

November 2016

Jointly published by the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) and the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT)



# Considerations for Developing State-Defined Alternate Diplomas for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities

Title I of the 2015 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), allows for the inclusion in graduation accountability of a diploma option for students with significant cognitive disabilities who participate in alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards (AA-AAS; see Table 1). The inclusion of a **State-defined alternate diploma** in the Title I Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) accountability is new.

## Table 1: Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015: Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate and State-Defined Alternate Diplomas

The Every Students Succeeds Act (Public Law 114-354) states that:

SEC. 8101. DEFINITIONS.....

(23) EXTENDED-YEAR ADJUSTED COHORT GRADUATION RATE.—

(A) IN GENERAL.—The term ‘extended year adjusted cohort graduation rate’ means the fraction—

(i) the denominator of which consists of the number of students who form the original cohort of entering first-time students in grade 9 enrolled in the high school no later than the date by which student membership data must be collected annually by State educational agencies for submission to the National Center for Education Statistics under section 153 of the Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002 (20 U.S.C. 9543), adjusted by—

- (I) adding the students who joined that cohort, after the date of the determination of the original cohort; and
- (II) subtracting only those students who left that cohort, after the date of the determination of the original cohort, as described in subparagraph (B); and

(ii) the numerator of which—

(I) consists of the sum of—

(aa) the number of students in the cohort, as adjusted under clause (i), who earned a regular high school diploma before, during, or at the conclusion of—

(AA) one or more additional years beyond the fourth year of high school; or

(BB) a summer session immediately following the additional year of high school; and

(bb) all students with the most significant cognitive disabilities in the cohort, as adjusted under clause (i), assessed using the alternate assessment aligned to alternate academic achievement standards under section 1111(b)(2)(D) and awarded a State-defined alternate diploma that is—

(AA) standards-based;

(BB) aligned with the State requirements for the regular high school diploma; and

(CC) 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)); and

(II) shall not include any student awarded a recognized equivalent of a diploma, such as a general equivalency diploma, certificate of completion, certificate of attendance, or similar lesser credential.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, 2015b (pp. 394-395).

Twenty-four states offered diploma options specifically for students with disabilities in 2015, and additional states had multiple diploma and certificate options (e.g., completion, attendance, career and technical education) available for all students (Achieve & NCEO, 2016). In draft regulations, the U.S. Department of Education (2016) indicated that its review of state diploma options showed that no states had a State-defined alternate diploma that met the requirements outlined in ESSA for this diploma.

This Brief describes the criteria that must be met for a State-defined alternate diploma to meet federal requirements for inclusion in the

ACGR. It includes considerations for states contemplating the development of a State-defined alternate diploma, and recommends steps for those deciding to adopt a State-defined alternate diploma.

Although the focus of this Brief is State-defined alternate diplomas, it is important to note that the availability of this option should not preclude students with significant cognitive disabilities from receiving a regular diploma. All students, including students with significant cognitive disabilities, should have the opportunity to pursue a regular diploma by meeting the same criteria as their peers

without disabilities. The State-defined alternate diploma is another graduation option that may be appropriate for some students with significant cognitive disabilities.

A **regular high school diploma** is “the standard high school diploma awarded to the preponderance of students in the State that is fully aligned with State standards, or a higher diploma” (U.S. Department of Education, 2015b). States can offer multiple regular diplomas and more rigorous “honors” diplomas, all of which are considered regular diplomas and count in a state’s adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) calculation (Achieve & NCEO, 2016). An IEP diploma does not count as a regular diploma.

## The Law

To ensure states are measuring student graduation rates in consistent ways, ESSA requires states to use a four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) and, if a state chooses, may also use an extended-year ACGR.

The **Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR)** is defined as the number of students who graduate in four years with a regular high school diploma divided by the number of students who were first-time 9<sup>th</sup> graders four years earlier (adjusted for transfers, émigrés, those who died, and those who entered prison or a juvenile justice facility). The **extended-year ACGR** includes the number of students earning a regular diploma before, during, or at the conclusion of one or more additional years beyond the fourth year or a summer session immediately following the additional year of high school.

ESSA states that the State-defined alternate diploma is for students who participate in the AA-AAS. It must have State-defined requirements, and meet the following specific criteria:

- Be standards-based

- Be aligned with State requirements for the regular high school diploma
- Be obtained within the time period for which the State ensures the availability of a free appropriate public education (FAPE)

ESSA also indicates that equivalents of diplomas (e.g., general equivalency diploma, certificate of completion, certificate of attendance, other similar “lesser credential”) **do not** count toward the calculation of the ACGR.

## Requirement 1: Be Standards-Based

The first ESSA requirement for State-defined alternate diplomas is that graduation requirements must be standards-based. ESSA and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) require all students, including students with significant cognitive disabilities who participate in alternate assessments, to have the opportunity to learn academic content based on *grade-level content standards*. In November, 2015 the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) provided guidance on free appropriate public education (FAPE). It clarified that students with disabilities should have the opportunity to learn the same curriculum as their peers without disabilities, one that is “based on the State’s academic content standards” for the grade in which a student is enrolled (U.S. Department of Education, 2015a). This opportunity will prepare students with disabilities to be college- and career-ready by the time they graduate from high school.

