

Increasing Graduation Rates for Students with Learning Disabilities



Introduction

For nearly 40 years, the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) has advocated for research, evidence-based practices and federal policies to ensure that all students with specific learning disabilities (SLD) achieve their full potential. Graduation from high school with a regular diploma is the cornerstone of our advocacy program because a diploma is the gateway credential tied to college and career readiness.

As we examined reports and studies, participated in discussions and conducted activities focused on improving graduation policies for struggling students, we concluded that a public conversation about high school graduation must start with the fundamentals: who are the students with SLD and what do their current high school exit outcomes look like? What we've discovered isn't surprising, but it does convey how critical the situation is. Too many of our bright, talented students' futures are at risk because regular diplomas aren't necessarily regarded or planned as their first option. This is unacceptable and must change.

Through this report, we share important data and findings to help policy makers, school leaders and parents understand the challenges that students with SLD face. They continue to make up the largest group of students eligible for special education services in our public schools—more than 2.2 million students. Yet only 68% graduate with a regular diploma each year. The report shows how the policy of some states to offer a variety of diplomas actually can result in fewer students with SLD graduating.

Ultimately, our report clearly shows that there are still far too many students with specific learning disabilities dropping out of school or receiving certificates of completion. Neither option gives students a viable pathway to higher education or meaningful employment.

Repeated surveys have documented how students with SLD are misunderstood, underestimated and held to low expectations by teachers and even their own parents. And yet a majority of the students themselves report that they believe they will graduate with a regular diploma. Too often they are moved off a diploma track as early as elementary school. This must change.

Because we live in a society and an economy that deem a regular diploma a necessity, we call on policy makers, school leaders and parents to embrace this report's findings and use them to transform schools so that students with SLD graduate with a regular diploma. Our students deserve to have their own high expectations matched by those who support and educate them.

The need for students to earn a high school diploma has never been greater, and this is especially true for the more than 2.2 million students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD). Currently, only 68 percent of students with SLD leave school with a regular high school diploma and in three states, more students with learning disabilities *drop out* than graduate. This has long term effects on the college and career prospects of students with SLD, including contributing to an unemployment rate of 39.5 percent for these adults. (Source: 2005 U.S. Survey of Income and Program Participation)

Key Findings

- While the dropout rate has improved dramatically for students with specific learning disabilities, these students remain at significant risk of not graduating with a regular diploma.
- Schools make decisions as early as elementary school that can take students off track for a regular diploma.
- States with a policy to offer multiple diplomas can result in fewer students with SLD graduating.
- The Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate is a critical accountability tool for ensuring students with disabilities are on track to graduate with a regular diploma.
- The vast majority (88 percent) of students with specific learning disabilities expect to graduate with a regular high school diploma.

Key Recommendations

The report makes key recommendations at the federal and state level to improve the graduation rate of students with specific learning disabilities, and to assure consistency and comparability in the graduation data for the subgroup of students with disabilities. They are:

- Maintaining and improving the current requirement to use the Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) is critical to improving graduation rates for students with SLD. ACGR for students with disabilities should be analyzed by disability type for additional information.
- Congress and the U.S. Department of Education should incorporate the use of the ACGR into all monitoring and compliance activities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.
- States should be required to implement evidence-based early warning systems in all high schools that have significant graduation rate gaps between all students, and students with disabilities.
- States with multiple diploma options and low graduation rates for students with disabilities and/or significant graduation rate gaps for students with disabilities should closely examine the impact of multiple diploma options, graduation requirements and exit exam policies.
- States should ensure policies that encourage early decisions that put students on an alternate route to exiting high school without a regular diploma are eliminated.

Key Takeaways for Parents, School Leaders and Policy Makers

The findings and recommendations in this report are essential to helping parents, school leaders and policy makers understand what they can do improve graduation rates of students with SLD. The key findings and recommendations for each of these audiences are:

Parents

- Students with specific learning disabilities are at significant risk of not graduating from high school with a regular diploma.
- Getting off track for a regular high school diploma can happen as early as elementary school.
- States offering multiple diplomas can result in fewer students with SLD graduating with a regular diploma.

School Leaders

- The vast majority (88 percent) of students with specific learning disabilities expect to graduate with a regular high school diploma.
- Schools make decisions as early as elementary school that may take students off the regular diploma track.
- States offering multiple diplomas can result in fewer students with specific learning disabilities graduating with a regular diploma.

