

Education Update

Each year more and more of our children are successfully included in regular classrooms, and receive the accommodations they need to access the standard curriculum. With that success, the dilemma of aspiring for the standard high school diploma vs. accepting the “certificate of attendance” that is the norm for many students with special needs becomes very real. Recent posts on the WSA list serve depict the anguish that parents suffer over how to insure that they’ve made the right choice - whichever path they choose. We would all love our children to attain high school diplomas, and for those who can pass state testing requirements its a wonderful achievement...or is it? What about future benefits? Will your child need the services that states provide to age 21 for job and life skills training? Will a diploma disqualify your child from receiving those benefits, or make it more difficult to receive on-going services as an adult? Unfortunately, the answer to those questions may be “yes”, and therein lies the dilemma. Will the accommodations that made the curriculum accessible and the diploma a possibility be available if needed for future school and work opportunities? Unfortunately, once a student has the diploma in hand, future accommodations and support are often not available. The options as well as the consequences vary from state to state, even school district to school district. It’s important to do your homework on the possibilities well ahead of your child’s senior year in high school. The articles below may help with the process.

High School Diploma vs. Certificate

Susan Bruce

What can a parent do?

First, consider what the IDEA says about high expectations in the purposes section. “Almost 30 years of research and experience has demonstrated that the education of children with disabilities can be made more effective by having high expectations for such children and ensuring their access to the general education curriculum in the regular education classroom, to the maximum extent possible ... “

This should be done in order for a child to “meet developmental goals and, to the maximum extent possible, the challenging expectations that have been established for all children; and be prepared to lead productive and independent lives, to the maximum extent possible.”

Second, consider the following questions.

- Why does the IEP team feel your child cannot meet course standards in order to receive a regular high school diploma?
- What supports and accommodations were discussed that would help your child receive a regular high school diploma?
- What does your child need in or-

der to meet the same expectations as other students?

- Could your child complete the requirements for the regular diploma by the time he is 21? A student with a disability can receive services until the age of 21 or until he graduates with a regular high school diploma, whichever comes first.
- Would the “alternate diploma” allow your child, to the maximum extent possible, to lead a productive and independent life?
- Is the alternate diploma appropriate for your child’s level of functioning?

Third, consider using the transition plan to address the diploma.

Transition Planning

An IEP should include transition services no later than the first IEP in effect when the student turns 16. The age could be younger, depending on your state’s special education regulations.

Transition services are services that step your child up to moving to the adult world.

Transition services should:

- Be designed with a results oriented process.
- Focus on improving the academic

and functional achievement of your child to “move” your child from school to post school activities.

Post school activities could include any of the following.

- Postsecondary education (college)
- Vocational education
- Integrated employment
- Continuing adult education (GED, perhaps)
- Adult services
- Independent living
- Community participation

The transition plan should base transition services on your child’s individual needs. The IEP team should consider your child’s preferences, interests, and strengths. What does he want to do?

If your child wants to attend a community or 4-year college, he will need that regular high school diploma!

Transition services should include the following.

- Instruction (address deficit areas)
- Related services
- Community experiences
- Development of employment and other post school living objectives
- Acquisition of daily living skills, if appropriate

Transition services in the IEP

High Expectations, Appropriate Testing

must include:

- Appropriate measurable post-secondary goals based upon age appropriate transition assessments, related to training, education, employment, and, where appropriate, independent living skills; and
- The transition services (including courses of study) needed to assist the child in reaching those goals.

Transition services can be special education, if your child needs the services provided as specially designed instruction or a related service in order to benefit from special education!

When thinking about transition planning, ask yourself these questions.

- How does your child's transition plan address moving her from the school world to the real world?
- What are your child's preferences?
- What are your child's strengths?
- What does your child want to do after graduation?
- What does your child need in order to help her meet those goals?
- Does your child need remediation in a particular area in order to meet these goals?
- What assessments tools did the school use?
- Are the transition goals in the IEP measurable?
- Where is the data?

IEP teams can develop and use transition plans to help students with disabilities meet the high expectations set for all students.

As with every other special education issue, make yourself an expert.



PACESETTER - Summer 2010 issue

During middle school and then high school, classes become increasingly challenging, but students with disabilities can do well academically if expectations and accommodations help them along. Paying close attention to testing accommodations during middle school and expecting the best from your child can help you set the course for a successful future.

Expecting the best

Today's national and state education policies reflect an expectation that most special education students, if given appropriate accommodations, services, supports, and instruction, can learn grade-level content and achieve grade-level standards. In addition, research shows that teachers' expectations of student achievement do matter: What they expect of students is typically what they get, regardless of student ability. "Having high expectations for your children is so important," says Deborah Leuchovius, project director of PACER's Technical Assistance on Transition and the Rehabilitation Act program (TATRA). "Your expectations will influence the teachers who work with your child and the expectations young people set for themselves."

