GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: ENSURING MEANINGFUL DIPLOMAS FOR ALL STUDENTS

The call to ensure that every student, including students with disabilities, graduates from high school well prepared for college and careers is acknowledged by policymakers, professionals and business leaders. The 21st century economy in the United States demands that labor market entrants possess the knowledge and skills necessary to advance the nation's economy on a global scale. Researchers have projected that 63 percent of all U.S. jobs by 2018 will require some postsecondary education and that 90 percent of new jobs in growing industries with high wages will require, at a minimum, some postsecondary education.[1] Ensuring that students with disabilities are college and career ready is a critically important yet challenging national goal. It requires that students be offered every opportunity to successfully complete high school, earn a diploma, access postsecondary education and secure a job with a family-sustaining wage that offers pathways to advancement.[2] It is critical that high school graduates, including students with disabilities, receive a diploma that means something — that they are prepared for postsecondary education and careers. All students deserve access to the academic skills they need so that they can make their own career decisions. They should not have those decisions made for them because they did not have the academic preparation they needed or, worse, left high school with a diploma believing they had been prepared.

The goal of college and career readiness for all high school graduates is the new norm throughout the nation…but not necessarily for students with disabilities. This situation effectively allows too many students with disabilities the opportunity to graduate without the preparation they need for life after high school.

Yet, the extent to which states require students to complete a college- and career-ready course of study for a high school diploma varies a great deal across the nation. Individual school districts have the flexibility to define more specific local course requirements using the state's requirements as a baseline, but states set the floor for what all students need to be ready for life after high school.

- Some states require all students to complete a college- and career-ready course of study.
- Others require that all students are initially placed into a college- and career-ready course of study but then allow students to modify the requirements and still receive a college- and career-ready diploma.
- Some states offer a standard diploma but allow students who complete a college- and career-ready course of study to receive an "advanced" diploma or endorsement.

- Other states do not have a college- and career-ready course of study option at all, although districts may require more than the state minimum course of study.

States follow different approaches in how they incorporate students with disabilities into these policies through accommodations, special pathways or diplomas — some of which lead to meaningful diplomas, and some of which do not.

It is critical that state policies and practices encourage students with disabilities to meet the college- and career-ready standards needed to attain the state's standard diploma – and that states align the standard diploma with college- and career-ready expectations. Achieve considers states' mathematics and English language arts high school graduation requirements to be at the college- and career-ready level if students are required to complete a curriculum aligned with state-adopted college- and career-ready standards in these subjects.[3] Readiness for college and career depends on more than the mastery of English language arts/literacy and mathematics content and skills, but these two content areas serve as a foundation for the study of other academic disciplines and contextualized learning. States often organize the course of study into course requirements, which may be satisfied in a variety of ways including through demonstration of competency. Course titles vary, but what matters most is the actual content and that all students take courses that deliver college- and career-ready standards. As of 2013, **less than half of all states** had adopted policies that align the state's standard diploma with college- and career-ready expectations.[4]

This policy brief was developed to provide guidance to state education policy leaders to support the goal of ensuring that students with disabilities leave school with meaningful diplomas.[5] First, it provides background to clarify the diverse characteristics of students with disabilities and present information on the high school and postsecondary attainment of these students. It then explores the policy landscape across states, looking at how diploma options, course requirements and exit exams affect students with disabilities. It concludes with recommendations to states about how to improve current approaches to high school graduation requirements for students with disabilities and promote the successful completion of these students with the knowledge and skills to be college and career ready.

COLLEGE- AND CAREER-READY DIPLOMAS

Mandatory: a diploma that specifies a college- and career-ready course of study that all students are required to complete. It does not offer "opt-out" provisions that allow students to receive a diploma having met requirements that do not reach the college- and career-ready level.

Default with minimum diploma opt-out: a diploma that specifies a college- and career-ready course of study that all students are required to complete but allows students with parents' permission to pursue a different state-defined diploma with a less demanding set of requirements.

