

# ALTERNATE DIPLOMA FOR PARENTS

## SPECIAL EDUCATION - GUIDANCE BRIEF



House Bill 1041 amended 70 O.S. § 11-103.6 and created the alternate diploma, a new graduation pathway for the 1% of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities who are taught to alternate academic achievement standards and participate in the Oklahoma Alternate Assessment Program (OAAP).

### Criteria for the Alternate Diploma

To participate in the OAAP, students require instruction taught to alternate achievement standards in core content areas. In addition, students must meet the criteria identified in [The Criteria Checklist for Assessing Students with Disabilities on Alternate Assessments](#). IEP teams, including the parent(s) and student, must determine annually that the OAAP is appropriate for the student. IEP teams must also consider the accommodations/modifications needed for students to be taught to the Oklahoma Academic Standards and assessed by the Oklahoma State Testing Program (OSTP), before considering eligibility in the alternate assessment.

### Standard/Regular Diploma vs. State-Defined Alternate Diploma

The IDEA requires the standard high school diploma to be fully aligned with State standards and states that it must not be aligned to alternate academic achievement standards. A standard high school diploma does not include a recognized equivalent of a diploma, such as a general equivalency diploma, certificate of completion, certificate of attendance, or similar lesser credentials (§300.102).

Therefore, students who are taught to alternate academic achievement standards and assessed under the Oklahoma Alternate Achievement Program (OAAP), are not eligible for a standard high school diploma.

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) allows states to define and adopt an alternate diploma. Oklahoma joins many other states that have adopted an alternate diploma to ensure that Oklahoma students can both receive a meaningful diploma and continue to receive the services they need for a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). Other states have state-defined alternate diplomas including Nevada, California, Georgia, Utah, Arkansas, Louisiana, Missouri, Mississippi, New Hampshire, Tennessee, and West Virginia.

The biggest difference between the standard and alternate high school diplomas is the district's obligation for FAPE under IDEA. The district obligation for FAPE ends when the student receives a standard high school diploma. However, **the district obligation for FAPE does not end when the student receives an alternate diploma** (usually at 18 years of age).

For students who are taught to alternate standards and assessed through the OAAP, when the student has earned the appropriate credits, the student will graduate with an alternate diploma. If the student has not turned 22 on or before September 1, the student will be offered continued enrollment following graduation with an alternate diploma and the district will continue to provide a FAPE through the school year in which they turn 22. The student can attend the same length of day and week as students without a disability. However, as with any student with a disability, the IEP Team may determine a shortened day/week is appropriate.



Returning to school after earning an alternate diploma is a decision of the IEP team. It is not required that a student return for an additional four years or even one year. Students with disabilities who have had effective transition plans and are ready to work on their postsecondary goals may not need to return for additional services. IEP team decisions should rely heavily on student and family preferences and be based on the postsecondary plans and goals of the student. Simply put, the district must offer FAPE to each student who graduates with an alternate diploma, but the student is not required to return after graduation if the IEP team determines otherwise. Continued enrollment does not need to be consecutive.

### Benefits of an Alternate Diploma

- Although districts in Oklahoma have been providing high-quality education to students with the most significant cognitive disabilities, the alternate diploma creates more access and opportunity for students and provides services that are more closely aligned with their unique needs.
- Academic coursework for these students needs to be appropriate and challenging. The Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE) will ensure through the alternate academic achievement standards that students will be exposed to the same level of academic rigor across the state.
- Transition skills, including, life skills and career readiness skills are an important part of the curriculum for these students, therefore, the alternate diploma graduation requirements include life skills and career readiness courses. The OSDE worked with stakeholders (parents and teachers) to create new alternate standards in life skills and career readiness and new courses that reflect what these students need to help them succeed in postsecondary life.
- These students should receive recognition for their accomplishments and that recognition should provide equal benefits. Other options, such as a certificate of completion, do not carry the same weight as a state-defined alternate diploma nor do they provide an equal benefit. Oklahoma joins many other states that have adopted an alternate diploma to ensure that Oklahoma students can both receive a meaningful diploma and continue to receive the services they need for a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE).



### Frequently Asked Questions

- Q: How is the state-defined alternate diploma different from a standard diploma?
- Under IDEA, districts no longer must provide a free appropriate public education (FAPE) once the student earns a standard diploma. However, a state-defined alternate diploma does not terminate a (FAPE) for students with an Individualized Education Program (IEP). The alternate diploma is only for those students assessed using the alternate assessment aligned to alternate academic achievement standards.
- Q: What are alternate academic achievement standards?
- The academic achievement of students participating in the OAAP is measured against alternate achievement standards, which differ in complexity from the Oklahoma achievement standards of the general state assessments. To participate in the OAAP, students must require alternate achievement standards in core content areas and must have an IEP containing rigorous, measurable goals that are aligned to Oklahoma's alternate achievement standards, called the [Essential Elements](#), that include short-term benchmarks/objectives.
- Q: Can a student earning an alternate diploma participate in the high school graduation ceremony?
- Students with disabilities receiving alternate diplomas shall be allowed to participate in graduation ceremonies with their same-grade classmates and continue with special education eligibility services. Parent and student preferences on when to participate in graduation ceremonies should always be considered.
- Q: Can a student working toward an alternate diploma continue public education to age 21?
- A student with an IEP who is working on an alternate diploma or graduates with an alternate diploma remains entitled to a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) through the end of the school year in which the student turns 22 years of age.
- Q: How will this diploma impact these students' future postsecondary and/or transition opportunities?
- For adult postsecondary and transition programs and opportunities, many will accept the alternate diploma as part of the criteria for acceptance into their programs (i.e., adult CTE programs, IPSE, Project SEARCH, community-based providers, and programs supported by the Department of Rehabilitation Services and Developmental Disabilities Services).
- Q: Can a student be accepted into a Career Tech program with an alternate diploma?
- It depends on the type of program. Contact your local [Career Technology Education \(CTE\)](#) Center for more information about the requirements of CTE programs.

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Q: Can a student with an alternate diploma be accepted into a college?

- Most four-year universities do not accept an alternate diploma. A limited number of remedial level community college courses are available to students with an alternate diploma, but they are not applicable toward the completion of a degree. However, Inclusive Postsecondary Education Programs (IPSE) that have been developed for adults with significant cognitive disabilities will accept an alternate diploma (e.g., Opportunity Orange Scholars at Oklahoma State University (OSU), Sooner Works at the University of Oklahoma (OU), and Riverhawks Scholar Program at Northeastern State University (NSU). Visit the [OKIPSE Alliance](#) to learn more about IPSE programs.

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