

Diploma Options, Graduation Requirements, and Exit Exams for Youth with Disabilities

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Background

States offer a variety of diploma options. Some options are available to all students, while others are available only to students with disabilities. The criteria used to determine which student receives which diploma often are unclear, and it is uncertain how the various options impact students' college and career goals. Past studies have suggested that states offering only a standard diploma have higher rates of graduation among students with disabilities.

It is important to understand the different diploma options and graduation requirements, and how they might affect students with disabilities nationwide.

Research Questions

- 1) What are 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 for students with disabilities when they are required to pass an exit exam to receive a high school diploma?
- 3) What are the intended and unintended consequences of using single or multiple options for students with disabilities?

Method

Participants: State special education directors (or their designee) in all 50 states.

Analysis: An online survey was administered using Qualtrics.

Survey dates: Data were collected from May - October 2017

Findings

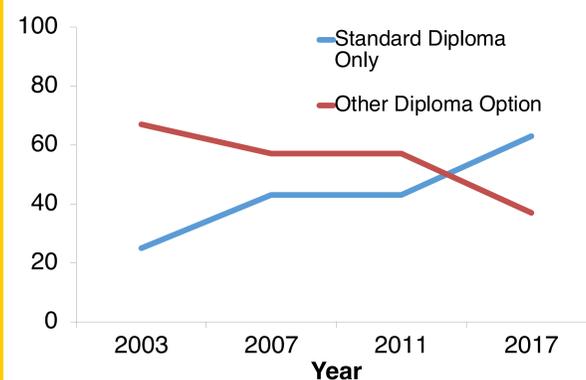
Diploma Options

Table 1: Types of diplomas available to students with disabilities

Diploma Type	# of states
Regular diploma only	31
Certificate of Attendance	4
Occupational/vocational diploma	1
Certificate of Achievement	2
IEP/Special Education diploma	6
State-defined alternate diploma	5

A variety of diplomas are available to students with disabilities, but **the overall trend is toward offering a single diploma to students with and without disabilities.**

Figure 1: Trend in diploma options offered

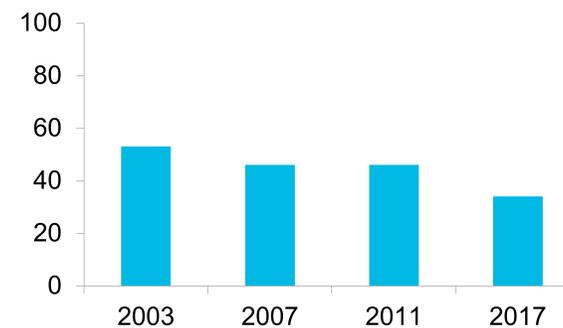


Stakeholder Engagement

Most state education officials do not consult with post-secondary educational institutions, employers, or the general public when establishing diploma options. Only 12 states indicated that they engaged post-secondary institutions, leaders in the business community, or members of the larger community in discussions about alternate diplomas.

Exit Exams

Figure 2: Trend in exit exam requirements



There is a downward trend in the use of exit exams. Sixteen states required students to pass an exit exam in order to graduate.

Allowances

Table 2: Allowances made for students with disabilities

Allowance Type	# of states
Reduced number of credits needed to graduate	3
Alternate credit-bearing courses count toward graduation	17
Lowered graduation criteria	4
Time extensions granted, or other allowances made	4
No allowances made	5

A majority of states (41) made some type of allowance that permits students to receive standard diplomas.

Other Trends

- **Increase** in the number and rigor of math courses required for graduation
- **Increased** reliance on credit-accrual based systems

Consequences

Multiple diploma options consequences:

- + More students receive **some** kind of diploma
- + **Greater flexibility** in graduation requirements
- + Increased ability to **maintain high standards for standard diploma earners**
- **Difficulty in communicating different diploma options** to students and parents
- **Other diploma options may be viewed as substandard** by employers and post-secondary education institutions
- **Lowered expectations** for students with disabilities

Single diploma option consequences:

- + **High expectations for all students** including students with disabilities
- + Employers and post-secondary institutions have a **clear record of student performance**
- + **More students with disabilities receive a standard diploma**
- **Overall standards may be lowered in order to make them accessible to all students**
- **Fewer students may receive diplomas**

Recommendations

- Clarify the assumptions underlying state graduation requirements and diploma options
- Ensure students with disabilities have opportunities to learn the material that will be tested in state and local assessments.
- Consider multiple indicators of students' learning and skills
- Clarify the implications of developing and granting different diploma options for students with disabilities
- Conduct on-going research on the intended and unintended consequences of state graduation requirements and diploma options