Default with personal curriculum opt-out: a diploma that specifies a college- and career-ready course of study that all students are required to complete but allows students with parents' permission to modify (i.e., lessen) the requirements — typically in mathematics — on an individual basis and still earn the same diploma.

Students with Disabilities: Characteristics and Outcomes

The Diverse Portrait of Students with Disabilities

In 2010–11, approximately 5.8 million children and youth ages 6–21 received special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), representing 8.4 percent of all students nationwide. Across states, the percentages of students with disabilities ranged from 6.3 percent in Idaho to 11.3 percent in New Jersey.[6] Within these numbers, students with disabilities are a heterogeneous and diverse population, with varying individual needs.

Disability categories can be used as a proxy for the characteristics and needs of students with disabilities and to understand which students should be expected to leave high school college and career ready.[7] Most of these students are identified in the category of specific learning disability (such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, auditory/visual processing disorders), accounting for about 41 percent of all students with disabilities nationally. Other high-percentage disability categories include speech/language impairments (about 19 percent); other health impairments, which often include students with attention deficit-hyperactivity (about 13 percent); intellectual disabilities (about 7 percent); autism (about 7 percent); and emotional disabilities (about 6 percent).

About 85 to 90 percent of students with disabilities can meet the graduation standards targeted for all other students, as long as they receive specially designed instruction and appropriate access, supports and accommodations.

These diverse characteristics have clear and important implications for states in setting graduation requirement policies. The vast majority of students with disabilities can be held to the same achievement standards as other students. Only a small percentage of students with disabilities, perhaps 10 to 15 percent, have disabilities that require that they meet different achievement standards.[8] Most often, but not always, the students who are held to different achievement standards are those with intellectual disabilities, autism or multiple disabilities. The remaining students with disabilities, about 85 to 90 percent, **can meet the graduation standards targeted for all other students,** as long as they receive specially designed instruction and appropriate access, supports and accommodations, as required by IDEA.

High School Completion Outcomes

Using the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) Leaver Rate, of the 402,038 special education students who left high school in the 50 states and District of Columbia in 2010–11, just 64 percent left with a standard high school diploma. This same year, nationally, 14 percent of students with disabilities exited with a certificate of attendance or other alternative type of diploma. Many students with disabilities dropped out of high school, leaving with neither a standard diploma nor a

certificate. In 2010–11, 20 percent of all special education students ages 14–21 who exited school did so by dropping out.[9] This percentage is estimated to be about twice the dropout rate of students without disabilities. The negative impact of dropping out on access to college and other postsecondary education opportunities, future employment, and other adult life pursuits is well documented; these negative outcomes are even more pronounced for students with disabilities. For example, employment and postsecondary education participation rates are lower for students with disabilities who dropped out of school compared to students without disabilities who did not complete high school.[10]

Most states are now using an adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) methodology for all graduation rates, including rates for students with disabilities. Across states, the ACGR shows wide variation in graduation rates for students with disabilities. Preliminary 2010–11 ACGR for students with disabilities ranged from 23 percent (Nevada and Mississippi) to 84 percent (South Dakota). The ACGR also allows for comparisons between students with disabilities and their peers without disabilities. Gaps between the ACGR for all students and students with disabilities are found in all states but one (South Dakota), with seven states (Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Nevada, South Carolina and Virginia) showing a difference of 35 percentage points or more.[11] The options available to students on their pathway to high school graduation are critical factors in determining the likelihood that they will graduate with the standard high school diploma.

Postsecondary and Employment Outcomes

Evidence about the postsecondary education and employment of individuals with disabilities illustrates the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead and the need to ensure that students with disabilities achieve college and career readiness before leaving high school. As compared to their peers without disabilities, students with disabilities have lower rates of enrollment in postsecondary education and lower rates of postsecondary completion.[12] Bureau of Labor Statistics data consistently show that the employment rate of individuals with disabilities is half that of individuals without disabilities.[13] Gaps in earnings also have increased over time for those who earn postsecondary degrees compared to those with high school diplomas.[14]

There is evidence that the focus on increasing postsecondary enrollment, completion and employment of students with disabilities is beginning to pay off. Postsecondary education is the primary post-high school goal in the transition plans of more than four of five secondary students with disabilities. More students with disabilities are taking rigorous academic courses, and although the rates are still far lower than those for students without disabilities, far more students with disabilities are enrolling in postsecondary education than ever before.[15]

The rigor of high school courses, the type of diploma a student receives, and the guidance and support provided to students all contribute to the student's success in transitioning to college and career, as well as his or her success once the student gets there. States have a clear responsibility to shape policies with

an eye toward increasing the rate of students with disabilities who receive a standard diploma, particularly one that aligns with a college- and career-ready course of study that prepares them for postsecondary education and employment.

