

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES, GRADUATION, AND A FAPE

Frequently Asked Questions about Graduation of Students with
Disabilities in Arizona's Schools

Same Opportunity

- Students with disabilities have the same opportunity to earn a high school diploma as all other students
- Arizona does not have alternative high school diplomas
- A regular high school diploma is earned by receiving a passing grade in the courses required by the Arizona State Board of Education and any courses required by the individual Public Education Agency (PEA)



How Does High School Graduation Affect the Right to a FAPE?

- Students who graduate from high school with a **regular high school diploma** are no longer entitled to receive a FAPE.
 - Students with disabilities who do not earn a regular high school diploma may continue to receive a FAPE until they “age out.”
-

What is a Regular High School Diploma in Arizona?

- A regular high school diploma is a written acknowledgement by the PEA's governing board that a student has met the graduation requirements established by the AZ State Board of Education by successfully earning a passing grade in courses **aligned to the state academic standards**.
- A GED is **not** a regular high school diploma.
- A certificate of completion is **not** a regular high school diploma.

Who Determines if a Course Is Aligned to State Standards?

- The PEA determines if its coursework is aligned to state standards.
- ADE does not determine whether coursework is aligned to state academic standards.
- Students who participate in the alternate assessment may receive credit toward graduation for coursework that is aligned to state academic standards through core connectors.



What Can the IEP Team Do with Regard to Graduation Requirements?

- IEP teams may determine the sequence of courses and which classes the student might take to fulfill the minimum competency requirements as long as the courses are aligned to state academic standards.
 - Mastery of IEP goals should enable students with disabilities to progress in the minimum course of study set forth by the Arizona State Board of Education and the PEA, but mastery of IEP goals is not a substitute for earning the course credits required for graduation.
-

Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services Guidance

- “the authority to set and/or modify those standards rests solely with the State” (which, in Arizona, is the State Board of Education) and “[g]iving IEP teams authority to apply different standards for promotion or graduation to students with disabilities will result in those students being taught to different and, [sic] potentially lower, standards than students without disabilities, thus depriving them of the same opportunities to learn that are available to their non-disabled peers.” Failing to apply the same academic standards to students with disabilities would be inconsistent with the IDEA’s definition of special education, which requires schools to specially design instruction to meet the unique needs of children with disabilities and provide access to the general curriculum so that they can meet the educational standards that apply to all children.

What if a Student Masters All IEP Goals but Is Unable to Earn Required Course Credit?

- The student does not earn a regular high school diploma and is eligible to receive a FAPE until they age out. A GED or certificate of completion does not exit a student from special education.

What if a Student Earns All Required Course Credit but Does Not Master All IEP Goals?

- Mastery of IEP goals is not required for a student to earn a regular high school diploma.
- Completion of all transition activities and/or mastery of IEP transition goals are not required to earn a regular high school diploma.

How Are Graduation Requirements and Postsecondary Transition Activities Different?

- Graduation requirements are defined as the minimum course of study and corresponding competency requirements established by the Arizona State Board of Education and the PEA that all students must meet in order to receive a regular high school diploma.
- Postsecondary transition activities are intended to position a child with a disability to pursue employment, education/training, and independent living after high school, in accordance with the purpose of the IDEA. The transition services can identify specific instruction and/or activities directly related to measurable postsecondary goals (MPGs) that could take place in a required course. It is important to note that the course of study outlined in a student's IEP is part of the transition activities and not the student's graduation plan. The courses listed in the IEP are targeted to provide the student with the opportunity to gain knowledge and skills directly related to the MPGs and are not designed to be an exhaustive list of graduation requirements. Transition activities are integrated into and occur simultaneously with a student's coursework and are not delayed until after coursework toward graduation requirements has been completed.



What Documentation Is Required When a Student with a Disability Graduates with a Regular High School Diploma or Ages Out of Special Education?

PEAs must provide the student with a summary of his or her academic achievement and functional performance, which must include recommendations to assist an exiting student in meeting his or her postsecondary goals. Additionally, the PEA must provide prior written notice to the eligible student or to his or her parents, if the student has not reached the age of majority. PEAs are not required to evaluate a student with a disability whose end of eligibility for special education and related services results from the student aging out or graduating.

Do PEAs Continue to Receive Funding for Students after their Four-Year High School Cohort Has Graduated?

- The graduation of a student's cohort would not impact the PEA's ability to receive funding for a student who has not yet received a regular high school diploma or aged out. PEAs receive funding for any full- or part-time student, as those terms are defined in A.R.S. § 15-901(A)(1).

Talk Early, Talk Often

- Do not wait until late April or May to discuss graduation with students and parents. Avoid surprises.
- Begin discussions around transition when the student enters high school. There is no requirement to wait until the student turns 16. This is an evolving conversation.
- For questions regarding providing appropriate transition services or best practices in transition planning, please [email the Secondary Transition team](#).

How Might the COVID-19 Pandemic Impact the Graduation Conversation for Students with Disabilities?

- Students learning online or remotely may have failed coursework required to earn a high school diploma.
- Parents may request an additional year.
- Compensatory services may be considered, but the student has earned the required credits to graduate.
- Parent or student confusion about credits and virtual instruction
- Students unable to complete transition activities

These are examples for discussion only and do not represent all scenarios that your district may face.