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Diploma Options for Students with Disabilities: Synthesis of the NCEO Document

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The National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) has conducted four studies of state graduation requirements for students with disabilities. This document synthesizes findings reported in NCEO's most recent 2007 study, *Revisiting Graduation Requirements and Diploma Options for Youth with Disabilities: A National Study*, and the comparisons they made to findings from 2002.¹ The purpose of the NCEO national study was to describe current variations across states in high school exit exam practices and the use of alternative diploma/credentialing options.

This synthesis was completed as part of the cooperative agreement between Project Forum at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) and the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs.

INTRODUCTION

In response to public demands to increase the level of student learning and achievement essential for youth entering adult roles and the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), states have developed a variety of policies such as increasing high school graduation requirements, developing high stakes exit exams and offering diploma options. Additionally, under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA), students with disabilities must be included in state and district assessments, further challenging states to develop policy options that allow participation of these students.

METHODOLOGY

NCEO developed a survey to align, in part, with three prior NCEO studies in 1995, 1999 and 2003. State directors of special education or their designees in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, hereafter referred to as state education agencies (SEAs), responded to the survey

¹ These NCEO studies can be found at <http://education.umn.edu/NCEO/>.

during 2006-2007, a 100% response rate. In addition, NCEO staff conducted an analysis of state graduation policies and supporting documents, and made follow up calls with states to discuss and clarify survey responses and policies reported on state education agency web sites.

RESULTS

State Graduation Requirements for Youth with and without Disabilities

The relationship varies between SEAs and local education agencies (LEAs) in terms of which entity establishes state graduation requirements for youth with disabilities. The most common practice across states is for the state to provide minimum requirements and allow LEAs to add to them. A total of 34 states' policies reflect this practice. Eight states, including the *District of Columbia* set graduation requirements that LEAs cannot change. Four states provide guidelines, but LEAs may set their own requirements. One state (*Colorado*) has no minimum state requirements for graduation and LEAs may set their own. Two states allow Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams to set the requirements (*Montana* and *Nebraska*).

Increase in graduation requirements

In the past three years, 28 states have increased their graduation requirements for receiving a standard diploma for both students with and without disabilities. Two states (*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.

Diploma Options

The range of diploma options available for youth with disabilities includes honors diplomas, regular/standard diplomas, IEP/Special education diplomas, certificates of attendance, certificates of achievements and occupational diplomas. All 51 respondents reported that they offered a standard or regular diploma for students with and without disabilities. Of these, 16 states also offer honors diplomas; six offer individualized education program (IEP)/special education diplomas; 19 grant certificates of attendance; 10 granted certificates of achievement; three offer occupational diplomas; and 11 offer other variations.

Eighteen states offer only the single diploma option, the regular/standard diploma to both students with and without disabilities. The highest in total number of diploma options is *Oregon* with five options. Nine states report four options and 10 states offer three options.

Other diploma options that states offer include:

- diplomas/certificates developed by local education agencies (LEAs) (*Idaho*, *West Virginia*);
- local certificates of attendance not state endorsed (*Kansas*);
- occupational coursework (*Kentucky*);

- certificates made available by local communities, though they do not equate to a high school diploma (*Massachusetts*);
- modified diplomas but not specifying “special education” (*Montana, Oregon*);
- certificate of completion available to students who have not completed all graduation requirements as mandated by statute (*Utah*);
- certificate of program completion (*Virginia*); and
- other diplomas as dictated by local school board policy (*Wisconsin*).

Allowances made for youth with disabilities to receive a standard diploma

Some states allow students with disabilities to obtain a standard diploma without completing all the state’s requirements for that credential. State variations include; reducing the number of credits that a student needs (5 states); making available alternate courses that can be used to earn required course credits (21 states); lowering performance criteria (10 states); permitting the IEP team to make allowances (32 states); granting extensions, such as more time to complete requirements (22 states); and other alternatives. Three states make no allowances and hold all students to the same standards.