State Policy Landscape

The promise of college- and career-ready standards is that all students will have an educational experience that prepares them to graduate from high school with the core academic knowledge and skills needed to reach their full potential in college, careers and life.[16] **Whether states have adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) or developed their own standards aligned with college and career readiness, special consideration needs to be devoted to how students with disabilities will be supported in meeting these standards.** This may be a significant challenge: General educators, special education educators and transition stakeholders traditionally have differed in their views of essential competencies and outcomes for postsecondary pathways for students with disabilities.[17]

IDEA requires that students ages 16 and older have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) that include appropriate, measurable postsecondary education goals. Through this transition planning process and the development of the student's IEP, specific competencies and skills that the student will need for future college and career pursuits are determined. In addition to discussing the student's academic needs, other critical skills — such as self-determination, social and emotional skills, self-advocacy, critical thinking, and independent living and employability skills — are discussed. A careful sense of balance, both in the academic curricular focus and the individualized goals for the acquisition of employability and life skills, must be achieved.

Do allowances for students with disabilities change the standards to which students are held, which is clearly inappropriate? Or do they provide students with alternative ways to meet the same standards?

During the IEP process, teams also discuss how or whether a student will take the same classes as his or her peers without disabilities and whether a student will meet the same or different requirements for leaving school. Although individualized decisions are made for students with disabilities, as required by law, states set the expectations for what is required of students with disabilities to graduate with a standard diploma through policies on course requirements, the array of diploma options that are available to students, and the use of exit or end-of-course exams. These policies, in turn, contribute to (or detract from) the success of students with disabilities in leaving school ready for college and career.

States vary in the allowances made for youth with disabilities to receive a standard diploma in terms of course-taking and assessment requirements. They also vary in the options for diplomas that they provide for students with disabilities. In most states, students with disabilities are able to take advantage of allowances to obtain a standard diploma. **It is critical to consider the nature of these allowances for**

each of these policy mechanisms. ***Do they change the standards to which students are held, which is clearly inappropriate? Or do they provide students with alternative ways to meet the same standards?***

Impact of Alternative Diploma Options for Students with Disabilities

In addition to setting requirements for the state's standard diploma and any advanced or honors diplomas (both of which may or may not require a college- and career-ready course of study), many states offer alternative types of diplomas or certificates specifically for students with disabilities, including:

- IEP or special education diplomas;
- Occupational diplomas;
- Skills certificates;
- Modified diplomas;
- Extended diplomas; and
- Special diplomas.

Seventeen states offer only the standard diploma to their high school students, both those with and without disabilities.[18] The remaining 33 states and the District of Columbia offer multiple diploma options to their high school students. In 2010–11, Nevada offered seven diploma options to its students; Oregon, Louisiana and Virginia offered five. The rate at which students with disabilities earn standard diplomas is related, to some extent, to the number of diploma options that are available to students.[19] For example, in Nevada, which has seven diploma options, only about one-quarter of students with disabilities earned a standard diploma in 2010–11. In Pennsylvania, which has two diploma options, nearly 90 percent of students with disabilities earned a standard diploma in the same year.[20] In its report *Diplomas at Risk,* the National Center for Learning Disabilities says that the data suggest that "the more options offered to students in fact results in fewer high school graduates."[21] Students who do not receive the standard diploma, as well, do not count as "graduates" under the ACGR.

