



Graduation Requirements Options: What Families

By Mindy Larson, Curtis Richards, and Joan Wills

Every parent wants to see his or her child successfully complete high school. Therefore, caring adults in students' lives need to understand the changing landscape of graduation requirements and diploma options to ensure students graduate prepared for college and careers.

States have been making widespread revisions to graduation requirements and curricula since the 2005 National Education Summit on High Schools, when governors, business leaders, and educators came to a consensus that schools must do a better job of preparing students for success in both college and careers. The impetus for change stemmed from concerns about high dropout rates, low achievement scores, and reports from postsecondary institutions and employers that too many high school graduates lacked college- or career-readiness.

To ensure all students complete high school ready to enter postsecondary education and the world of work, states are implementing various high school reforms including:

- Increasing academic standards for all students;
- Conducting statewide and local district reading and math proficiency testing;
- Requiring students to identify career and postsecondary goals in their first year of high school, or earlier, and develop individual learning plans aligned with those goals; and
- Developing exit exams linked to a student's eligibility to receive a high school diploma.

Parents and families have a key role to play in helping students understand the new graduation requirements, define college and career goals, and choose a pathway to earning a diploma that is relevant to students' goals and meaningful to employers and postsecondary institutions. For parents of students with disabilities, it is especially critical to understand the differences between the standard diploma and any alternatives offered by the school and to make informed decisions about the student's program of study.

Reforms focused on college readiness

To ensure the standard high school diploma has meaning for postsecondary institutions and employers, most states have been adopting higher academic standards to prepare students for college-level work without needing to take remedial courses. As a result, the number of credits and type of courses students must take to obtain a standard high school diploma has changed in most states. According to a survey of state education policies, 28 states currently require high school students to earn between 21 and 24 credits to obtain a standard diploma. The required courses in these states typically include four credits in English/language arts, three to four credits in mathematics, three to four credits in social studies, and two to four credits in science. States also are requiring students to take and pass specific courses in a given discipline—for example, passing Algebra II is increasingly required to graduate. The rigor of courses is also increasing.

Currently, 25 states require students to pass exit exams to receive a standard diploma. Almost all exit exams test student proficiency in both math and English; some also test social studies and science knowledge.

While each state currently has its own academic standards and exams, efforts are underway to develop and adopt common standards and assessment tools across states. Supported by the National Governors Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and the National PTA, the Common Core State Standards Initiative (www.corestandards.org) is led by 48 states, two territories and the District of Columbia, which have joined together to develop standards for English/language arts and mathematics for kindergarten through grade 12. Each is determining individually how to implement and assess student knowledge based on the standards, but, most are collaborating on the development of improved common assessments. For the first time, those using the common assessment tools will use 12th-grade tests, a practice that could become a graduation requirement.

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Understanding diploma options

Recognizing that some students may exceed minimum graduation standards while others may fall short, states are experimenting with an array of diploma options (see Table 1, “Description of Diploma Options”). Some states offer special diplomas, often called honors diplomas, to students who take the most rigorous course work, achieve a high grade-point average, or post high scores on state exams. Other diploma options, sometimes called alternative diplomas, are designed for students with disabilities who receive special education services, students who fail exit exams, and students who do not take the required core courses. Included among these alternative diploma options are certificates of completion, IEP/special education diplomas, and occupational/vocational diplomas.

States vary in the allowances they make for students with disabilities to receive a standard diploma. Some make no allowances at all, while others reduce the number of credits a student needs, offer alternate courses that can be used to earn required course credits, lower performance criteria, or permit the IEP team to make allowances and grant extensions, and other adjustments.

Parents and students need to look at what alternative diploma options mean in the eyes of future employers and postsecondary institutions. Alternative diplomas typically are viewed as being based on less rigorous academic standards than, and therefore not equal to, a standard high school diploma (See Table 2, “Advantages and Disadvantages of an Alternative Diploma”). This could make it more difficult for a student to obtain a job or be admitted to his or her postsecondary school of choice.

Reforms focused on career-readiness

The adoption of career-readiness as a goal alongside college-readiness during the aforementioned 2005 education summit was a momentous and unprecedented act. Since the summit, states and territories have implemented new policies and promoted school practices that ensure all students are career-ready upon graduation.

Table 1. Description of Diploma Options

Diploma Option	Description
Honors diploma/diploma of high distinction	Students must achieve at a high academic level. Often this diploma requires a certain grade-point average (GPA).
Standard diploma	A student must complete a certain number of credits and obtain a minimum GPA to receive a diploma.
Certificate of completion/attendance	This option, for students who have not received the grades necessary to obtain a standard or honors diploma, demonstrates that a student completed a set number of classes or that a student qualifies for a diploma because of sufficient attendance in a set period of time.
Certificate of achievement	This option demonstrates that the student has achieved a certain level of performance. This type of diploma certifies that the student was present and performed to the best of his or her ability but did not attain the necessary grades and/or credits to obtain a standard or honors diploma.
IEP/special education diploma	This is an option for students receiving special education services and those who have an IEP. Requirements are usually set by the student’s IEP team and are therefore unique to each student.
Occupational diploma	For students who are enrolled in vocational programs, this type of diploma certifies that a student has demonstrated a specific level of competence in an occupational area.

To help students make informed career decisions, schools are recognizing the need to provide comprehensive career navigation services starting no later than middle school by which students

- Complete career assessments to clarify their interests, values, and skills;
- Learn about a wide range of career options and pathways;
- Develop the soft skills, such as dependability, integrity, and other work-related personal attributes, employers expect all new employees to have;
- Gain workplace skills through internships, summer jobs, volunteer work, and job shadowing; and
- Set personal career goals and develop a plan to accomplish them.