Policy Makers

- Maintaining and improving the existing requirement of a four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate is a critical accountability tool for ensuring students with SLD are on track to graduate with a regular diploma.
- States should limit multiple diploma options because it can lead to fewer students with disabilities graduating with a regular diploma.
- State and federal law needs to include incentives for states to respond to the large variation in graduation rates of students with SLD across states – from 25 percent to 91 percent.





Foreword

In the 21st century the cost of dropping out to an individual and society is very high. Simply put, there is no work to support a family for young adults without a high school diploma. That is why it is imperative that all students graduate from high school prepared for college and career. The good news is that after decades of decline and stagnation high school graduation rates are rising. The bad news is progress has been uneven across states and across groups of students. As is clearly shown in the National Center for Learning Disabilities report on high school graduation rates, students with specific learning disabilities are among the groups for which progress needs to be greatly accelerated in order for the nation to reach its goal of high school graduation for all. The report also demonstrates that students with learning disabilities can graduate from high school with regular diplomas at high levels. The fact, that some states have close to 90 percent graduation rates for students with learning disabilities stands as a clear challenge to the greater number of states where graduation rates are as low as 25 percent. Not only must we do better, but clearly we can.

This report takes a critical initial step in showing how—by providing the first comprehensive review and accounting of high school graduation rates for students with learning disabilities. It also documents how states vary in their expectations for these students and the measures they use to gauge progress. Together, this makes the case that the way forward is to hold students with specific learning disabilities to the same high standards as all other students. Schools must provide them the supports they need to meet these standards, and policy makers must establish policies which give school districts and states the incentives and tools they need to provide these supports.

Key Issues

- Too few students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) leave school with a regular diploma—just 68 percent in the 2010-2011 school year.
- While the dropout rate has improved dramatically over the past decade, the rate in many states remains far too high. In three states—Louisiana, Nevada, and South Carolina—more students with SLD drop out than leave with a regular diploma.
- Variation across states in the ways that students with disabilities can exit school appears to have a significant impact on the graduation rate of these students.
- The Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate—now required by the U.S. Department of Education to be used by all states and reported for all student groups—provides valuable information that should be used to improve the graduation rate for students with disabilities.

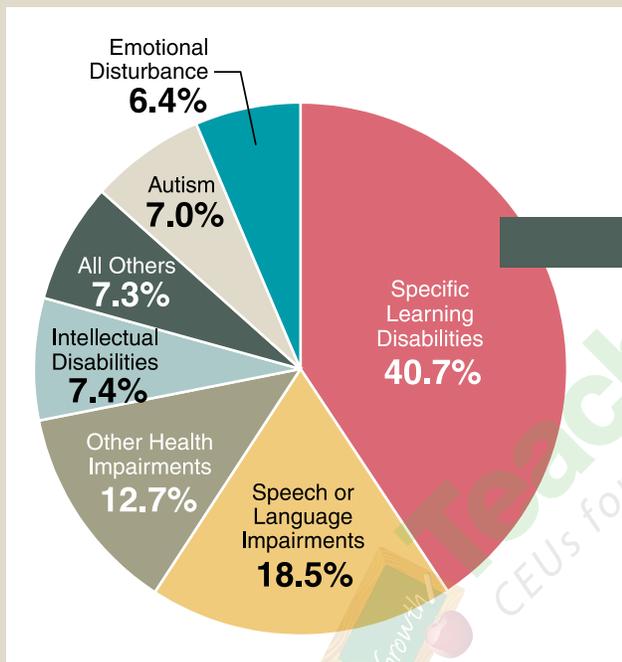
The need for students to earn a high school diploma has never been greater. Nearly 90 percent of the fastest-growing, highest-paying jobs require some sort of education beyond high school. The nation has recognized this pressing need and answered with initiatives designed to keep students in school, increase the graduation rate, and expand access to job training and postsecondary education. Today's focus is on all students leaving high school "college-and- career ready."

"We must raise the expectations for our students, for our schools, and for ourselves—this must be a national priority. We must ensure that every student graduates from high school well prepared for college and a career."