Although state and local education agencies may adopt alternative diplomas in the hope that those "diplomas" will provide students with disabilities access to future educational and work opportunities, research suggests that this goal is not met. Postsecondary institutions and the business community find the alternative diplomas confusing and of questionable value.[22] Employers are most unsure of certificates of completion, attendance or achievement and are least likely to hire persons with these certificates.[23] Similarly, postsecondary institutions place little value on alternative exit certificates and, in general, treat students who earn these alternative certificates as though they had dropped out of school.[24]

As the pressure to increase graduation requirements aligned to states' college- and career-ready standards grows, consideration of diploma options will once again come to the forefront of discussions in states and districts. The standard diploma and any alternative diploma option established by high school exit credentials must have explicit and well-understood meaning and value. At the same time, careful consideration needs to be given to how a state ensures that every student has the opportunity to try to earn a standard diploma — and that state standard diploma should be one that prepares all graduates for college and careers. Policies that result in early decisions that place a student on an alternate "track" to a different diploma option should be avoided.

Many states with alternative diploma options may have set their policy without consultation from postsecondary institutions; employers; or other community members such as parents, teacher unions and individuals with disabilities.[25] Members of IEP teams lack transparent information about the value and rigor of various diploma options and about the possible consequences for students of receiving an alternative diploma instead of a standard high school diploma.

Course of Study Required for Graduation

The states that have policies to align the standard diploma with college- and career-ready expectations vary in terms of their policies to provide allowances for students with disabilities to receive a standard diploma. Students with disabilities may be permitted to earn fewer credits to earn a standard diploma, or they may be allowed to take alternative courses. They may be allowed to request a waiver from the course requirements to which all other students are held. These adjustments may be part of state policy, or they may be allowed by the state through the IEP process, whereby the team can determine the coursework required for the student to graduate.

For example, **KENTUCKY** requires all students to complete 22 credits for high school graduation, including three credits of mathematics through Algebra II. The state's regulations provide flexibility to local boards of education to substitute alternative "functional, integrated, applied, interdisciplinary, occupational, technical or higher level" courses for students with disabilities if the courses provide "rigorous content … based on grade-level content standards and may be modified to allow for a narrower breadth, depth, or complexity of the general grade-level content standards."[26]

Students in **ARKANSAS** must complete a college- and career-ready course of study to graduate under the state's Smart Core curriculum. However, graduation requirements for students with disabilities are set through the IEP process.[27]

Whether a state's standard diploma is at the college- and career-ready level or not, it is imperative for the state to collect and report the number and percentage of students seeking modifications to the standard diploma and to ensure that students with disabilities who receive substantial modifications understand that it will impact their level of readiness. If states do not know which students are modifying

which courses, they cannot know whether policies are delivering on their promise, and critical course-taking completion data are lost, along with the opportunity to identify course patterns that best prepare students for college success and promising practices. This information can affect decisions about teacher assignment and resource allocation and identify areas of challenge and intervention for students.

Further, even if students complete the state's standard course requirements, they may still not be eligible for financial aid or may not take the right courses to meet minimum requirements for admission into their state's postsecondary system. States should signal and be transparent about these potential disconnects should a student not pursue the standard diploma.

Exit Exams and End-of-Course Assessments

In addition to graduation requirements for courses of study, some states also have requirements for students to take exit exams (which may cover a range of grade-level standards in various content areas) and/or end-of-course assessments (which cover the specific standards for a course). The states may require students to pass the exit exams or end-of-course assessments or may factor end-of-course assessments into grades for required courses. In 2011–12, 25 states had or planned to have exit exams to determine whether a student would receive a high school diploma.[28] Ten years prior, 18 states had high-stakes exit exams that students had to pass to earn a standard diploma.[29] Exit exams may influence the extent to which students with disabilities receive high school diplomas. Research has found that students with disabilities are more likely to receive alternative diplomas in states with high school exit exam requirements for graduation.[30]

States offer a variety of alternative ways for students to meet their exit or end-of-course exam requirements. These alternatives are offered to students with and without disabilities, but students with disabilities have more alternative routes. These routes to a standard diploma may or may not require that students meet the same performance on standards as those required for other students earning a standard diploma.

