

**State-Defined Alternate Diplomas for Students with  
the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities**

**••• Tips for Advocates •••**

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the latest version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, allows states to develop and award a state-defined “alternate diploma.” This diploma is specifically for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities who are assessed using the state’s alternate assessment aligned to alternate academic achievement standards (AA-AAS). ESSA permits states that develop an alternate diploma, which satisfies the requirements below, to count students earning such a diploma as having received a “regular high school diploma” for purposes of calculating and reporting the state’s adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) (either four-year or extended year). Advocates for students with disabilities should be actively involved in the development of state policies regarding an alternate diploma.

**ESSA requires that such alternate diplomas be:**

- Standards-based;
- Aligned with the state requirements for the regular high school diploma; and
- Obtained within the time period for which the state ensures the availability of a free appropriate public education under section 612(a)(1) of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (20 U.S.C. 1412(a)(1)) (through age 21 in most states). (PL 114-95 §§8101 (23)(25))

The National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) and the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT) have developed an excellent resource on this topic, *Considerations for Developing State-Defined Alternate Diplomas for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities*, available at [https://nceo.info/Resources/publications/OnlinePubs/NTACT\\_Brief/default.html](https://nceo.info/Resources/publications/OnlinePubs/NTACT_Brief/default.html).

This document reiterates several of the points from the NCEO/NTACT brief and provides some additional considerations for advocates in states that have proposed the development of an alternate diploma.

## **A state-defined alternate diploma policy should:**

- Ensure that students who are eligible for the diploma are being instructed and assessed on the state academic content standards for the grade in which they are enrolled and are on track to pursue post-secondary education or competitive integrated employment (i.e., paid work in an integrated setting).
- Include course credit requirements and exit exam requirements that are aligned to the requirements for a regular high school diploma—the requirements must be standards-based and offer similar content.
- Revise the state’s guidelines regarding participation in the AA-AAS to ensure only students who have the most significant cognitive disabilities are assessed using this assessment, consistent with CFR §200.6 (c).
- Include strategies to ensure that the state does not exceed the 1% cap on the number of students who can participate in the AA-AAS imposed by ESSA. The 1% cap is based on all students who are assessed and equals approximately 10% of students with disabilities.
- Make clear that under ESSA students who take an AA-AAS cannot be precluded from attempting to meet the requirements of a regular high school diploma and that participation in an AA-AAS does not determine a student’s educational setting under IDEA.
- Make clear that obtaining an alternate diploma does not impact a student’s IDEA eligibility, unless the student has reached the exit age in the state (through age 21 in most states).
- Require professional development to ensure that the issues listed in the bullets above are properly addressed.
- Disaggregate and publicly report the state’s graduation rate data to show the percentage of students counted in the graduation rate who earned an alternate diploma.

## **A state-defined alternate diploma policy should NOT:**

- Include any requirements related to a student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals (even if IEP goals are standards-based).
- Merely “rework” existing lesser credentials, such as certificates of attendance/completion or IEP/FAPE diplomas that do not meet the requirements in ESSA.
- Focus on vocational/technical knowledge and skills, without a focus on the academic requirements in ESSA.
- Include requirements that are not included in the requirements for a regular high school diploma, such as attendance or conduct.
- Require that the alternate diploma be obtained in four years in order to be counted in the adjusted cohort graduation rate. A student obtaining an alternate diploma beyond four years can be counted in the state’s extended-year graduation rate, if applicable.

## **Additional Resources**

Should Your State Have An Alternate Diploma? Considerations and Recommended Steps, NCEO/NTACT Presentation at the Combined Federal Programs Meeting, December 2016

<http://apps1.seiservices.com/cfpm2016/Materials/Should Your Sate Have an Alternate Diploma.pdf>

U.S. Dept. of Education, Every Student Succeeds Act High School Graduation Rate Non-Regulatory Guidance, January 2017

<https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/essagraterateguidance.pdf>

CFR Part 200, Title I-Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged,

<https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2016-12-08/pdf/2016-29128.pdf>

Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), section 8101 (23) and (25).

<https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BILLS-114s1177enr/pdf/BILLS-114s1177enr.pdf>

ESSA Fact Sheet: Assessments for Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities, <http://www.parentcenterhub.org/essa-fact-sheet-alt-assess/>

Every Student Succeeds Act: Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities. Presentation by Ricki Sabia, J.D., Senior Education Policy Advisor for the National Down Syndrome Congress. <https://youtu.be/xmTBeaTysmQ>

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