— President Barack Obama, A Blueprint for Reform: The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, U.S. Department of Education, March 2010

The need to raise expectations is particularly acute for the nation's 5.8 million students with disabilities. Students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) make up 41 percent of these students, and numbered more than 2.2 million in 2011.

Students Receiving Special Education Services by Disability Category



Source: www.IDEAdata.org
2011 Part B Child Count, Students ages 6-21, U.S. and outlying areas

Most Common Types of Specific Learning Disabilities

The most common types of specific learning disabilities include:

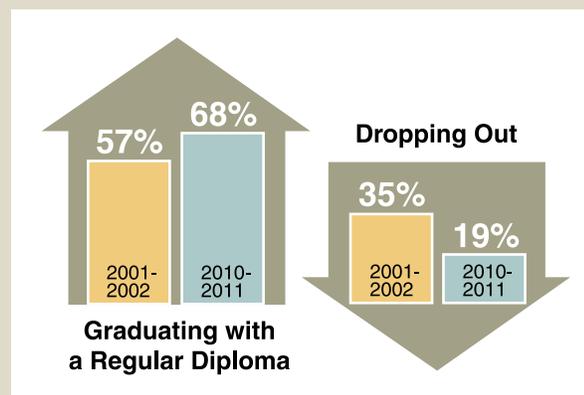
- **Dyslexia**—difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition, poor spelling and decoding abilities.
- **Dyscalculia**—trouble solving arithmetic problems and grasping math concepts.
- **Dysgraphia**—difficulty forming letters or writing within a defined space.
- **Auditory/Visual Processing Disorders**—difficulty understanding and using verbal or written language despite normal hearing and vision.
- **Non-verbal Learning Disabilities**—problems with visual-spatial, intuitive, organizational, evaluative and holistic processing functions.

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD) is sometimes mistakenly thought to be a learning disability. While this isn't the case, AD/HD occurs in about one third of people with SLD.

While the past decade has seen improvements in both the graduation rate and dropout rate for students with SLD, these students continue to earn high school diplomas at an unacceptably low rate.

The rate of graduation went from 57 percent in 2002 to 68 percent in 2011 and the dropout rate went from 35 percent to 19 percent.

How Students with SLD Leave School: Ten Year Trend

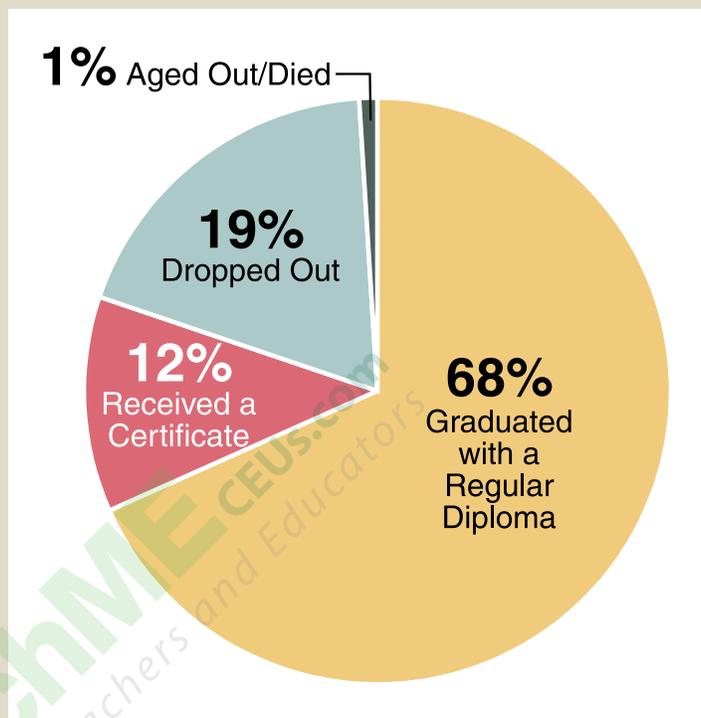


Source: www.IDEAdata.org, IDEA Part B Exiting, State-level Data Files

In the 2010-2011 school year, 221,000 students with SLD left high school. Of these, just 68 percent (151,000 students) left with a regular diploma while 19 percent (43,000 students) dropped out. Twelve percent (26,000) of students with SLD left school with a certificate—a document recognizing the student’s completion of a school program but not recognized for postsecondary education or employment. (Source: IDEA Part B Exiting Data for 2010-2011)