Among the alternative routes that are designed to show that students have met the ***same*** standards as those required by an exit exam or end-of-course assessment are the following:

- Students pass another test with a score that has been determined to be comparable (e.g., designated score on an SAT, ACT, Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate exam).
- Students with a close-to-passing score demonstrate that their grade point average is similar to the grade point average of students enrolled in the same courses who have passed the exit exam.
- Students complete a performance-based assessment, or a portfolio of current or cumulative work, in the content area in which they did not earn a passing score on the exam.

For example, **TENNESSEE's** high school policy governing the state's college- and career-ready READY CORE graduation requirements provides flexibility for students with disabilities who do not earn a passing grade on a required course based on performance on the end-of-course assessment. Upon recommendation from the student's IEP team, the student can use an alternative performance-based assessment to demonstrate his or her knowledge and skills on the course content.[31]

These approaches are unlike other approaches that change the standards that the student is meeting to earn the standard diploma. For example, in several states, students may apply for a waiver or simply be exempted from the exam requirements. In others, an assessment that is based on different standards (such as modified achievement standards) can be used. In still others, an IEP team can decide what the passing score will be for an individual student. It is critical for states to ensure that students with disabilities meet the same standards as their peers without disabilities — and that they provide appropriate accommodations to ensure that students have the opportunity to do so.

Recommendations

Students with disabilities need to be held to high standards for earning a state's standard diploma — preferably one that requires a college- and career-ready course of study — so that it has meaning to their future education and work and so that the postsecondary community/businesses know that the standard diploma means something. If schools allow students, both with and without disabilities, to graduate with a standard diploma but have not ensured that students have met the expectations of that diploma, then it is essentially an empty credential. The following recommendations are designed to assist state leaders in meeting **the goal of not changing the standards to which students with disabilities are held.**

A. Set High College and Career Expectations and Clear Goals for Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities should be held to high expectations of the CCSS/college- and career-ready standards. To accomplish this goal, state leaders should consider the following actions:

- States should ensure that their policies for students with disabilities do not encourage early decisions that would put students on an alternate "track" to exiting high school without a standard diploma. To the extent possible, all students with disabilities should be kept on a path toward earning a standard diploma.
- States should determine and clarify the accommodations or allowances they intend to grant to students with disabilities to earn a standard diploma. States should ensure that the allowances provide flexibility in **how** students demonstrate mastery of standards, not in **what** standards they master. For instance, any accommodations should provide students exposure to equally rigorous content based on the state's CCSS/college- and career-ready standards.
- States should develop parent-friendly information about decision criteria used in recommending

an alternative diploma to ensure that parents are fully informed of consequences, including how different types of diplomas will be viewed by employers and postsecondary education programs.

A systematic approach to ensuring that students are on track to meet the CCSS/college- and career-ready standards is integral to high expectations. Early indicators (such as attendance, performance on state assessments, suspension incidences, and mobility) and appropriate response systems should be put into place to ensure that students who may be behind are identified and appropriate response systems implemented.

B. Limit the Number of Diploma Options Available to Students with Disabilities

States need to clarify the assumptions underlying state graduation requirements and diploma options. This clarification should start with defining and gaining consensus on what a standard diploma is supposed to mean in terms of the knowledge and skills attained by all students.

- Does it mean that a student has basic skills in a variety of content areas, or does it mean that the student has achieved a level of knowledge and skills that ensure the student will succeed in college or a career?
- Do the state's graduation requirements allow students to achieve a standard diploma based on multiple indicators of a student's demonstrated learning and skills?
- If a student struggles in achieving the requirements in any one area, is he or she in danger of jeopardizing his or her graduation prospects and earning a standard diploma? For example, students with disabilities might be required to complete the same coursework as other students but be allowed an alternative route to demonstrate the same knowledge and skills required by the high school exit exam and still receive a standard diploma.

After basic questions about the meaning and method of achieving a standard diploma have been determined and clarified, decisions can be made about the need to recognize students who have not met an acceptable level of attainment but have demonstrated other specific knowledge and skills, or characteristics, that should be recognized with some type of alternative diploma.

