



GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS FOR  
STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

**Policy Recommendations**

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# GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: **Policy Recommendations**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Although federal policy and funding play a role, the United States has a long history of recognizing that the local and state levels have primary responsibility for establishing policies and providing funding for K-12 education. A good example of how local control affects education can be found in the differences in graduation requirements, which vary from state to state and even among local education agencies (LEAs). In the past decade, there has been growing pressure for schools to increase both student academic achievement and graduation rates so that our nation's young adults will be better prepared for college or other postsecondary employment opportunities. State and school districts have responded to this pressure by setting more stringent graduation requirements, including the adoption of high stakes exit exams.<sup>1</sup>

Changing graduation requirements involve complex policy decisions that must take into account students with disabilities. Since students with disabilities are considered to be general education students first, they are usually held to the same graduation requirements (including coursework and high stakes testing, if required) in order to receive a high school diploma.<sup>2</sup> In 2007, at least 20 states proposed rules or signed into law new

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<sup>1</sup> High stakes exit exams are generally defined as “must pass” exams that students must take (and pass) to exit either a grade or complete diploma/graduation requirements.

<sup>2</sup> Several states have carved out exceptions for students with disabilities with respect to their high stakes exit exams.

policy regarding high school graduation requirements. Seven of these states also designed new policy around high stakes exit exams.

Even though local school districts and states have primary responsibility for setting graduation requirements, federal policy plays a significant role. The 2002 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, better known as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (P.L. 107-110) (NCLB), requires states to include “graduation rates for public secondary school students (defined as the percentage of students who graduate from secondary school with a regular diploma in the standard number of years)” (emphasis added) in an LEA’s determination of adequate yearly progress (AYP) [Sec. 1111(b)(2)(C)(v)(II)(dd)]. LEAs have had a difficult time trying to fit students with disabilities who may continue in school through age 21<sup>3</sup> into this calculation. Thus, a student with disabilities may be allowed to stay in school under IDEA and eventually graduate with a regular diploma at age 20, but this student would not count as a graduate under NCLB. Graduation requirements, including those for students with disabilities, have been compiled by groups including the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the Education Commission of the States. Less has been written about issues that these graduation requirements trigger for states and students with disabilities. However, over the past 15 years, the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) has conducted four

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<sup>3</sup> Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, students with disabilities may continue in school through their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday if they have not graduated, unless the state establishes a different timeline. In practice, some states set the completion date as low as age 19 while Michigan has extended its services up to age 26.

studies of graduation requirements for students with disabilities (Johnson & Thurlow, 2007). Their findings show that in the past three years, 28 states have increased their graduation requirements for students with disabilities. Based on the trends that the studies show, NCEO recommends that: 1) students with disabilities be given the opportunity to learn the material on which they will be tested; 2) states make graduation decisions based on multiple indicators of student learning and skills; and 3) states clarify the implications of alternative diploma options for students with disabilities.

Based on the importance, variability within and among states and state policy changes regarding graduation requirements for students with disabilities, Project Forum at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) conducted a policy forum on this topic as part of its cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). The forum was held October 10-12, 2007. A variety of stakeholders who are knowledgeable in local, state and federal policy and who are familiar with the outcomes of these policies on schools, families and students participated. See the appendix for the participant list. The expected outcomes of the forum were:

- to express participant-generated issues related to graduation requirements for students with disabilities, and
- to develop policy recommendations for the local, state and federal levels to address these issues.

This proceedings document provides a synthesis of the presentations on the historical and research background of graduation requirements for students with disabilities and of a panel discussion based on implementation of the various requirements. A description of the issues and prioritization of recommendations follows.

## Terminology

In order to avoid confusion and unnecessary limitation of the discussion, forum participants agreed to discuss graduation more broadly and define that term and the term dropout. To further avoid confusion, the

participants agreed to use the term graduation requirements rather than standards to discuss criteria for graduation.

- Graduation was defined as the receipt of a regular diploma or any other diploma or certificate.
- Dropout was defined as no graduation and no completion.
- Graduation requirements were defined as the criteria students must meet in order to graduate.