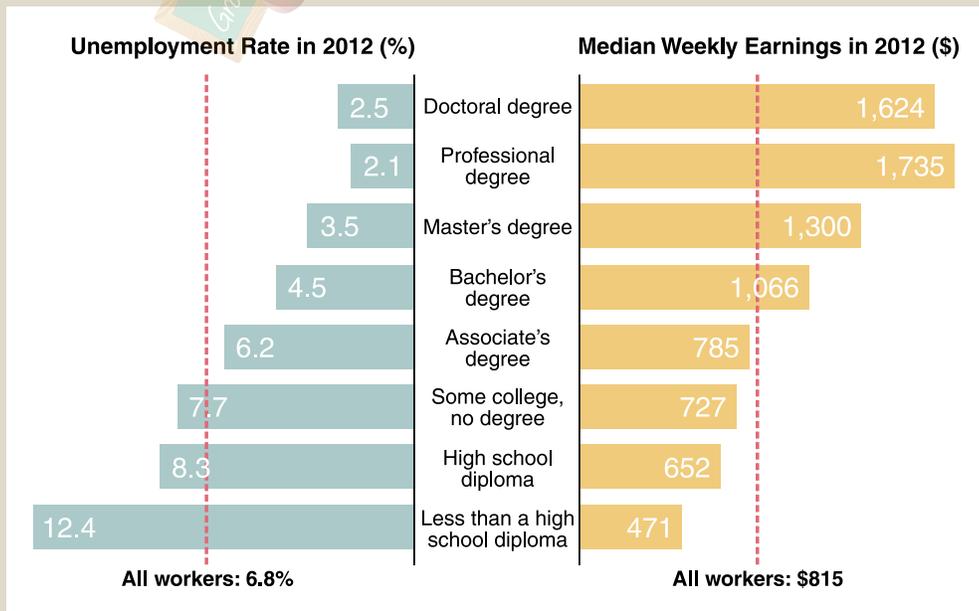
This low rate of high school graduation with a regular diploma has a serious impact on the employment rate and earnings of students with SLD. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the unemployment rate for those with less than a high school diploma is over 12 percent—almost double that of all workers. The median weekly earnings is \$471—a bit more than half that of all workers.

How Students with SLD Exited School, Ages 14-21, 2010



Source: www.IDEAdata.org, IDEA Part B Exiting, 2010-2011

Education Pays

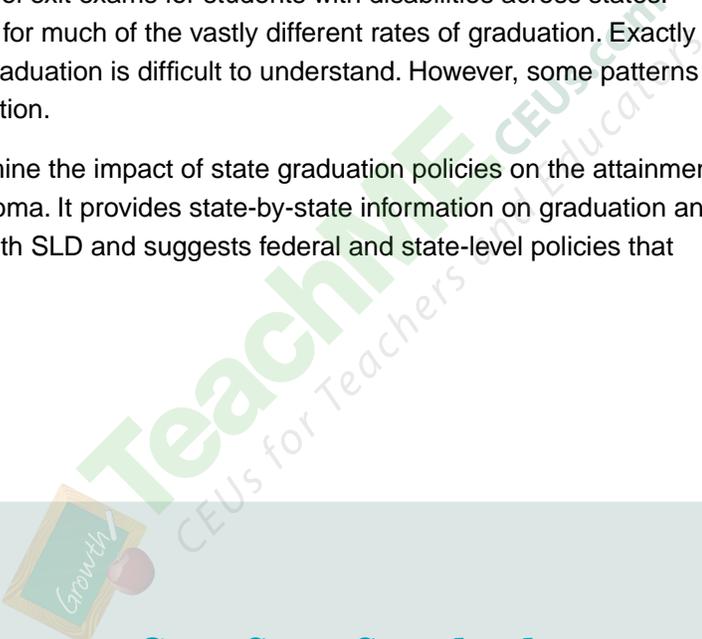


Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey

Examining graduation rates across states reveals more sobering statistics. While the graduation rate for students with SLD across all states is 68 percent, half of all students with SLD are educated in states with graduation rates *lower than the nationwide rate*—putting large numbers of students at even greater risk of failing to graduate than the nationwide rate would indicate. In fact, if these states had a graduation rate of 68 percent, some 12,000 additional students with SLD would have left school with a regular high school diploma in the 2010-2011 school year.