The need remains for states to address exactly what each diploma option means. That is, states must thoroughly reach consensus on the "meaning" and "rigor" of each diploma option with, at a minimum, postsecondary education program representatives, employers and representatives from the special education community.

C. Identify Multiple, Equally Rigorous Paths to Earning a Standard Diploma for Students with Disabilities

States also need to reach decisions about the appropriateness of identifying alternative routes to a standard diploma, especially if an exit exam will be used. Any alternative route considered must be based on the same beliefs, premises and requirements as the standard route to the diploma.

Students with disabilities may have disability-related barriers to accessing the curriculum and demonstrating knowledge and skills on standardized assessments. Despite the variability in the specific disabilities that students may have and the nature of the barriers that are associated with them, the appropriateness of identifying alternative routes remains important.

It is important to ensure that students with disabilities have ways to demonstrate their knowledge and skills regardless of their specific disabilities. Strong approaches for accomplishing this are through **the use of universal design strategies for learning and for assessments and the provision of accommodations that do not change what is taught in the classroom or what is measured on an assessment**. Universal design strategies, for example, involve providing students with multiple means of representation, action/expression and engagement.[32] Accommodations, such as extended time and use of text-to-speech technology, are used during both instruction and assessments.[33] Attention should be paid to universal design and accommodations before considering alternative routes.

Because earning a standard diploma is a high-stakes outcome for students, it is reasonable to identify alternative ways for students to demonstrate that they have met the **same standards** — albeit in a different way. Some of the more appropriate alternative routes may be those that have been allowed for all students. Among the approaches that states might consider are:

- Requiring clear documentation by districts of all courses that support college and career readiness.
- Allowing some students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills via a performance-based assessment, such as a presentation to a panel or development of a portfolio of evidence.
- Demonstrating the same grades in critical courses as students who have passed an exit exam.

For example, **MASSACHUSETTS** has regulations that provide for performance appeals in which the superintendent of the student's school district provides evidence of the student's knowledge and skills in the subject area or areas for which the appeal is being filed.[34] The commissioner of education reviews the submission (which can include either portfolio evidence or documentation of students with similar course grades who passed the exit exam), and if the performance appeal meets the state requirements, the commissioner refers it to the Performance Appeals Board.

Regardless of approach, **it is critical to track and report students' use of alternative routes in local districts.** Charting the post-school outcomes of students who graduate with a standard diploma via an alternative route will be important as well to ensure that students who use an alternative route are

leaving school with the knowledge and skills to be successful. Continued attention to having alternative routes that allow students to show the same knowledge and skills as students who earn a standard diploma via traditional routes is essential.

D. Identify Appropriate Graduation Requirements and Diploma Options for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities

Students with significant cognitive disabilities now receive instruction linked to the CCSS/college- and career-ready standards. They are held to different performance standards. The question of how to recognize their successful completion of school is an emerging topic as college-based postsecondary programs for them are established throughout the nation.[35] Two actions are needed to address graduation requirements and diploma options for students with significant cognitive disabilities:

- First and foremost, policies are needed to ensure that students with significant cognitive disabilities are in classes that promote high expectations and are based on the CCSS/college- and career-ready standards. Currently, too many students with significant cognitive disabilities are tracked from their earliest years, resulting in lack of exposure to the content needed to interact with their peers and to gain the skills needed for successful postsecondary experiences and successful competitive employment.
- Second, policymakers should take steps to involve stakeholders in discussions about ways to recognize successful completion of an educational program based on the CCSS/college- and career-ready standards. Included in these discussions should be educators, parents, postsecondary education programs and employers. Serious discussions about the meaning of various diploma options under consideration must take place.

E. Research the Impact of State Graduation Requirements and Diploma Options on Student Outcomes

States should explore the intended and unintended consequences of their graduation requirements and diploma options. Research has identified some of these.[36] For example, both intended and unintended consequences have been associated with having multiple diploma options. Among the intended consequences are:

- An increase in the number of students receiving some type of exit document;
- More flexibility for districts in the way students exit school; and
- Possible reductions in the dropout rate.

