

Students with Disabilities and the new Graduation Requirements

Most students with disabilities, when provided with special education support and accommodations, are able to meet all high school graduation requirements and earn the diploma just as students without disabilities. The high school graduation rule recognizes that a small number of students with disabilities will need special considerations while maintaining rigor as they work toward the high school diploma.

The Role of the IEP team

The IEP team, which includes the parent and the student, plays a critical role in identifying desired post-secondary outcomes and then defining the course of study and supports the student will need to reach those outcomes. Students are required to have a transition plan as part of their IEP prior to entry to 9th grade or age 16, whichever comes first. This plan should be the “guide to graduation” and should clearly begin to delineate the path and the supports necessary to assist the student to achieve graduation. Parents and students must have a clear understanding of the requirements to achieve a high school diploma so that the IEP team can plan with the student how she or he will meet those requirements. It is important that they receive accurate and clear information regarding the new graduation rule from both IEP teams and school counselors.

Some students may need to consider that earning a high school diploma will take longer than four years. They should be informed that they are eligible for services until they either graduate with a high school diploma or reach their 22nd birthday. Students may need to take support classes, plan a schedule so that the courses are balanced and extremely challenging coursework is not taken all at one time. The team along with the student and his or her parents must determine what high school credential is desired and what likely path they will take.

Mathematics and other content supports

There are also some students whose IEP team will acknowledge that mathematics is particularly difficult for the student. Prior to entry into high school, the IEP team will examine the CRCT scores from middle school and the level of support needed in middle school to achieve success in mathematics classes, and determine what levels of support will be needed in high school.

The graduation rule allows students with disabilities to graduate with a high school diploma after accumulating three mathematics credits (instead of 4) *if* they have taken Mathematics I with a support class (two units of credit, one core and 1 elective) and Mathematics II with a support class (another 2 units of credit, 1 core and 1 elective) and then either Mathematics III or its equivalent. It is anticipated that the core mathematics units will most likely be in a co-taught or collaborative setting and that the support class will also provide co-taught or collaborative support. The IEP team must be sure that all students are held to high expectations, even when reducing the mathematics requirements to earn the high school diploma.

For other content areas, some supports may also be needed and could be in the form of actual classes; other students may need less structured situations, such as before or after school tutoring or preview sessions. Still others will need instruction in utilizing good learning/studying strategies to enhance content mastery. The IEP team should utilize progress monitoring data to drive the decision-making progress regarding necessary supports for a student with a disability.

Students must meet the testing requirements of the state testing rule. Those who are working toward the high school diploma must participate in and pass all sections of the high school graduation tests. The State is exploring options for an alternate assessment based on modified academic achievement

standards. These are the students who are capable of mastering the grade level content, but have unique assessment needs in order to show what they know and are able to do. This alternate assessment based on modified academic achievement standards should be available by the time students for whom this rule applies (the students who are in the 8th grade during the 2007-2008 school year) reach 11th grade.

Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities

The provision for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities provides a diploma path for a very small number of students with disabilities. They are those students who access the Georgia Performance Standards at an entry or prerequisite level and for whom that access is often provided through augmented communication, assistive technology and significant personnel supports. In all but the most unusual circumstances, the presence of the cognitive, motor and sensory disabilities is known at the time the student enters school.

Students with significant cognitive disabilities who participate in the GAA no later than the 8th grade may follow a rigorous course of study that can lead to a high school diploma. This course of study is only for those with significant cognitive disabilities and they must be participating in the GAA by 8th grade. These students will participate in an integrated curriculum to earn 23 units (minimum). The units earned will align with and provide these students access to the content in language arts, mathematics, science and social studies that all children study. Students will also have IEP goals that include self-determination, independent living and other skills needed to maximize independence. GADOE is identifying courses that will align with the standards and meet the requirements for the high school diploma.

These students will have to be proficient on the GAA at 11th grade. Retesting will be available by the time these students are 11th grade.

Students with significant cognitive disabilities will remain in school until the age of 22 with a focus on transition goals and activities to lead to an independent adult lifestyle or will transition with supports to an employment/education/training setting prior to age of 22.

Frequently Asked Questions

Is the special education diploma still an option?

The special education diploma is still part of the graduation rule as an option for students with disabilities. However, IEP teams should be very cautious when selecting this option. The student and parent who select this option prior to the student reaching the 22nd birthday should be offered an IEP that offers a program specifically planned to provide the instruction and support to allow the student to meet requirements for the high school diploma, even if the student plans to accept a special education diploma that will allow him or her to participate in graduation ceremonies at the end of four years. Furthermore, the student and parent should be made aware that the special education diploma, in most circumstances, does not meet requirements for many types of employment, entry into the military, or admission to post-secondary educational institutions.

Can the special education diploma be counted for AYP?

The special education diploma does not meet the federal criteria to be counted as a high school diploma when calculating the graduation rate for AYP. Only those high school diplomas which are tied to a rigorous curriculum meet the requirements for graduation rate. The special education diploma, the high school certificate as well as students who drop out are not counted as receiving a high school diploma when calculating graduation rate.

Won't the students who take longer than the traditional four years to graduate count against our AYP calculation?

By the time the students impacted by this rule are completing four years of high school, Georgia will have revised the process for calculating graduation rate. NCLB allows for students to count positively toward graduation when they complete high school in the standard number of years. Georgia is exploring various ways to define the standard number of years. However, systems should be aware that the special education diploma does not count toward AYP under the current graduation rule, nor will it count toward AYP under the new graduation rule.

Why is there not a provision for a support class in all subject areas?

Support classes can and should be offered in any subject area in which a student with a disability has a need. The only requirement in the new graduation rule is that a student MUST take the support class for Mathematics I and Mathematics II if he/she plans to utilize the three units of mathematics option under the rule.

Isn't it unfair that students will have to take so many support classes to be sure they pass mathematics? Isn't this limiting their high school experience?

The need for support classes may extend the time it takes a student with a disability (or any student) to obtain all credits needed or desired for the high school diploma. Although many students would like to complete all the requirements within the traditional four year period, specific transition planning should now be better able to address the requirements for the high school diploma and the possibility that additional time (or summer coursework) may be necessary to prepare students to meet the requirements to be college and work ready. Even if students do not plan to seek to post-secondary education, it is important that high school provide them with the skills to meet the increased demands of the workplace.