Access to grade-level content is needed for students with significant cognitive disabilities to develop 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. Students with significant cognitive disabilities can learn academic content when provided with the opportunity to learn, although they may learn grade-level content with reduced complexity and breadth, and master it in different ways

as measured by standards-based alternate assessments (Browder, Wakeman, & Flowers, 2016; Kleinert, Browder, & Towles-Reeves, 2009; Lee, Browder, Wakeman, Quenemoen, & Thurlow, 2015).

States that currently have an alternate diploma option will need to review current course and alternate assessment (if applicable) requirements for graduation. States should determine whether required courses are standards-based, and if a proficient score on the alternate assessment is required, whether that assessment is standards-based as well. If not, states will need to revise their requirements.

Similarly, states developing requirements for new State-defined alternate diplomas will need to ensure course and assessment requirements are based on grade-level content standards. For course requirements, it will be vital to carefully consider how to design and implement courses, instructional units, and pathways that do not change the content standards. States should focus on designing and implementing courses that are rigorous, yet adapted to meet the needs of this group of students. As states shift to more rigorous course requirements they will need to consider how to support schools and teachers

as they develop new skills that will enable them to successfully instruct this population. Similar supports for educators will be needed if the state includes an alternate assessment requirement for graduation with a State-defined alternate diploma.

## **Requirement 2: Be Aligned with State Requirements for Regular Diploma**

The second federal requirement for State-defined alternate diplomas to count toward ACGR for Title I accountability is that they must be aligned with State requirements for regular diplomas. This requirement suggests that the same kinds of requirements that exist for a regular diploma must exist for the State-defined alternate diploma.

For example, if a state requires completion of specific standards-based courses, then the State-defined alternate diploma also must require the completion of specific standards-based courses, although not necessarily the same standards-based courses as for the regular diploma. The number of required courses (credits) in required content areas should be aligned across diploma options. For example, if students who receive a regular diploma are required to pass English Language Arts (ELA) 9, 10, 11, and 12, an aligned requirement for students with significant cognitive disabilities might be that they pass ELA 9, 10, 11, and 12, although the specific criteria for passing could be different.

Similarly, if a state has assessment requirements for the regular diploma, then the state should have aligned requirements for the State-defined alternate diploma. For example, if a state requires a student to be proficient on the state's high school general assessment, an aligned requirement for students with significant cognitive disabilities might be that the student must be proficient



on the state's high school alternate assessment.

### **Requirement 3: Be Obtained During FAPE Period**

The third requirement is that the diploma be obtained within the time period for which the state ensures the availability of FAPE. This time period is defined by the state. Although most states recognize the period required by IDEA (3-21 years), several states do extend the years for which FAPE is provided, and in at least one state it goes to age 26.

#### **Implied Requirement: "State-Defined"**

The name of the option for students with significant cognitive disabilities to be counted in a state's ACGR, "State-defined alternate diploma," implicitly adds a fourth requirement for states; the requirements for earning an alternate diploma must be *State-defined*.

Some states currently allow local education agencies to set graduation policy requirements for students with disabilities. According to a 2014 analysis (Thurlow, Albus, Lazarus, & Vang, 2014), the graduation policies of 15 states allowed students to meet requirements set by the IEP team. In addition, the policies of seven states referred to local district requirements for students with disabilities (e.g., local districts could set requirements, districts could adapt some of the requirements, etc.). Policies that indicate students with disabilities can meet requirements either by meeting local requirements or via requirements that are set by the IEP team would not meet the requirements for a State-defined alternate diploma as defined by ESSA.

#### **Considerations About Whether to Offer a State-defined Alternate Diploma**

States may want to consider several questions when deciding whether to offer a State-defined alternate diploma option:

- **Do current diploma options adequately meet the needs of all students, including students**

**with significant cognitive disabilities?** It is important to consider whether current options provide students with significant cognitive disabilities with a viable pathway to a diploma option that provides meaningful access to college, careers, and community (Kearns, Kleinert, Harrison, Sheppard-Jones, Hall, & Jones, 2011; Kleinert, Kearns, Quenemoen, & Thurlow, 2013). Students with significant cognitive disabilities should have the opportunity to earn a diploma that shows they have completed a rigorous standards-based program of study.