In addition, multiple diploma options can also improve transparency as states report the percentages of students who graduate with each option.

Unintended consequences of multiple diploma options include:

- Some options may be viewed as substandard;
- Communication of different options to parents and students is problematic;
- Providing different options may be perceived as developing special "tracks," making success in the general education curriculum more difficult to achieve; and
- Expectations are lowered for some students.

States should also consider potential concerns with having a single diploma option. One of the primary concerns is that, according to IDEA, students with disabilities who earn a standard diploma no longer need to be provided special education services, even though students may have specific special education transition needs. States that opt for a single diploma option must ensure that students have strong transition plans so that they can continue to receive needed services after graduating with a standard diploma. States should also ensure that they publicly report the number and percentages of students graduating with a standard diploma who receive their diploma through an alternative route.

As states continue implementation of the CCSS or other college- and career-ready standards, consideration of diploma options should once again come to the forefront of discussion. The standard diploma and any alternative diploma must have explicit and well-understood meaning and value to students, families, future employers and postsecondary education professionals. The diploma must lead either to successful post-school outcomes or employment for students with disabilities. States should undertake post-school follow-up evaluations to assess the extent to which different diploma options, if available, influence student educational, employment and other life outcomes.

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Resources

- Achieve — www.achieve.org
- National Center on Educational Outcomes — www.nceo.info
- National Center for Learning Disabilities — www.ncld.org
- National Center on Secondary Education and Transition — www.ncset.org

- National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities — www.ndpc-sd.org
- National Transition Technical Assistance Center — www.nsttac.org

[1] Carnevale, A. P., Smith, N., & Strohl, J. (2010). *Help wanted: Projections of jobs and education requirements through 2018*. Washington, DC: Center on Education and the Workforce.
[2] References to a standard (or "regular") diploma in this brief include both the standard and advanced diplomas. Some students with disabilities, just like their peers without disabilities, earn advanced diplomas.
[3] In states that have adopted the CCSS, students must take at least three years of rigorous mathematics through an Algebra II/Integrated Math III course (or an equivalent) to learn what is incorporated in the CCSS. In English, the CCSS presume that students will take four years of English and that English language arts courses will be aligned with the CCSS.
[4] Achieve. (2013). *Closing the Expectations Gap.* Washington, DC: Author.
[5] The term *students with disabilities* is used in this document to refer to students who receive special education services and have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). Although the information likely applies to students with disabilities on 504 accommodations plans, graduation rate data are not available for this group of students.
[6] These data are from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs Data Collection. Tables B1-3 and B1-17 for 2010–11. Accessed at www.ideadata.org.
[7] See Thurlow, M. L. (2007, February). *The challenge of special populations to accountability for all.* Aspen Institute Education Conference — No Child Left Behind: A Five-Year Review. San Juan, Puerto Rico.
[8] Thurlow, M. L., & Quenemoen, R. F. (2012). Opportunities for students with disabilities from the common core standards. *The State Education Standard,* 56–62.
[9] Dropout data are based on those students exiting school in 2010–11. They reflect a status dropout rate, which is unlike the four-year graduation rate data (see www.ideadata.org). Comparable dropout data do not exist for students without disabilities. Nevertheless, studies have shown that students with disabilities drop out at higher rates than do students without disabilities. Wagner, M., Newman, L., Cameto, R., Garza, N., & Levine, P. (2005). *After high school: A first look at the postschool experiences of youth with disabilities. A report from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS-2).* Menlo Park, CA: SRI International. Available at www.nlts2.org/reports/2005_04/nlts2_report_2005_04_complete.pdf.
[10] See, for example, a presentation illustrating that the negative effects are even more pronounced for special education students: Wagner, M., Newman, L., Cameto, R., Garza, N., & Levine, P. (2005). *After high school: A first look at the postschool experiences of youth with disabilities. A report from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2* (NLTS-2). Menlo Park, CA: SRI International. Available at www.nlts2.org/reports/2005_04/nlts2_report_2005_04_complete.pdf.
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