

High School Graduation Options for Students with Disabilities

High School Diploma Options for Students with Disabilities

What high school graduation options are available to students with disabilities to earn a standard high school diploma?

Students with disabilities can earn a standard high school diploma using any high school graduation option that is available to all students. The majority of students with disabilities will earn their diploma in this way.

Who decides which high school graduation option a student will follow to earn a standard diploma?

The individual educational plan (IEP) team, which includes the parent and the student, determines which high school graduation option is the most appropriate, using the postsecondary education and career goals of the student to guide the decision. Students who work toward a standard diploma via access courses must have written parental consent on record to be provided instruction in the state standards access points curriculum. The diploma decision may be revisited at any time, and students may move between options. A student may be awarded a standard diploma if they meet the requirements of any high school graduation option.

Must all students with disabilities work toward either a Scholar or Merit designation?

No. The requirements for Scholar and Merit designations, must be discussed with the parent of all students with disabilities. If the parent, or the student if over 18 years of age and rights have transferred, chooses to work toward one of the designations, this must be noted on the IEP and the IEP must reflect a high school graduation option that will allow the student the opportunity to earn the chosen designation.

Can a student who received a special diploma in the past, or who left school without a diploma, return to school and work toward a standard diploma?

Yes. There is an entitlement to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) for students with disabilities, in compliance with the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). FAPE needs to be available to students under the age of 22 who have an IEP and who have not earned a standard diploma. Students who graduated with a special diploma or who otherwise left the public school system without earning a standard high school diploma may return to public school.

Can a student who began 9th grade before 2014-15 and who is pursuing a special diploma change to a standard diploma?

Yes, if the IEP team, which includes the parent and the student, determines that is the best option for the student and it is aligned with their postsecondary goals. However, because these students did not begin to pursue a standard diploma in 9th grade, they may need additional time to complete all of the required coursework.

Can a student with an individual educational plan (IEP) who began 9th grade before 2014-15 and who is pursuing a standard diploma via the high school graduation option, now pursue a standard diploma via the high school graduation option, which requires both academic and employment competencies?

Yes, if the IEP team determines that is the best option for the student and it is aligned with their postsecondary goals. Students are free to move between the high school graduation options.

Should districts stop offering the special diploma beginning with the 2014-15 school year?

No. Students who entered the 9th grade before the 2014-15 school year and whose IEP noted that they were working toward a special diploma on the day the bill was signed into law (June 20, 2014) may receive a special diploma.

If a student who entered 9th grade prior to the 2014-15 school year is pursuing a special diploma using Option 1, may he or she switch to the Option 2 special diploma?

Yes, if that option is offered by the school district and the IEP team determines that it best meets the student's postsecondary goals.

What core courses are appropriate for students entering 9th grade for the first time in 2014-15?

Students entering 9th grade for the first time in 2014-15 must be enrolled in general education core courses unless the IEP team has determined that the student has a significant cognitive disability and that access points are the most appropriate way for the student to access the curriculum. Students receiving instruction in access points and taking the alternate assessment should be enrolled in access courses. Access courses are based on access points. Students taking access courses must have written parental consent on record to be provided instruction in the state standards access points curriculum. A student may be enrolled in an access course but receive instruction in a general education class.

Can students who were enrolled in general education courses in middle school be enrolled in access courses in high school?

Yes, but only if their IEP team has determined, based on data, that the student has a significant cognitive disability and, therefore, access courses are the most appropriate way for the student to access the curriculum. Students taking access courses must have written parental consent on record to be provided instruction in the state standards access points curriculum. The focal point for discussion should be the impact of the student's cognitive disability; to qualify as a student with a "significant cognitive disability," that impact should affect all aspects of the student's academic, independent functioning, community living, leisure and vocational activities.

Can districts continue to enroll students in fundamental courses?

Only students who began 9th grade prior to 2014-15 and who are working toward a special diploma may enroll in fundamental courses. Fundamental courses are academic skill-building courses that support a student's participation in general education classes by allowing them more time to build the necessary skills for success. These courses may not replace core academic courses required for a standard diploma in grades 9-12.