- **Do stakeholders want a diploma for students with significant cognitive disabilities?** States should have discussions with educators and parents of students with significant cognitive disabilities about the possibility of a State-defined alternate diploma (Thurlow & Johnson, 2013). These discussions should include frank conversations about the meaning of a State-defined alternate diploma for the student's college and career readiness. Another group of stakeholders should be consulted if educators and parents are in favor of pursuing a State-defined alternate diploma. Businesses, industry councils, and educational institutions that provide employment and post-secondary education services to students with significant cognitive disabilities should be convened to discuss the implications of a State-defined alternate diploma, including whether it could lead to a possible "industry-recognized credential."
- **Do students with significant cognitive disabilities have the opportunity to learn rigorous standards based content?** Federal requirements (e.g., ESSA, IDEA) clearly indicate all students, including students with significant cognitive disabilities, should have the opportunity to learn the same standards-based content as their same-age peers, yet there is strong evidence that this often does not occur. The development of a graduation

option for this group of students, one that has rigorous requirements, can help promote access to the grade-level standards-based curriculum. Educators will need support in this shift.

## Steps for Creating a State-defined Alternate Diploma

States that decide to create a new State-defined alternate diploma or to adjust the requirements for a current diploma option for students with significant cognitive disabilities should consider taking several steps:

- 1. Define the meaning of “State-defined alternate diploma.”** It is important to define the purpose and meaning of the State-defined alternate diploma. Stakeholders (including educators, parents, post-secondary education institutions, and businesses) should agree with the purpose and meaning of this new diploma option before it is implemented.
- 2. Examine policy adjustments that need to be made to incorporate the State-defined alternate diploma into current educational policies.** Consideration should be given to whether receipt of an alternate diploma terminates eligibility for FAPE, as it does in some states for students who earn a regular diploma. It also will be essential to examine the extent to which the state’s alternate achievement standards are aligned to college- and career-readiness standards for students with significant cognitive disabilities, to ensure that the student who meets them “is on track to pursue postsecondary education or employment consistent with PL 93-112,” as required by ESSA (U.S. Department of Education, 2015b). PL 93-112, now identified as the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA), not only reforms and modernizes the public workforce system, but also addresses employment challenges facing people with disabilities. States are required to use 15%
- 3. Determine the course and exit exam requirements that will align with those requirements for the regular diploma.** The specific course requirements (and exit exam criteria, if they exist) to earn a State-defined alternate diploma may differ from the requirements for students without disabilities who receive a regular diploma. Nevertheless, they must be standards-based and cover similar content. Even though students with significant cognitive disabilities may learn grade-level content and demonstrate their knowledge and skills in different ways from their peers, the course and exit exam requirements should be aligned.
- 4. Revise assessment participation requirements to ensure that only those students with the most significant cognitive disabilities participate in alternate exit exams to earn a State-defined alternate diploma.** It will be important to have clear and rigorous participation and proficiency requirements for the State-defined alternate diploma. Exemption from exit exam requirements is not appropriate if other students have exit exam requirements. Proficiency requirements also should be rigorous to ensure students who must pass an alternate exit exam as one component of meeting the requirements for the State-defined alternate diploma demonstrate the knowledge and skills represented by the diploma.
- 5. Provide professional development to promote access to the general curriculum and opportunity to learn for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.** For many years, students with significant cognitive

of federal grant funds for pre-employment transition services for youth with disabilities, and half of Supported Employment grants must be devoted to services for youth with the most significant cognitive disabilities (ARC, 2016).

disabilities were not held to academic content standards and were not provided opportunity to learn. Continued attention to the need for professional development is an essential part of optimizing the opportunities provided by a State-defined alternate diploma. As part of this emphasis, it should be stressed that the availability of the State-defined alternate diploma should not prevent any student with a significant cognitive disability from working toward meeting the requirements for a regular diploma.

## Conclusions

In some states, course and exit exam requirements for a student with disabilities to receive a regular diploma are exactly the same as for their peers without disabilities regardless of whether the student has a significant cognitive disability. In other states, the course requirements are close to being the same, and in still other states they are far from the requirements for other students (Thurlow, Albus, & Lazarus, 2015; Thurlow et al., 2014). In many states, students with significant cognitive disabilities have been held to requirements for either the regular diploma or a different diploma option that are not standards-based. Frequently, especially for students with significant cognitive disabilities, the individualized education program (IEP) team is allowed to alter course requirements, make course substitutions, and change or eliminate exit exam requirements to graduate (Thurlow et al., 2014). To have a “State-defined alternate diploma” that meets ESSA requirements, a state will need to ensure that any graduation policy, course, or exit exam requirements for the alternate diploma be standards based, aligned with State requirements for a regular diploma, obtained within the FAPE period, and defined by the State.

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## Acknowledgments

This Brief was written by Martha Thurlow, David Test, Sheryl Lazarus, Matt Klare, and Catherine Fowler. It was published jointly by the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) and the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT).

NCEO is supported through a Cooperative Agreement (#H326G160001) with the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Research to Practice Division. The Center is affiliated with the Institute on Community Integration at the College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota. Project Officer: David Egnor.

NTACT is funded by a Cooperative Agreement (#H326E140004) with the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS). NTACT is located at the University of North Carolina Charlotte. OSEP Project Officer: Dr. Selete Avoke. RSA Project Officer: Kristen Rhinehart-Fernandez.

Opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U.S. Department of Education.