As you encourage your child and his or her teachers to have high learning expectations, it's also important to make sure your child's knowledge is being accurately measured. For students who have a disability affecting their ability to show what they know on typical tests, an important part of their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) is defining testing accommodations. Without the needed accommodations in the classroom or when taking state and district-wide assessments, testing may not accurately measure a student's knowledge and skills.

Leveling the playing field

Assessment accommodations are changes in testing materials or procedures that enable students to participate in assessments in a way that measures abilities rather than disabilities.

"The purpose of accommodations is to level the playing field so students can display what they know without being hindered by their disability," Leuchovius says. Such accommodations do not lower the difficulty of the test- but may change the way information is presented, the way a student responds, the setting in which the test is taken, or in the timing and scheduling of the test. For example, a student with a fine motor impairment taking a test might need a note taker to write answers or extended time to complete the test. A student with attention difficulties may need to have a test broken into segments.

Choosing accommodations

Parents can work with the IEP team to ensure that their children receive the accommodations they need to demonstrate what they know. Accommodations should be chosen on the basis of the individual student's needs, not on the basis of the disability category, grade level, or instructional setting.

The student's IEP should contain documentation for all identified accommodations, and these accommodations should be used consistently for instruction and assessment. Once documented in the IEP, each teacher and others responsible for implementing the accommodations must be informed of the specific accommodations that must be provided.

Ideally, the same or similar accommodations should be used during classroom instruction, classroom tests, and state and district tests.

Accommodations that are introduced to a student for the first time on the day of a test are not likely

Assistive Technology - Explained

to be effective. If students are not already familiar with how an accommodation works, it could hurt rather than help their test performance.

Testing accommodations are also provided to individuals with disabilities by college testing agencies.

By becoming familiar with testing accommodations during the middle school years, you can help guide your child to higher achievement, a meaningful high school diploma, and his or her future goals.

Accommodations and diplomas vary. Throughout the U.S. states offer an array of diploma options. Testing accommodations can help students with disabilities in these states earn a standard high school diploma instead of an alternative diploma.

Alternative diplomas are generally viewed by employers and colleges as being based on less rigorous academic standards than standard diplomas. "Parents in states with multiple diploma options need to think carefully about which diploma their child should work toward, beginning in middle school," says Deborah Leuchovius, project director of PACER's Technical Assistance on Transition and the Rehabilitation Act program. "Once they study the options and discuss them with their child and their IEP team, they can plan the course work and ensure that their child receives accommodations needed to achieve that diploma."

The advantages and disadvantages of diploma options are outlined in a recent publication titled "Graduation Requirements and Diploma Options for Students with Disabilities," produced by the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD-Youth). It can be found at: ncwd-youth.information-brief-22

You can also find diploma options available in each state at: www.cephd.umn.edu/nceo/TopicAreas/Graduation/StatesGrad.htm

By Bridget Gilormini

When a learner is struggling in any area of life and nothing seems to help, both parents and professionals often turn to technology as a solution. Using what is called assistive technology (AT), a toddler can color with an adapted crayon, a teenager can use word prediction software to become a successful writer, and an adult can use speech-to text technology to be gainfully employed. An evaluation should be conducted at least annually for every student who has an IEP and may benefit from it.

Assistive technology includes the devices, software, and services a student needs to receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE), which is guaranteed by a federal law called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). AT should also be considered to help a student be educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE), also ensured by IDEA.

While it is clear that some children with disabilities can benefit from AT, parents need to be proactive about seeking services for their child and become familiar with the law that ensures AT services are provided by public schools.

An age of technology

Technology is rapidly advancing, sometimes on a daily basis. New technology changes not only how we learn and engage with the world, but how we function in daily life. Consider Aimee Mullins, an athlete who set world records running on prosthetic legs at the 1996 Paralympics. Her high-tech limbs help her reach the potential she has to be a runner, a model, and an actress. Consider Bridget Thomson, who became the first student in Minnesota to take the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) using speech-to-text as

an accommodation. Speech-to-text technology helped Bridget reach her potential.

Despite the fact that technology can help children achieve their dreams, students with disabilities are not systematically evaluated to see if they would benefit from AT services. Anecdotal evidence suggests that only 3 to 5 percent of students with disabilities have assistive technology written into their Individualized Education Program (IEP), according to research conducted by Dave Edyburn of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Although sometimes students use AT even though it is not included in their IEPs, a large percentage of students who would benefit from AT are not receiving services. That's why it's important for parents to be proactive and to make sure AT services are considered for their children.

AT and the law

While AT is a relatively young field, the laws that govern it are not new. Schools must consider the use of assistive technology for students.

Today's rapidly advancing technology can open new worlds for children with disabilities, but parents must proactively look for assistive technology solutions.

**Robin Pegg, BS, COTA/L, ATP is a certified Assistive Technology Specialist, who has been working with children and young adults with WS for 9 years as recreation director for the WSA camp programs and children's programming at the national convention. More recently, Robin has helped many families establish AT support for their children. For more information, see the story on page 12, and write to Robin at: drgep@comcast.net*