This paper discusses the national movement toward increasing high school graduation requirements and the development of alternatives to the standard high school diploma for students with disabilities. Findings from a review of state policies indicate: (1) 38 states and territories apply some graduation requirements to students with disabilities; (2) 9 states require all students regardless of their disability to meet all requirements for a standard diploma; (3) 9 states reported that students with mild disabilities must meet all requirements for a diploma; (4) 11 states reported that graduation requirements for all students with disabilities are determined locally, guided by the students' individualized education programs (IEPs); and (5) six states permit requirements for students with severe disabilities to be determined or waived by the students' IEPs. A chart illustrates graduation diploma options for students with disabilities in Florida. (Contains 16 references.) (CR)
A Comparison of Graduation Requirements

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University of Central Florida
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University of North Florida

Division on Career Development and Transition
October 21, 1999
Charleston, South Carolina
A Comparison of Graduation Requirements

Summary
Over the past few years, many states have increased the requirements for attaining a standard diploma. Changes include increases in the number of credits required for graduation, higher academic standards, and the addition of exit exams. This is not a new phenomenon, but rather part of a recurring cycle in educational policies/politics. A similar emphasis on more rigorous graduation requirements occurred in the 1980s when nearly half of the states (47.9%) reported new policies on required number of units for graduation; and more states began prescribing the number and types of courses students must take and pass in order to graduate from high school (Bodner, Clark, & Mellard, 1987).

The pace and direction of the changes in graduation requirements appears to be somewhat different since 1995. For example, the number of states requiring an exit examination for graduation has increased from 15 in 1989 to 17 in 1996. It increased from 17 to 22 by 1998. The average number of Carnegie units required for graduation has gone up 2.5 points just since 1996. Half of all states (25) show increases with only one showing a decrease.

We do not know what effect these changes will have on students with disabilities, but we would be foolish to believe that there will be no impact. Some states are developing options for students with disabilities to provide them with more alternatives to successful transition to adult life. Florida is an example of a state who has developed two alternatives to the standard diploma: (1) a credit-based diploma and (2) an employment and community skills competency-based diploma. Prior to the most recent increase in graduation requirements, most Florida school districts report limited use of option 2. There will be a need to scrutinize the effects of diploma options on graduation rates and other measures of transition as the full impact of the more stringent graduation requirements begin to be felt across the nation.
Units Required for Graduation
25 states raised the number of Carnegie units required for graduation since 1996. The average increase was 2.8 units with a range of 1 to 6 units. The median increase was 2.5 units.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1996</th>
<th>1998</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>range</td>
<td>1-22</td>
<td>10-24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>median</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1996

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Credits Required</th>
<th>Number of States</th>
<th>Percent of States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21+</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-20</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1998

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Credits Required</th>
<th>Number of States</th>
<th>Percent of States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21+</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-20</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Five states leave this decision to local school board discretion (Colorado, Iowa, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nebraska)
Some states prescribe core requirements and leave the remainder to the local school boards (e.g., Illinois, California, New York, Vermont, and Wisconsin)
One was under revision in 1998 (Pennsylvania)

States requiring exit exams

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1987</th>
<th>1998</th>
<th>In development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Types of course requirements

Number of States specifying core credits for graduation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>1996 states</th>
<th>1998 states</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4 credits</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 credits</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 - 4 credits</td>
<td>math</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 credits</td>
<td>math</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 - 4 credits</td>
<td>science</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 credits</td>
<td>science</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-4 credits of social studies</td>
<td></td>
<td>31</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Status of State Level Graduation Policies on Students with Disabilities

38 states and territories apply some graduation requirements to students with disabilities

9 states require all students regardless of their disability to meet all requirements for a standard diploma

9 states reported that students with mild disabilities must meet all requirements for a diploma

11 states reported that graduation requirements for all students with disabilities are determined locally, guided by the students' IEP.

6 states permit requirements for students with severe disabilities to be determined or waived by the students' IEPs.


Diploma Options for Students with Disabilities in Florida

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard Diploma</th>
<th>Special Option 1</th>
<th>Special Option 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Required credits in subject areas, including Algebra or other higher level math course</td>
<td>Required credits in subject areas</td>
<td>Successful completion of the goals and objectives on the student's IEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Successful passage of High School Competency Test</td>
<td>Mastery of Student Performance Standards for the student's exceptionality</td>
<td>Mastery of employment and community competencies as specified on the student's Graduation Plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.0 GPA</td>
<td>2.0 GPA</td>
<td>Successful employment for at least one semester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>16 years of age or older</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References


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