While schools typically have some guidance services, some states are requiring schools to be more intentional in educating students about career choices and pathways. One strategy adopted by about half of all states is the individual learning plan, also called a graduation plan, student success plan, or curriculum plan. An individual learning plan typically documents a student’s

- Career interests;
- Goals for postsecondary education, training and employment;
- Courses he/she will take to meet graduation requirements and achieve personal goals; and
- Other activities and services planned to help the student succeed.

Some states require that students create an individual learning plan in order to graduate from high school while other merely encourage it. The plan usually is developed during middle school

or at the beginning of high school. Parents are key partners in developing these plan; some states require parents to approve the plan before it becomes official. The plans are intended to be revisited and revised throughout the student’s high school years to track progress and address changes in interests and goals.

Another strategy states are using to promote career-readiness is requiring a certain number of career course credits to be completed before a student can graduate. For example, Delaware requires students to earn three credits through preplanned, sequential courses associated with their chosen career path.

Many schools are restructuring courses to add information about career pathways to curricula. Schools are also incorporating more work-based learning activities into classes that teach students academic and career-readiness skills. Work-based learning strategies are especially common in school districts struggling with high dropout rates and significant numbers of students who are behind in the credits. Recognizing the need for multiple pathways to graduation, these districts are using work-based learning strategies, such as career academies and career-themed or technical schools to teach core academic course content in a more engaging way. Multiple pathways strategies also include providing smaller and more personalized learning environments and flexibility in the structure of the school calendar such as nontraditional school hours, extended class periods, and longer school years. Parents of students who are significantly behind in credits or at risk of dropping out should inquire with their school district to find out if similar school models are available.

Table 2. Advantages and Disadvantages of an Alternative Diploma

Diploma Option/Policy	Advantages	Disadvantages
<p>Certificate Options. Certificates for attendance, completion, achievement, etc. are available to all students. Requirements can vary considerably, and may or may not allow students with IEPs to meet them in different ways.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintains the integrity of the requirements for earning a standard diploma. • Provides other exit options for students not meeting the requirements for a standard diploma. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides exit document that may or may not be useful for entering post-secondary schooling or gaining employment. Little is known about the value of these options. • Flags those students receiving special education services.
<p>Special Education Diploma. Diploma or certificate available only to students with IEPs. This type of diploma typically is added to other options for non-IEP students.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizes that students with disabilities may be working on different standards from other students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not promote access to the general education curriculum.

Source: National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) Policy Direction, Number 10, Jan. 2000.

What families can do

In light of the changing requirements for high school graduation, PTAs need to help families become proactive and informed to ensure students will graduate both college- and career-ready. Following are some practical suggestions to make to your school's families:


Become fully informed

- Seek clear information about high school program options and graduation requirements no later than middle school.
- Request regular updates on your child's progress towards a standard high school diploma or alternate exit credential.
- Inquire whether an individual learning plan (ILP) is required in your state.
- Inquire about career and technical program options and their alignment with professional and industry standards.
- Communicate with teachers about course expectations and how they relate to rigorous academic standards.
- Learn how to interpret the school's online report card on their Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), the number of teachers who are "highly qualified," and data about school attendance, dropouts, and graduation rate.

Provide ongoing support to your child

- Support your child by making sure he or she attends school every day and completes all assigned homework.
- If individualized learning support is needed, help your child access services provided by the school or community organizations.
- Discuss your child's strengths and interests with him or her, and explore together possible career and education goals for after high school.
- Ensure your child is taking the courses needed for entry into the postsecondary education program or career path of his or her choice.
- Accompany your child on postsecondary campus and program visits.
- Emphasize that education is key to achieving dreams and future economic security.
- Discuss the consequences of important educational decisions, such as graduation and diploma options.
- Partner with the school to develop an individual learning plan, if required.
- Reinforce development of a positive work ethic by helping your child set goals, complete assignments, manage time, meet high expectations, and persist through challenges.

Get involved in education advocacy

- Speak up for what your child needs to succeed by insisting that teachers hold your child to high expectations in rigorous content at every opportunity.
- Request flexibility to address individual student concerns. Communicate with teachers and other school staff about your child's individual interests, dreams, and concerns.
- Request that teachers inform you of any concerns about behavior or academic progress.
- Demand that schools provide curriculum and program options based on a universal design of learning experiences, including differentiated instruction to teach in different ways to suit students' learning styles, and targeted interventions, if needed. Seek help, if needed, through school and community organizations, including the state and local PTA, parent information and resource centers (PIRCs), and family engagement specialists.
- Encourage schools and community organizations to sponsor afterschool and summer programs that will provide opportunities for hands-on and work-based learning outside the classroom and exposure to mentors and role models.
- Advocate for improving inadequate programs and adding missing services at school board meetings, and legislative budget hearings.
- Volunteer to serve on school improvement teams or advisory boards, perhaps through your PTA, to contribute family perspectives. Finally, to stay informed on the latest happenings on Capitol Hill and to learn more about important legislative issues affecting families, schools, and communities, join the PTA Takes Action Network at PTA.org/takesaction. 

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IEL houses the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth), a youth technical assistance center funded by the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy.

Parts of this article were adapted from resources published by the NCWD/Youth through a grant/contract/cooperative agreement from the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy (Number #OD-16519-07-75-4-11). For more information and other resources, contact the Collaborative at (877) 871-0744, contact@ncwd-youth.info, or www.ncwd-youth.info.