## BACKGROUND

### National Study on Graduation Requirements for Youth with Disabilities

The survey study, *National Study on Graduation Requirements for Youth with Disabilities*, (2007) was based on earlier work by NCEO and the National Transition Network dating back to 1995. State special education directors in all 50 states and the District of Columbia responded to the survey. Findings show that state education agencies (SEAs) and LEAs vary in the allowances they make for youth with disabilities to receive a standard diploma. The range includes making no allowances, reducing the number of credits a student needs, making available alternate courses to earn required course credits, lowering performance criteria, addressing graduation criteria individually in an Individualized Education Program (IEP), granting extensions and other alternatives. Furthermore, differentiated diploma options such as honors diplomas, IEP/special education diplomas, occupational diplomas, certificates of attendance or certificates of achievement add to the complexity of state and local concerns regarding graduation. Findings show a variety of intended consequences for using multiple diploma options:

- Numbers of students receiving some form of high school diploma increased.
- LEAs have more flexibility in determining how students will exit school.

- Creating options is viewed as motivating for students and reduces dropout.
- States' ability to maintain "high" academic standards for their standard diploma increased when alternative diplomas were available.

A variety of unintended consequences for using multiple diploma options was reported:

- Alternative diploma options are viewed as substandard.
- Communicating different options to parents, students and employers is problematic.
- There is a perception that the use of multiple diplomas results in developing "special" tracks for students.
- Access to postsecondary education for students who receive alternate diplomas is limited.

Several intended consequences for using a single, standard diploma option were reported:

- High expectations for all students are maintained.
- More students with disabilities earn a standard diploma.
- Having a single, standard diploma helps build consistency regarding the meaning of graduation requirements.
- The single option creates a sense of equality (i.e., all students are tested on the same standards and are viewed as equally participating).
- A single option provides employers and postsecondary education institutions a clear and detailed record of students' performance.

Unintended consequences for using a single, standard diploma option include:

- The number of students with disabilities remaining in school through age 21 may increase because they need extra time to meet the requirements.

- The dropout rate may increase if students cannot meet the standards in the same timeframe as their grade-level peers.
- Fewer students (both general and special education) actually receive the diploma.
- The standard diploma is perceived as too general or "watered down."

States also reported intended and unintended consequences when students are required to pass exit exams to receive a standard diploma. Intended consequences for requiring students with disabilities to pass exit exams include:

- More students with disabilities participate in the general education curriculum and achieve results.
- Preparation for adult life is improved by accessing postsecondary education and employment.
- The "differences" between general and special education students are reduced.

Unintended consequences for requiring students with disabilities to pass exit exams include:

- Some students may need to remain in school longer.
- Parents are often dissatisfied.
- Student self-esteem is lowered by repeated failures on exams.
- A higher dropout rate may result.
- Some students with disabilities will not receive a diploma.

Implications reported in the NCEO study include that underlying assumptions of graduation policies must be reviewed to understand why requirements might differ for certain groups of students; implications of different diploma options must be clarified in relation to access to postsecondary education and employment; graduation decisions must be made on the basis of multiple, relevant information sources that are meaningfully reflected in graduation requirements; and implications of having one diploma option available and maintaining high academic standards must be examined.

## State High School Exit Exams and Students with Disabilities

The Center on Education Policy, an independent nonprofit organization, has been conducting comprehensive studies of state high school exit exams since 2002. The current study, *State High School Exit Exams: Working to Raise Test Scores*, (Zabala, Minnici, McMurrer, and Hill, 2007) reports on state high school exit exam implementation in the 26 states that currently require or plan to require exams. The report focuses on the efforts made at the state and local level to raise initial pass rates for all students, help students who fail on their first attempt and close the achievement gaps. This study found that in most cases states use the same test for both the NCLB requirements and state exit requirements. Most states' tests are aligned to the tenth grade standards. Students with disabilities are challenged by exit exams and their pass rates, even after several attempts, are lower than students without disabilities (e.g., in Arizona, the pass rate for all students is 71%, but for students with disabilities it is just 8%). The most common alternative paths to graduation are alternative diploma/certificate, alternate assessments, waivers and exemptions. The least reported alternative path to graduation is adjusted passing criteria on the high stakes exam.

### The Challenges for Minority Youth

According to Dr. Fabricio Balcazar of the Center on Capacity Building for Minorities with Disabilities Research at the University of Illinois, numerous student and family characteristics and systems variables affect the ability of minority youth with disabilities to receive a standard diploma. For instance, immigrant families often lack a sense of entitlement to education, making it difficult for them to maneuver and understand the educational system. Minority families are often poor, and poor people share strong experiences of oppression in their lives that make it difficult for them to advocate for themselves. Systemically, school funding formulae in most states are based on property taxes. This type of funding discriminates

against minority students with disabilities who tend to concentrate in and around low-income communities. Furthermore, minority students are likely to be negatively impacted by graduation requirements, especially those that require an exit exam. A single minimum competency test (exit exam) for all students denies fair treatment because all schools are not equal. If students are poor, they are likely to attend schools that receive less funding and fewer resources and less qualified teachers than schools in middle and upper class communities.

