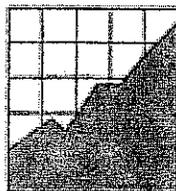


**Revisiting Graduation Requirements and
Diploma Options for Youth with Disabilities:
A National Study**



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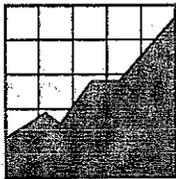
**Revisiting Graduation Requirements and
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A National Study**

David R. Johnson • Martha L. Thurlow • Karen E. Stout

December 2007

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Executive Summary

Changes in graduation policies and requirements that specifically call for raised academic standards for all students, as well as the development of exit exams linked to a student's eligibility to receive a standard high school diploma, are strategies that states have used to increase student learning. Both state and federal attention to graduation rates demonstrate the perceived link between completing school with a standard diploma and successful future adult roles. How to successfully include students with disabilities in these policies, whether to provide other types of exit documents, and then determining the consequences of various policy approaches has always been a challenge for states.

It is important to continue to document high school graduation policies and requirements in relation to students with disabilities. The controversy about potential negative and positive consequences continues, and because of this, a clear understanding of what the policies and requirements actually are is essential. Examining not only the policies and requirements, but also individuals' perspectives on the potential effects of these on students with disabilities, assists in thinking through the policy issues that need to be addressed.

The present study was undertaken to update the status of graduation policies across the nation. It follows up on previous work, the last study having been conducted in 2002, just after the implementation of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Three research questions served as the focus of this national study of high school graduation requirements and diploma options for students with and without disabilities:

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

Responses were collected from states via an online survey that contained questions aligned to previous surveys. Respondents were state directors of special education or their designees in all 50 states and the District of Columbia; the return rate was 100%.

Results indicated some changes in graduation requirements and diploma options from the previous survey. For example, fewer states seemed to be using exit exams as part of their requirements. In addition, states seemed to be decreasing the use of some diploma options, such as the IEP diploma, while increasing others, such as honors diplomas. Still, there continued to be an array of diploma options available to students with disabilities; these may or may not benefit

students with respect to future opportunities for postsecondary access and employment. States do have options for students who do not pass high stakes exit exams, including scoring options and testing options.

Recommendations produced from this study are as follows:

- Clarify the assumptions underlying state graduation requirements and diploma options.
- Ensure students with disabilities an opportunity to learn the materials they will be tested on in state and local assessments.
- Make high school graduation decisions based on multiple indicators of students' learning and skills.
- Clarify the implications of developing and granting alternative diploma options for students with disabilities.

It will be important to study the consequences – beyond the perceptions of those setting policies and those working with students – by examining data on the scores of students on high school exit exams, for example, and by following students across time. Continued attention to this important policy area for students with disabilities is essential.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Graduation Requirements	4
Alternative Diploma Options	7
Overview of the Study	8
Method.....	8
Results.....	9
Range and Variation in State Graduation Requirements and Diploma Options for Students with and without Disabilities	9
Increase in Graduation Requirements.....	10
Diploma Options.....	14
Allowances Made for Youth with Disabilities to Receive a Standard Diploma.....	17
Involvement of Community Stakeholders.....	20
State Use of Exit Exams—“High-Stakes” Testing	22
Intended and Unintended Consequences of State Graduation Requirements and Diploma Options.....	31
Consequences of a Single Diploma Option on Students with Disabilities	32
Consequences of Multiple Diploma Options on Students with Disabilities.....	33
Discussion.....	34
Recommendations.....	38
Conclusion	41
References.....	42