Which career and technical education (CTE) courses can substitute for specific access content area courses?

Students with disabilities who are following the high school graduation option may substitute an eligible secondary CTE course for English IV; for one math, with the exception of algebra or geometry; for one science, with the exception of biology; and for one social studies, with the exception of U.S. history. Any CTE course that has content related to the course for which it is substituting may be used.

How is it determined if a CTE course has “content related” to a course in the core subject area for which it is substituting?

Districts may determine whether or not a CTE course contains content related to an academic area.

Must students with disabilities earn credit via an online course in order to meet graduation requirements?

At least one course within the 24 credits required be completed through online learning. However, it also states that this requirement does not apply to a student for whom the IEP team has determined that an online course would be inappropriate. Because many students with disabilities will be accessing online instruction in a postsecondary or employment setting, it is critical that efforts be made to support the participation of students in an online course. The IEP team should reconsider the student’s ability to participate in an online course during the next IEP review. To support all students in the use of an online learning environment, teachers should start to blend distance-learning tools and services into their regular class routine to help students develop appropriate skills. Teachers should consider using phone or video conferencing, online tutoring, digital instructional materials, online course materials, submission of assignments online, wikis, blogs and other collaboration tools, online feedback and reporting to students and parents, mobile learning devices and social media.

How is parental approval documented?

Parental approval of an IEP team decision can be documented in the IEP notes.

What happens if a parent does not approve an IEP team decision?

The IEP team should carefully consider the parent’s concern(s) regarding the decision that the parent does not approve and take the steps necessary to gain consensus. If consensus cannot be reached, the parent may choose to seek the opinion of an independent reviewer. The decision of the IEP team prevails until the results of the independent review are available. Once the findings are provided, the IEP team must consider them. If the parent and the IEP team still cannot come to an agreement, the parent can exercise their procedural safeguards and request a due process hearing

If a student in the high school graduation option that requires paid employment and does not secure such employment, or loses their job before goals are achieved, can they graduate with a standard diploma?

Yes, if other suitable employment is found or if the student meets the graduation requirements under another high school graduation option. Students need to be employed at or above a minimum wage, in compliance with the federal Fair Labor Standards Act, for the number of hours per week noted in their

employment transition plan and for the equivalent of at least one semester in order to meet graduation requirements. In the event that paid employment is not secured, or is lost before the student meets their goals and another employment site cannot be found, the requirements of all other high school graduation options should be reviewed to determine whether the student has already met, or can meet through additional coursework, the graduation criteria of a different high school graduation option.

May a student earning their standard diploma via access courses earn credit through employment?

Yes. If the parent of a student taking access courses wants the student to gain work experience in order to meet their postsecondary goals, the series of ESE CTE courses may be used. These courses can be repeated as often as required for the student to attain the skills they need to be successful in future employment.

Who can defer receipt of their standard diploma?

Only a student whose IEP requires special education, transition planning, transition services or related services through the age of 21 may defer receipt of their standard diploma. In addition, once a student defers, they must be enrolled in accelerated college credit instruction, industry certification courses that lead to college credit, a collegiate high school program, courses necessary to satisfy the Scholar designation requirements or a structured work-study, internship or pre-apprenticeship program in order to continue to receive FAPE

Transition services are a coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability that is:

- Designed to be within a results-oriented process that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child's movement from school to post-school activities
- Based on the individual child's needs, taking into account the child's strengths,

Related services may be required to assist a child with a disability to benefit from special education, and includes early identification and assessment of disabling conditions in children.

Accelerated college credit programs, include dual enrollment and early admission, advanced placement, credit by examination, the International Baccalaureate program and the Advanced International Certificate of Education program.

Collegiate high school programs are required to provide, at a minimum, an option for public school students in grade 11 or grade 12 participating in the program for at least one full school year to earn Career and Professional Education industry certifications and complete 30 credit hours through dual enrollment toward the first year of college for an associate or baccalaureate degree.

A structured work-study program is any program that is designed to prepare the student for employment. Programs would normally include instruction in basic employment competencies, social skills and job search skills, and provide one or more work experiences, which may include supported employment.