Conclusions drawn by Dr. Balcazar include:

- Parents and students must be knowledgeable of their rights and resources and be able to effectively advocate for needed services and resources.
- Graduation requirements must be sensitive to the context of minorities with disabilities and their families and consider racial and socioeconomic disparities.
- One-size-fits-all solutions must be avoided because they can end with harming minorities with disabilities and their families.

## ISSUES RAISED FOR DISCUSSION

### Federal, State, Local and Parent Perspectives

This section of the policy forum consisted of a panel composed of Marlene Simon-Burroughs (U.S. Department of Education), representing the federal education and national technical assistance perspective; Mabrey Whetstone (Alabama Department of Education), representing the SEA perspective; Patrick Clancy (Waterloo Community School District), representing the LEA perspective; and Doreen Byrd (North Carolina Parent Training and Information Center), representing the parent and parent center perspective. The following section summarizes the various perspectives of federal, states, LEAs and parent representatives who participated in the policy forum.

## Federal Perspective

Each state is required to have in place a performance plan evaluating the state's implementation of IDEA Part B and a description of strategies for improving Part B implementation. This plan is called the Part B State Performance Plan (SPP). Each state is also required to report annually to the public on the performance of each of its LEAs according to the targets in its SPP, and must report annually to the secretary of education on its statewide performance according to its SPP targets. This report is called the Part B Annual Performance Report (APR). OSEP has a large investment in the development and use of 20 Part B performance indicators for measuring state accountability in a variety of areas. Two of these Part B indicators are used to hold states accountable in the area of graduation:

- Graduation (Indicator B1): requires states to report the percent of youth with IEPs graduating from high school with a regular diploma.
- Post School Outcomes (Indicator B14): requires states to report the percent of youth who had IEPs; are no longer in secondary school and who have been competitively employed, enrolled in a postsecondary school, or both within one year of leaving high school.

Requirements for graduation must be more than academic standards and these indicators reflect this belief. The entire array of indicators includes functional and career development goals. In order to achieve these goals, as well as academic goals, we need highly skilled personnel (e.g., teachers, counselors, transition specialists and others) who can connect students to the community. Other resources that must be in place include the opportunities to receive quality instruction, including preparation for exit exams. Students from low-income homes have much less access to out-of-school assistance such as tutoring or parent help than more affluent students.

## State Perspective

State staff are focused on the OSEP indicators and tend to discuss graduation in the context of indicator B1, graduation rates. However, they believe that there must be a rigorous curriculum that is relevant for students with disabilities. According to NCLB, states must have one set of high academic standards. States have struggled with making the curriculum based on these high standards applicable to all students with disabilities.

Another issue is that of resources and the allocation of those limited resources available within a state.

States must ensure that teaching and learning are happening for all students. The state of Alabama has set a goal for all students with disabilities to participate in the general education curriculum at least 80% of the time. This is seen as critical to their success and the success of all struggling students.

Passing high stakes exit exams is another issue related to graduation for students with disabilities. Alabama has five content area exams at the 11th grade level. Approximately 30% of students with disabilities pass these tests, and the state is pushing to move all students to graduate with the standard diploma.

There must be multiple pathways or methods to graduation in order to open up a variety of options such as community or four-year college and work experience for all students. Therefore, higher education and community employers must be involved in developing, accepting and understanding what is meant by differences in pathways to a diploma.

Teachers must be prepared both within the preparation phase and the in-service phase of their careers to work differently with students with disabilities. Teacher preparation programs must be involved.

Central to the success of students with disabilities is the engagement of parents in the discussion and decision making for graduation. Parents also must be aware of what is meant by different pathways to a diploma.

### **Local Perspective**

Schools need to be able to focus on teaching and learning and use numerous data points to make graduation decisions. In order to ensure adequate student preparation, these data points should be reviewed years before the child reaches a gatepost that necessitates meeting graduation requirements. Systems issues, such as high stakes exit exams or other graduation requirements should not impose difficulties to learning for students. Students with disabilities should have an IEP that allows graduation requirements to be waived on an individual basis as appropriate.

### **Parent Perspective**

As is true for many parents of nondisabled students, many parents of students with disabilities do not contemplate graduation requirements unless their child has difficulty in meeting them. It is important for high schools to reach out to parents of students with disabilities to ensure they are aware of the requirements and how their child can be assisted in meeting them. Students' courses of study must be consistent with their post-secondary goals and IEP teams must not make assumptions about a student that eliminates opportunities.

