

## ISSUE BRIEF:

### Graduation requirements and students with special needs

The majority of students with disabilities have the same ability and opportunity to earn a regular diploma as all students, with the support of specialized instruction and accommodations as appropriate. Additionally, all students with disabilities, beginning no later than the first individual educational program (IEP) to be in effect when the student turns 16, have a transition plan developed to help ensure they are prepared to achieve their goals for life after graduation.

The Every Student Succeeds Act, passed in 2015, defines both a **regular high school diploma** and an **alternate diploma**. The definition for a regular high school diploma was not new, but was further clarified – it had been in regulation since 2008. The alternate diploma was new and was created to give states the option to create a diploma for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities and count them as graduates if the diploma is: *standards-based; aligned with the State requirements for the regular high school diploma; 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 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.*

Based on the clarified federal definition of a regular high school diploma and the requirements for the provision of a free appropriate public education under IDEA, the South Dakota Department of Education has intensified technical assistance for school districts and oversight in this area to ensure students are being afforded their right to continue to receive appropriate special education services until the district's obligation has been met through the student receiving a regular high school diploma or aging out of eligibility for special education services.

#### **Preparing students for life after high school**

For students whose IEP teams determine it may not be appropriate to take the required courses to receive a diploma or who may receive modifications to required courses, although they may not be awarded a regular high school diploma, the district has flexibility to issue a certificate of attendance/completion, district diploma, or other form of acknowledgement. The student is eligible to continue to receive services until aging out of special education services at the end of the fiscal year they turn 21 or achieve a regular high school diploma. In elective courses, modifications would be allowable and would not generally impact a student's ability to earn a regular diploma.

South Dakota provides extensive training and supports for teachers through the Department of Education and through an interagency agreement that supports the [Transition Services Liaison Project](#). The state annually measures graduation, dropout, secondary transition IEP goals, and postsecondary transition, and reports these indicators at the federal level. Districts are also measured on their performance on the indicators at the local level.

#### **Accommodations and modifications**

IEP teams may determine that a student needs accommodations or modifications in a course to successfully access learning and demonstrate knowledge.

**Accommodations:** the teaching supports and services that students may require to successfully demonstrate learning. Accommodations do not change curriculum expectations, or the knowledge and skills students are expected to demonstrate.

## ISSUE BRIEF:

### Graduation requirements and students with special needs

**Modifications:** practices that change, lower, or reduce learning expectations. Providing modifications to students may have the unintended consequence of reducing their opportunities to learn critical content.

**Example:** Shortening assignments. If a teacher assigns 20 math problems (i.e. 10 on double-digit addition and 10 on double-digit subtraction), but a student on an IEP is only required to complete the 10 addition problems, this is a **modification**. The student is not expected to demonstrate the same knowledge and skills that is expected of all students to meet the standards.

However, if the teacher shortens the assignment to half the problems, but requires an even mix of addition and subtraction problems, this is an **accommodation**. The student may not have as much practice and reinforcement opportunity as other students, but the student is still able to demonstrate knowledge of the full scope of the standards.

Both accommodations and modifications are allowable for students with disabilities. Because accommodations do not reduce learning expectations, the use of accommodations does not impact a student's ability to earn a regular high school diploma. If modifications are used, the IEP team needs to determine the impact it has on whether the student can learn and demonstrate knowledge of the course standards.

Parents, teachers, and students should discuss and clearly understand the impact of accommodations and modifications on a student's ability to earn a diploma and meet their goals after graduation.

#### **Alternate diploma and alternate achievement standards**

South Dakota weighed carefully whether to develop a state-defined alternate diploma but determined not to pursue it due to many factors, including but not limited to, the number of students eligible to work toward an alternate diploma and a variety of capacity issues, including teacher shortages. This decision involved input from multiple stakeholder groups. As of the 2018-19 school year, only eight states had adopted a state-defined alternate diploma based on the federal regulations.

Students whose progress toward meeting content standards is measured by alternate achievement standards/descriptors would not be considered to have met the same standards requirements to obtain a regular high school diploma. Measuring students' understanding based on alternate achievement standards/descriptors would essentially equate to a modification of general content, because it reduces the scope and complexity of the knowledge and skills expected of the student. At any time, an IEP team can determine that a student can enroll in the courses required to achieve a regular diploma and not modify the coursework, in order for the student to meet the required courses necessary to achieve a regular high school diploma.

This resource describes for parents the difference between content standards and achievement descriptors and what alternate achievement descriptors are: <https://www.parentcenterhub.org/essa-guide-standards/>

#### **Links to related data**

<https://doe.sd.gov/ofm/data-childcount.aspx>

<https://sdschools.sd.gov/#/home>

<https://doe.sd.gov/sped/SPP.aspx>

<https://doe.sd.gov/sped/StatePublicReports.aspx>