

Diploma Requirements, Certificates, and Students with Disabilities (March 2013 School Leader Update)

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Diploma Requirements – Alternative School Programs

Following are guidelines for districts to use for their students who complete a plan of study at an alternative school program, including a community college alternative school program.

- a. Always bear in mind that a student cannot graduate from a program. A student graduates from a high school. The vast majority of our districts do not have an alternative high school. They offer an alternative school program either directly or through a community college or through a consortium of other districts. Students who conclude their studies through an alternative school program get their diplomas (if earned) from their district of enrollment.
- b. A district may not set different core requirements for graduation for students in an alternative setting or program. For example, if the general graduation requirement includes seven credits for language arts, four for science, four for mathematics, and six for social studies, these core requirements must also be met by a student in an alternative setting or program. The flexibility offered in alternative programs may be reflected in scheduling issues and in elective courses, not the core curriculum.
- c. A district must offer just one basic diploma. Think of the basic diploma as the lowest common denominator of achievement (i.e.: It reflects the successful completion of all core requirements). It is permissible to indicate high achievement on the diploma, such as “with honors.”
- d. It is permissible to indicate on the face of the diploma that the student completed his/her studies via the alternative program. It is not mandatory to do this, since the transcript (which is more important than the diploma) will reflect all curricular data. If a district elects to indicate completion of credits via an alternative program, the word “program” must appear on the diploma.

- e. Districts are strongly discouraged from lowering the electives requirements drastically.
- f. Notwithstanding the above paragraphs, if a district has an attendance center that is an alternative school (not just the program), the diploma may come from either the alternative school or the resident district and must state on the face of the diploma that the student is awarded the diploma for having met the graduation requirements of “(Name) School.” The alternative school’s graduation requirements may be different from the requirements for graduation from the district’s traditional high school(s). When a student enters the alternative school, staff should determine at the earliest practical time whose graduation requirements are going to be applied for the student.
- g. Community colleges may serve students from numerous districts. **The district officials need to work with the college officials to ensure that the college understands the number and type of the district’s core requirements. A community college should not be offering a “one-size-fits-all” alternative school program.**
- h. As with students who complete their educational programs via an alternative program, the diploma awarded to a special education student must be similar in all significant respects to the basic diploma awarded by the district. The transcript is the communication means between the district and other entities. Explanations of modifications may be included on the transcript. For more information, see item below.

Grades, Certificates of Achievement, and Transcripts of Students with Disabilities

Diplomas/Certificates of Achievement

- In certain cases, special education students may receive a diploma without meeting the graduation requirements for the general education program if they meet their Individualized Education Program goals and graduation requirements set by their IEPs.
- Granting a student in special education a Certificate of Achievement (or Completion or Attendance) is appropriate for a student who is not able to meet the academic requirements for a diploma. Bear in mind the following:
 - Such an award does not end the student’s right to receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE). The right to a FAPE ends only either when the student reaches age 21 or successfully finishes a regular secondary education program. The same is true if a special education student obtains a GED; if the student is not yet age 21, he or she may still demand a FAPE from the district of residence.

- A district is not required to end a student's educational program when the student has met the district's graduation requirements if not all of the IEP goals have been met (unless the student has reached age 21).
- A denial of a diploma to a student is NOT a denial of a FAPE.

Grades

- If a student has received some reasonable accommodation, but the curriculum has not been modified for the student, the grade shall not reflect that an accommodation was made. After all, the purpose of a reasonable accommodation is to level the playing field so that the grade will truly represent the student's intellectual abilities. Another way of thinking about it is that the accommodation merely removes the disadvantage to the student of his/her disability (e.g., giving a student extra time to take a test).
- If the curriculum has been modified, the report card and transcript may be coded or may include an asterisk to indicate a modified curriculum, but only if such coding is also used for general education students (because the report card cannot indicate that the student is a person with a disability unless the parent consents).
- Grading on a pass/fail system is acceptable for a student with disabilities if participation in the P/F system is voluntary and the same P/F system is available to all students.
- Using a grading scale that assigns lower grade weights to special education courses is not a violation of state or federal law as long as the lower weighting is the result of an assessment of actual differences in the difficulty of the course vis-à-vis a comparable regular education course, and is not related to the classification of students enrolled in the course. For example, a lower weighting scale for "Basic Science Applications" is permissible if Basic Science Applications is less rigorous than other science courses, but is not permissible if done because only special education students are enrolled in the course.
- A student with an IEP who is enrolled in a general education course for reasons other than mastery of the content (e.g., to learn social skills or organizational skills) may be excluded from class grading and may be evaluated on the objectives and goals of the IEP for the course.

Transcripts

- Modifications to curriculum content may be reflected in the transcript via some coding or an asterisk, but only if such coding is also used for general education students. Remember that the transcript cannot identify the student as a student

with disabilities unless the parent (or student if student is at least 18 years old) consents.

- Courses listed on a transcript may not be identified as special education courses.

Acceptable

- Practical Math Applications
- Basic Social Studies
- General Science

Not Acceptable

- Special Education Math
- Resource Social Studies
- Special Education Science
- Modifications or exceptions to the grading scale may be identified via asterisks or special coding if done so as not to identify the student as having a disability (unless consent is given). For instance, it is permissible to indicate via an asterisk that the student received a modified grade or completed work at a lower grade level but using asterisks cannot be limited to students with disabilities.

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