High schools tend to be less child centered and more content centered. Therefore, problems arise either due to low expectations or lack of appropriate instruction. Exacerbating this problem, students have too often not been given the appropriate instruction in their early school years and thus do not acquire basic skills necessary to succeed in high school. High schools must acknowledge this and remediate and not award diplomas to students who have not met the requirements. However, students who are not able to meet the graduation requirements, even with the support that they need, should be recognized formally for their achievement.

### **Discussions**

Education from the early grades should be focused on students' long-term goals for graduation and post graduation. Moving toward individual plans and data-driven decision making for all students will assist professionals to provide timely intervention for any student who begins struggling, not only students with disabilities. Wrap-around services, including mental health and other community services, should be provided to ensure that resources are available to meet students' needs. The focus must be to move students from where they are to where they need to be in order to graduate with a meaningful document that is understood by employers and postsecondary institutions.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the presentations and discussions, the forum participants described and refined 14 issues related to graduation requirements for students with disabilities and then developed recommendations to address the impact of each issue. While the group felt strongly that each recommendation is integral to solving the pervasive issues with graduation requirements, not only for students with disabilities, but for any struggling student, they prioritized their recommendations in light of the likelihood of implementation and significance of the impact that each recommendation would have. In the following table, the top five priorities for both likelihood of implementation and significance of impact are listed in order. The last nine recommendations are listed in diminishing order based only on their significance of impact.

Graduation Requirements: Issues and Recommendations to Address Them

<p><b>Issue:</b> There exists a misalignment between IDEA, NCLB and state needs with respect to the number of years students take to complete high school and the inability of state-approved graduates to count as graduates under both NCLB and IDEA.</p>	
<p><b>Recommendation:</b> NCLB should be aligned with IDEA.</p>	<p><b>Action Steps:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NCLB should use the IDEA standard, consistent with individual state policy, for the number of years to complete high school for the purposes of graduation accountability for students with disabilities</li> <li>• Students with the most significant cognitive disabilities (i.e., those in alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards) who receive a state-approved exit document should be counted as graduates.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Issue:</b> Rigorous graduation requirements are not always relevant to the student and workplace, therefore diminishing the quality of relationships and participation by pertinent groups.</p>	
<p><b>Recommendation:</b> Ensure availability of multiple pathways to meet the graduation requirements and promote student-focused planning.</p>	<p><b>Action Steps:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Design requirements that meet what business and industry need based on relevant research (e.g., building and maintaining relationships, oral and written skills, critical thinking skills, other “soft skills” and other core skills necessary).</li> <li>• Design requirements that align with relevant post-secondary education including technical, community and four-year schools (i.e., diploma and nondiploma granting institutions) and their requirements (e.g., entry math, writing, reading skills and critical thinking skills).</li> <li>• Work with community colleges, businesses, vocational technical institutions, vocational rehabilitation and other agencies on the development of multiple, relevant pathways to graduation.</li> <li>• SEAs and LEAs need to review current minimum graduation requirements for rigor and relevance for all students, recognizing that not all students will pursue post-secondary education.</li> <li>• Review how multiple pathways are aligned with core content standards.</li> <li>• Align multiple pathways with core content standards so that students who graduate through any pathway will count in the graduation rate for both NCLB and IDEA.</li> <li>• Promote flexibility for community-based instruction and career readiness through course credit availability (i.e., allow enough open slots in high school scheduling for this).</li> <li>• Promote integration of work-based experience and career exploration into the core curriculum.</li> <li>• Provide professional development to staff to ensure that they possess skill in implementing community-based practices.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Issue:</b> Multiple pathways to a regular diploma are often not recognized and valued.</p>	
<p><b>Recommendation:</b></p>	<p><b>Action Steps:</b></p>

