the career readiness or ability pathways, IEP teams must confirm and document that the student has met all requirements for graduation. A building administrator must be a member of the team and sign specifically to verify and accept the completed graduation plan. IEP teams must also determine whether additional evaluations, reports, or documents are necessary to support a smooth and effective transition to postsecondary services for a student who will graduate on the career readiness or ability pathway. The school will arrange for such information to be provided at no cost to the student or his/her parents.

IEP teams may use a certificate with a follow-up plan of transition when a student has completed the high school portion of his/her education and is on track for graduation but continues to have transition needs that must be addressed by school staff and adult service providers together. The certificate with a follow-up plan allows the student to participate in graduation activities and continue to work toward obtaining the high school diploma. The certificate does not end the student's right to a FAPE. The student receives his/her diploma upon successful completion of the IEP goals and transition outcomes. The certificate of transition should not be confused with a certificate of completion. The certificate of completion is no longer used for students with disabilities in New Mexico.

The pathways regulations mirror IDEA 1997. Successful implementation requires IEP teams to be knowledgeable of the transition requirements of IDEA, the graduation requirements for all students, the pathways requirements, and the next step requirements. The next step requirements require all students in grades 8-11 to prepare an interim next step plan which sets forth the coursework for the grades remaining in high

school. This annual multi-year plan must be based on the student's postschool goals. Students in the 12th grade must complete a final next-step plan prior to graduation. This plan must show that the student is committed or intends to commit in the near future to a four-year college or university, a two-year college, a trade or vocational program, an internship or apprenticeship, military service, or a job. An IEP that meets all transition and procedural requirements of IDEA satisfies the next step requirement for students with disabilities.

Mrs. Stenhjem: Any questions?

Male speaker: I am from the state of Idaho and I am just curious in this pathway process through the years, how did DVR participate or how did you partner with them on some of this decision-making for some of the disabled students or did they?

Mrs. Gronewold: We did have representatives from DVR on the task force. Districts have worked with DVR with students on the career readiness pathway. An example would be DVR purchasing training materials and providing job placement related to the training materials; the school would be responsible for providing instruction using the training materials. We have had some discussion with the DVR Assistant Secretary of Education about the need to have counselors attending IEPs when decisions about changing pathways are being made.

Mrs. Ruddele: This is Karen from West Virginia, and I work with the Department of Education. My question is about students taking vocational educational courses. If you have a student who is focusing on a particular cluster, do you have to end the course program or end of problem test for that, and then what measures have you taken regarding how that student earns a certificate or even a credential in the field?

Mrs. Gronewold: The career readiness pathway is individualized to meet the needs of a student. The alternative courses could be on-the-job training, vocational courses offered by the district, or a combination of both. The career readiness pathway is the multi-year plan of the courses the student will take. If a student with a disability is in a district that provides options for students to focus on a particular cluster, the student would have the same opportunities as students without disabilities to earn a certificate or credential in a field.

Female Speaker: I have a question about dealing with the four graduate requirements and also with chances for students to graduate in four years. How did you deal with that?

Mrs. Gronewold: IEP teams are required to inform parents and students of consequences that may result from changing a student's pathway from the standard

path. Students on the career pathway must meet the district's minimum credit requirements. The credits will be a combination of both standard and alternative courses. Most of the students on the ability pathway are those who age out.

Graduation plans must be a part of all IEPs beginning in the 8th grade and there should be discussion about number of credits, passing the exit exam, and if the student is on target to graduate with his/her class.

Mrs. Parker: My name is Donna Parker from the Tennessee State Department of Education. Just to clarify, once the state has made the career readiness pathway and the ability pathway, are those departments identical to any other department and there is no reference to any alternative program?

Mrs. Gronewold: No, there is no reference—the diploma is the same. New Mexico's graduation regulation states that all diplomas must look the same, and the only distinguishing marks that can be on the diploma are for honor students.

Mrs. Stenhjem: More questions? Okay, it sounds like we are at the end of our call. Again I would like to thank our presenter, Sue Gronewold, for sharing such a great model with us and providing such useful information. We really appreciate your time and expertise, Sue.

Mrs. Gronewold: Thank you.

Mrs. Stenhjem: And we will have a transcript of this call on our Web site as soon as possible at <http://www.ncset.org/>. Our next teleconference call will be October 28 at 2:00 CST, the presenter will be Dr. Kris Webb of the University of North Florida, and she will be presenting on "Dare to Dream for Adults." I think that's it. Thank you being on the call, and have a great day everyone.

This teleconference was coordinated by the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition.

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