The variation in graduation rates across states can be explained, in part, by the dizzying array of graduation policies regarding students with disabilities. Surveys conducted by the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) and the Center on Education Policy (CEP) reveal significant variation in the diplomas and other options, graduation requirements, and high school exit exams for students with disabilities across states. This variation could account for much of the vastly different rates of graduation. Exactly how these policies impact graduation is difficult to understand. However, some patterns emerge upon close examination.

This report attempts to examine the impact of state graduation policies on the attainment of a regular high school diploma. It provides state-by-state information on graduation and dropout rates for students with SLD and suggests federal and state-level policies that could improve these rates.



Coming Soon: Common Core State Standards

Complicating the urgent need to improve graduation rates for students with SLD is the looming transition to new, more rigorous academic standards in English/Language Arts and Mathematics. For most states, this means implementation of the Common Core State Standards developed by a state-led effort of the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers.

The purpose of these standards is to ensure a clear and consistent framework to prepare all students for college and the workforce, including students with disabilities. However, the increased rigor of these new standards poses challenges for students who receive special education services and could result in even fewer graduates.

State-by-State: Graduating, Dropping Out, Getting a Certificate

How these rates are calculated.

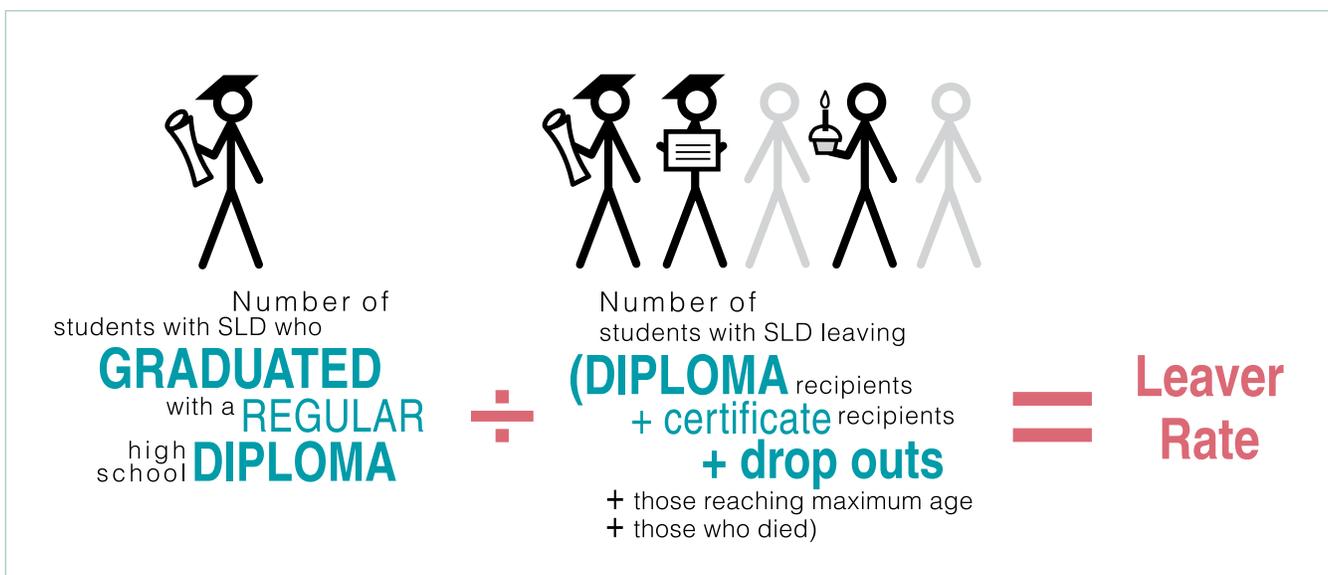
The rates for each state and nationwide (all states and the District of Columbia) at which students with Specific Learning Disabilities exit school with a regular high school diploma, a certificate, or by dropping out were calculated using the IDEA Part B Exiting Data for 2010-2011 available at <https://www.ideadata.org/csvdata%5Cbexiting2010-11.csv>.