<p>All SEAs and LEAs must offer flexible, multiple pathways to a regular diploma that are attainable for students with disabilities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not have language in policy or guidance that supports a special education or special education-like diploma.</li> <li>• Multiple pathways to a regular diploma should include academic and career readiness.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Issue:</b> There is need for more information about the implications of allowing multiple graduation options.</p>	
<p><b>Recommendation:</b> All students should exit school with a credential that articulates their academic and work readiness skills and abilities.</p>	<p><b>Action Steps:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop, implement and disseminate results of a study focused on the trends and outcomes of the various diploma options (i.e., move to postsecondary education, work and other postsecondary options).</li> <li>• Encourage SEAs and LEAs to design credentials based on these findings that would describe student skills and abilities upon graduation.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Issue:</b> Multiple measures are usually not considered for graduation requirements although evidence-based best practice demands that practice.</p>	
<p><b>Recommendation:</b> Federal law and policy should encourage states to develop multiple measures to meet graduation requirements.</p>	<p><b>Action Steps:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish a national taskforce to review and summarize multiple measure options to inform state policymaking.</li> <li>• Integrate the variety of multiple measure options into federal law and policy language that encourages and allows these options at the state and local levels.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Issue:</b> There is often a misalignment between IEP goals/transition plans and graduation requirements.</p>	
<p><b>Recommendation:</b> Design rigorous and relevant graduation pathways and allow graduation from any approved pathway to count toward graduation rates.</p>	<p><b>Action Steps:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Design approved pathways to graduation that meet rigor and relevance requirements for graduation and allow ease of movement across and between them.</li> <li>• Since the method of accessing the curriculum will vary by pathway, align each pathway to the core curriculum and to each other so that students can move easily between them as necessary.</li> <li>• Develop communication mechanisms to inform constituents (e.g., employers, organizations, disability groups, Congress, educational community) about the benefits of being able to meet graduation requirements through multiple pathways and that this is not intended to lower expectations.</li> <li>• Make regulatory changes such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expand federal, state and local definitions of a standard diploma.</li> <li>• Expand NCLBs time flexibility and integrate requirements into six-year performance plans.</li> <li>• Expand NCLB definition of graduation.</li> <li>• Expand IDEAs annual performance plan instructions and definitions of what is considered graduation to include multiple pathways.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use the IEP goals and transition plans to ensure that all students with disabilities have a mechanism to meet graduation requirements including any of the pathways by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• developing national guidelines to help IEP teams develop appropriate goals for transition plans that link to graduation requirements;</li> <li>• training IEP teams to develop goals that will help students meet graduation requirements; and</li> <li>• ensuring that transition goals are introduced prior to high school and set a flexible class/coursework plan on a student-by-student basis.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p><b>Issue:</b> The higher policymakers raise minimum graduation requirements, the more students with disabilities are unable to meet them.</p>	
<p><b>Recommendation:</b> LEAs and SEAs must have a range of course options available that satisfy minimum graduation requirements.</p>	<p><b>Action Steps:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Federal, state and local policy must allow additional time flexibility to meet graduation requirements.</li> <li>• SEAs and LEAs must develop programs of study that articulate different ways to meet the minimum graduation requirements.</li> <li>• Make resource availability a priority and provide access to a range of resources.</li> <li>• See “rigorous graduation requirements are not always relevant” issue and recommendations.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Issue:</b> There is a lack of reciprocity across and within states for passing exit exams and entering postsecondary education.</p>	
<p><b>Recommendation:</b> Establish reciprocity across and within states to connect exit exams and postsecondary education and career readiness.</p>	<p><b>Action Steps:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify and explore commonalities in state exit exams (e.g., rules, rationale, content, reciprocity under certain circumstances).</li> <li>• Examine the content of state exit exams and how they link to requirements for post-secondary education and career readiness.</li> <li>• Establish interstate compact(s) (e.g., approve ACT or SAT test scores or some other universal standard).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Issue:</b> Increased requirements create the need for targeting resources based on proven strategies.</p>	
<p><b>Recommendation:</b> Prioritize the use of funds to support students with disabilities in meeting graduation requirements.</p>	<p><b>Action Steps:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fund special activities to support student engagement (e.g., mentoring, internships, job shadowing, developing self-determination skills).</li> <li>• Fund support for parent training and involvement in making choices about student programs of study to meet graduation requirements.</li> <li>• Target funds to improve recruitment and retention of highly skilled and culturally competent teachers.</li> <li>• Target funds for professional development to identify gaps in student knowledge and provide differentiated instruction to help students with disabilities meet graduation requirements.</li> </ul>

