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## Employer Perspectives on High School Diploma Options for Adolescents with Disabilities

Researchers Ryan Hartwig and Patricia L. Sitlington interviewed 25 employers representing a range of occupational categories to determine the effect that different types of diplomas may have on the employment of young adults with disabilities.

The purpose of the study was to determine employers' attitudes toward hiring people with disabilities who have earned different types of high school diplomas. The diploma options used for the study were taken from Johnson and Thurlow (2003), [\*A National Study on Graduation Requirements and Diploma Options for Youth with Disabilities\*](#), and included the following:

- **Occupational diploma:** A diploma that students receive for completing the requirements specializing in certain occupations, that is, metal fabricating, auto mechanics, carpentry, or other skills areas.
- **Certificate of completion, attendance, or achievement:** A diploma offered to students who have met the requirements of their special education program but not the requirements of the school's general education program.
- **GED:** A diploma offered to those who take the coursework and pass an exam offered by community colleges and/or high schools that covers very basic curriculum in the areas of math, science, reading, and writing.

### FINDINGS:

The primary interest of almost half of the employers' was whether prospective employees had graduated from high school rather than the specific type of diploma earned. Employers with no preference between types of diplomas said they were more willing to look at the individual's characteristics and how well he/she performs during the interview. They also indicated a tendency to look at a person's work ethic and expect those they hire to have a strong work ethic.

However, employers' willingness to hire students with each of the three diploma types presented in the interview varied significantly.

### ► OCCUPATIONAL DIPLOMA

The vast majority of employers interviewed (80%) were willing to hire those with occupational diplomas. In addition, there was little difference across occupational categories regarding this type of diploma. However, employers willing to hire people with occupational diplomas stated that they would hire them "to do repetitive work, to do work that does not require much thought, to do inventory, to put stickers on items, and as delivery drivers." Many also stated that the occupational diploma would need to relate to the specific job opening. Researchers noted, however, that the employers interviewed did not have a clear understanding of the "occupational diploma."

### ► CERTIFICATE OF COMPLETION, ATTENDANCE, OR ACHIEVEMENT

Employers interviewed showed the least likelihood of hiring those with certificates with almost half (44%) indicating they would not or are not sure. Just a little over half (55%) indicated a willingness to hire those with a certificate. Employers indicated that they would hire people with certificates to perform jobs such as "cleaning floors, sinks, and stools; caring for animals; shredding paper; vacuuming cars; housekeeping; doing laundry; washing dishes; bussing tables; preparing food; cutting books; and pulling weeds."

According to the researchers, it "seems clear that when those who have earned a certificate were hired, they would be placed in jobs that require very little academic skill....When comparing the jobs with the skills, it seems that employers expected prospective employees with certificates to be unable to learn academic skills."

### ► GED

Most of the employers interviewed (75%) were willing to hire people with disabilities who had earned GEDs. Employers expected prospective employees to "have communication, hygiene, social, and grooming skills ... and to be willing to work and have good attitudes, a good work ethic, and some sort of a work history."

Employers less willing to hire those with GEDs stated reasons such as "A person with a GED tells me one of two things: They either quit school for no apparent reason or they quit school due to unfortunate circumstances and had the will to go back and get a GED. Therefore I would have to look at the person's individual qualities."

## THE BOTTOM LINE

While small, the group of employers interviewed for the study was determined to be representative of occupational categories. However, the researchers could not control for the influence of the employers knowledge of the requirements of the ADA or the positive and negative experiences they may have encountered with employees with disabilities. Also, responses from employers in other areas of the country may differ from these findings.

Type of Diploma	Employer Considerations for Employment		
	Yes	No	Not Sure
Occupational diploma	20	4	1
Certificate of attendance, achievement, or completion	14	5	6
General Educational Development diploma	19	3	3

Note: Twenty-five employers were interviewed.

**Source:** Employer Perspectives on High School Diploma Options for Adolescents With Disabilities, Ryan Hartwig and Patricia L. Sitlington

Several important conclusions can be drawn from the study's findings. Among them are:

- Employers are willing to look at the individual characteristics of prospective employees rather than the type of diploma held.
- As a whole, employers were most willing to hire those with occupational diplomas (80%) and those with GEDs (76%).
- Employers tended to "stereotype a person with a GED, indicating that they would hire him or her for an unskilled labor position."
- Employers are much less likely to hire those who earned a certificate of completion, attendance, or achievement. Employers also indicated, "they would assign individuals with these certificates more menial jobs."

## DISCUSSION

Parents and special education advocates can draw on this research to help in transition planning for young people with disabilities. IDEA 2004 requires that transition planning include "appropriate measurable postsecondary goals based upon age appropriate transition assessments related to training, education, employment, and, where appropriate, independent living skills" (34 CFR 300.320 (b)(1)).

According to Dr. Larry Kortering, Project Co-Principal Investigator at the [National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center](#), the transition assessment process must be "multifaceted and ongoing" and the assessment results must be used as a "driving force for a student's high school education." Teachers should use assessment results to link what students are doing in school to what they

want to do when they leave school. Lastly, transition planning should also include adult service providers to help with the student's transition from school.

It is critical for transition planning to include the type of diploma the student is expecting to earn. Both students and parents should be involved in this decision. Students should be encouraged to earn a regular high school diploma if at all possible—even if that diploma takes longer to obtain than the standard number of years, typically four. Both parents and students should understand the implications of earning something other than a regular high school diploma.

As the researchers who conducted this study noted, “care should be taken in awarding students with disabilities a certificate of completion, attendance, or achievement. Along with being the diploma option least favored by the employers interviewed, this option was also associated with menial jobs requiring menial skills.”

**The Research:** Employer Perspectives on High School Diploma Options for Adolescents With Disabilities, Ryan Hartwig and Patricia L. Sitlington, University of Northern Iowa. Published in Journal of Disability Policy Studies 2008, Volume 19 Number 1, June 2008.

**Additional Resources:**

[Age Appropriate Transition Assessment Guide](#), National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center

[Transition Planning Under IDEA 2004](#), Advocate Academy Webinar Archive, The Advocacy Institute

[Transition Assessments for Students with Disabilities](#), Advocate Academy Webinar Archive, The Advocacy Institute



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