Pre-apprenticeship programs provide an avenue for both adults and youth who are at least 16 years old to become qualified to enter registered apprenticeship programs. They are sponsored and operated by registered apprenticeship programs in the same trade or trades.

What actions must school districts take with regard to deferral of the standard high school diploma?

- Review the benefits of deferring with the parent and the student, including continuation of educational and related services
- Describe to the parent and the student, in writing, all of the services and programs available to students who defer
- Note the deferral decision on the IEP
- Provide a document that notes the decision for the parent, or the student if over 18 and rights have transferred, to sign that is separate from the IEP
- Inform the parent and the student, in writing, by January 30 of the year in which the student is expected to meet all graduation requirements that failure to defer releases the school district of the obligation to provide FAPE, that the deadline for acceptance or deferral is May 15 and that failure to attend the graduation ceremony does NOT constitute deferral
- Ensure that the names of the students who are deferring are submitted to appropriate staff for entry into the district's management information system

When does a student defer?

Students must make their decision to defer receipt of their standard diploma by May 15 in the school year in which they are expected to meet all of the requirements for graduation. The decision must be noted on the IEP and also kept on file in writing. The district may choose to create a form for this purpose.

Who decides if a student will defer receipt of their high school diploma?

The parent, or the student if over the age of 18 and rights have transferred, in consultation with the rest of the IEP team, makes the deferral decision.

May a student who decided to accept their diploma change their mind before graduation day and defer acceptance?

Yes, if this change is made before May 15 of the year in which they met graduation requirements.

May a student accept their diploma and change their mind later?

No. The decision to defer must be made before May 15 of the year in which the student will meet all requirements. If a student does not defer their diploma, the district is released of the obligation to provide a free appropriate public education.

Does a student need to defer every year?

No, students do not need to defer every year. The deferral applies until the student is no longer age eligible for FAPE or elects to accept the standard diploma, whichever comes first.

May a student choose to end their deferral period and request their diploma at any time after they defer and before they age out?

Yes. Although it is expected that most students who defer receipt of their high school diploma will receive their diploma after they complete the program or programs for which they deferred, students can request their diploma whenever they choose. This decision must be based on the understanding that the district is released of the obligation to provide FAPE once the student receives the standard diploma.

Does a student who receives a certificate of completion need to defer receipt of the certificate in order to continue to receive a FAPE?

No. A student with a disability who receives a certificate of completion and has an IEP that requires special education, transition planning, transition services or related services through the age of 21 may continue to receive the specified instruction and services.

May students who defer receipt of their standard high school diploma participate in graduation activities and “walk” during the graduation ceremony?

This is a district decision.

What options are available for a student who earned a standard diploma via the high school graduation options with regard to attending a state college or university?

The minimum standard for admission to an associate degree at a state college as a standard high school diploma or its equivalent. There is no minimum standard for admission to most career and technical certificate programs, but there are some regulated certificate programs with minimum entry standards.

Admission into Florida’s public universities is competitive. Institutions consider the courses a student has completed, grades received and scores on admission tests, such as the SAT or ACT.

Once admitted to a public postsecondary institution, students with disabilities are expected to meet the same academic standards as their nondisabled peers, although certain accommodations are available. Postsecondary students are also expected to be independent adults. In order to receive accommodations, students with disabilities must register with the disability services office at the institution, provide that office with documentation of their disability and self-advocate for the accommodations they need.

In high school, public school students with disabilities who have an IEP have rights and protections described in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), including accommodations and services that are designed to help the student succeed. Postsecondary students with disabilities have rights and protections through the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. These laws prohibit discrimination and provide for access of people with disabilities to all programs. ADA and Section 504 differ from IDEA.

Are there any special programs for students with intellectual disabilities at the postsecondary level?

Yes. Several universities and state colleges have Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID) programs. TPSID programs are designed to support students with intellectual disabilities who seek to continue academic, career and technical, and independent living instruction at an institution of higher education. The programs include academic advisement and curriculum structure and prepare students for employment.