<b>Issue:</b> The complexity of graduation requirements makes it difficult for parents, teachers and others, including employers, to understand them.	
<b>Recommendation:</b> Early discussion and training for teachers, counselors, parents and students on the diploma options available in the state/district and the implications and possible outcomes for students.	<b>Action Steps:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborate with the Parent Training and Information Centers to develop documents, resources and training opportunities that discuss the graduation requirements in accessible communication modes/formats.</li> <li>• Develop a process that monitors, follows and communicates student progress toward meeting the graduation requirements. Share process/tool with teachers, students and parents.</li> </ul>
<b>Issue:</b> Students with disabilities and other groups of students frequently do not have access to highly skilled and culturally competent professionals.	
<b>Recommendation:</b> Provide preservice and inservice training for both general and special education staff so they can appropriately teach the content necessary to meet graduation requirements.	<b>Action Steps:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Revise the Interstate New Teachers Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) standards from the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) to include requirements related to cultural competence for all teachers.</li> <li>• Encourage LEAs to develop specific requirements related to cultural competence for current staff and use in their recruitment of teachers.</li> <li>• Continue to provide federal and state technical assistance, such as the work under CCSSO’s Center for Improving Teacher Quality project, to assist states in revising their credentialing requirements in line with the INTASC standards.</li> <li>• Involve institutes of higher education, state credentialing agencies and state special education departments in the revision of preservice requirements.</li> </ul>
<b>Issue:</b> Insufficient, culturally competent instruction and service delivery affects how, and if, students meet graduation requirements.	
<b>Recommendation:</b> Ensure that high stakes tests reflect the content of instruction.	<b>Action Steps:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At the state and local level, review class and test content and revise as necessary to align them.</li> <li>• SEAs and LEAs should investigate extended learning opportunities for students with disabilities (e.g., out-of-school tutoring).</li> <li>• Review opportunities to integrate the delivery of related services to help students with disabilities meet graduation requirements.</li> <li>• See “funding” issue and recommendation.</li> <li>• See access to “highly skilled and culturally competent professionals” issue and recommendations.</li> </ul>
<b>Issue:</b> There is little evidence-based best practice information in regards to graduation requirements.	
<b>Recommendation:</b> The Institute of Education Sciences (IES) should fund new research on the	<b>Action Steps:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• IES should make this topic a priority and fund specific studies.</li> <li>• The U.S. Department of Education and national organizations should work together to</li> </ul>

<p>effectiveness of current practices related to promoting that students with disabilities meet graduation requirements and be prepared for their post-school plans.</p>	<p>synthesize and disseminate currently available research on this topic.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The federal government should require government-funded researchers to use consistent measures across states to make possible conclusions about effectiveness.</li> <li>• The U.S. Department of Education should fund pilot projects to look at the development of promising practices.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Issue:</b> Complex graduation requirements lead to increased litigation.</p>	
<p><b>Recommendation:</b> Graduation requirements need to be clear, targeted and designed to be a part of planning for each student from school entry (i.e., Kindergarten).</p>	<p><b>Action Steps:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Every student must have an academic plan that is periodically revised and that addresses transition and graduation requirements.</li> <li>• Graduation requirements must be clearly articulated to parents, student and educators.</li> <li>• See “complexity of graduation requirements” issue and recommendation.</li> </ul>

## CONCLUSIONS

Forum participants identified the following possible barriers to implementing their recommendations:

- political considerations;
- tracking student movement through multiple pathways;
- employer buy-in and understanding of the meaning of diplomas received through various pathways;
- unintended consequences such as lowered expectations and risk of tracking students in low tracks from which they could not depart;
- current NCLB and IDEA language;
- stakeholder resistance;
- need for professional development and training on a variety of levels;
- some recommendations are based on the assumption that states must change their graduation requirement policies and this currently seems improbable;
- insufficient funds or lack of willingness to use funds to improve preservice and inservice training in the area of differentiated instruction and other means to help students with disabilities meet graduation requirements; and
- lack of a foundation from which to develop a viable multiple pathways model in many states.

However, participants also regarded their recommendations as multi-functional. For instance, many of the recommendations, once implemented, would promote attention to many of the other graduation requirement issues and also other national education efforts such as:

- increasing the access to highly qualified and high-quality teachers for all students;
- connecting primary and secondary education to the needs of both post-secondary education and employers;
- ensuring that all students are given the opportunity to demonstrate what they know and can do (i.e., multiple measures of assessment)
- improving post-secondary outcomes for all students;
- making education rigorous and relevant for all students; and
- improving student achievement.

Many of the policy recommendations from this forum address negative graduation requirement implications found in NCEO's work and mirror recommendations that NCEO made based on a decade of research. Project Forum and the policy forum participants submit these recommendations and action steps with anticipation that appropriate national, state and local organizations; federal and state policy makers; and state and local education administrators, service providers and parents will work together to develop cohesive plans to support all students as they successfully move from secondary education to post-secondary education and/or the world of work.

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## APPENDIX

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