State Use of Exit Exams

Twenty-four states have exit exams while 27 do not. Twenty-one states require both youth with and without disabilities to pass an exit exam to receive a high school diploma, and three states require only youth without disabilities to pass an exit exam to receive a diploma. This is a change from the 2002 NCEO survey finding that 27 states required students with disabilities to pass an exit exam to graduate. In 1999 NCEO identified 20 states where exit exams were linked to the student’s receipt of a diploma and, in 1995, found 16 states with these policies.

For states with exams linked to graduation, the range and variation of options extended to youth if they fail exit exams 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 equivalent form of the exam.

Eighteen of the 24 states with exit exams allow students to retake the test; four offer an equivalent form of the exam and five 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.

Three scoring options are available for exit exams for youth with disabilities. Since respondents were allowed to “check all that apply” there is some overlap.

- Eighteen states require the same passing score for students with and without disabilities.
- Four states (*Minnesota, New Mexico, New York and Washington*) give the same test to both groups, but permit different passing scores; and
- Three states (*Arizona, Idaho, New York and Washington*) give different tests to different groups of students.

Options for youth with disabilities if they fail the exit exam include:

- retaking the test (18 states);
- using another procedure such as portfolio, special coursework or special exam (2 states);
- petitioning for an exemption while still receiving a diploma (5 states); and
- taking an equivalent form of the exam (4 states).

Consequences of State Graduation Requirements and Diploma Options

In the NCEO survey results for 2007, states reported the following consequences of their policies:

- 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).
- Differences between general and special education students are reduced. All students are held to the same standards, required to pass the same exams and receive the same diploma (12 states).
- Some students with disabilities will fail to receive a diploma (12 states).
- Higher dropout rates may result (12 states).
- Student self-esteem is lowered by repeated failures on exit exams (14 states).
- Dissatisfaction of 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).
- SEAs and LEAs are forced to create alternative diplomas and pathways to ensure that students exit with some form of a high school credential (3 states).

DISCUSSION

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 practices. We know from the National Longitudinal Transition Study 2² that there are significant outcomes for students

² Find information about the National Longitudinal Transition Study- 2 at <http://www.nlts2.org/>.

with disabilities who do not earn a high school or equivalent diploma. Comparing the current survey to the 2003 survey, NCEO identified two major trends.

- The comparisons of the previous NCEO studies to the current 2007 study appear to show a leveling off of the use of exit exams as a requirement for receiving a high school diploma.
- Over the past 15 years of the standards-based education movement, states have experimented with a wide range of high school diploma options for students with and without disabilities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the trends and survey findings, NCEO makes the following recommendations.

- Clarify the assumptions underlying state graduation requirements and diploma options. It is important to ask what is required for students with disabilities to take exit exams to reflect what they have learned and how accommodations or alternative exams affect their outcomes.
- Ensure students with disabilities an opportunity to learn the material on which they will be tested.
- Make high school graduation decisions based on multiple indicators of students' learning and skills. States can use a combination of Carnegie units, competency tests, exit exams or a series of benchmark exams to make graduation decisions. They can develop special testing provisions such as accommodations, alternative assessments, waivers or appeals, and multiple opportunities to retest. Relying on a single measure of a student's performance is inconsistent with knowledge about testing practices.
- Clarify the implications of alternative diploma options for students with disabilities. The question is whether receiving something other than a standard high school diploma limits access to future postsecondary opportunities.
- Clarify the implications of different diploma options for continued special education services. Once a student receives a standard diploma, the student is no longer entitled to special education services unless state or district policy allow for these services to continue.
- Conduct ongoing research on the intended and unintended consequences of state graduation requirements and diploma options. Several unintended negative consequences have been identified such as high failure rates, grade-level retention and increased drop-out rates.

PRIMARY REFERENCE

Johnson, D.R., Thurlow, M.L. (2007). *Revisiting graduation requirements and diploma options for youth with disabilities: A national study* (Technical Report). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes.

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