The IDEA Part B Exiting data are the only data that show how students exit high school by type of disability. It includes only students eligible to receive special education and related services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) at the time of leaving school. Students who transferred to general education, or moved and were known

to continue their education are not included in the calculation. Definitionally, graduating with a regular diploma means receiving a high school diploma identical to that which students without disabilities receive.

This calculation is often called a “**Leaver Rate.**” The leaver rate generally would result in a higher graduation rate and lower dropout rate than other types of calculations, such as the Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate discussed on page 13.

Note: Utah has been excluded from this analysis due to quality concerns about data.



Graduating

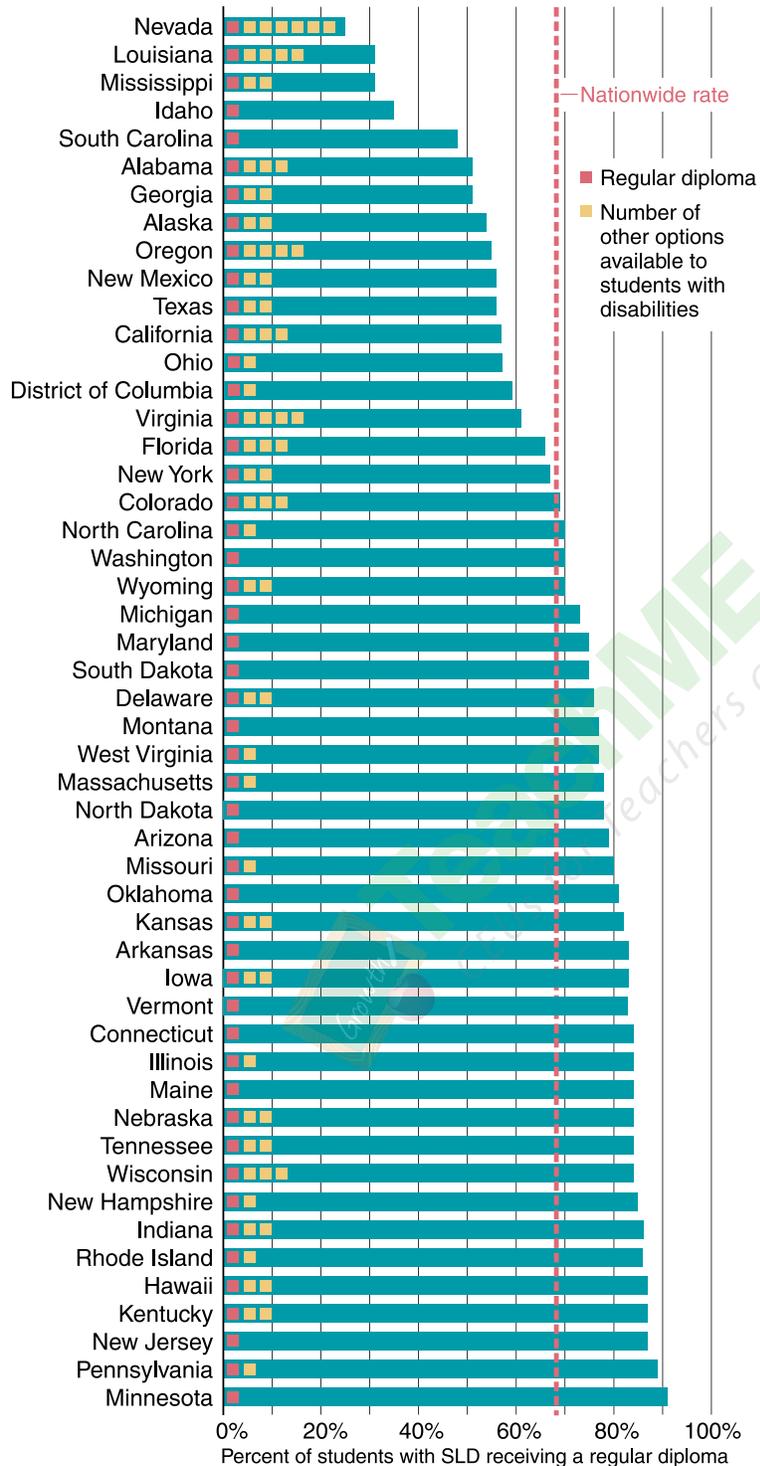
The rate at which students with SLD leave high school with a regular diploma varies dramatically across states—from a high of 91 percent in [Minnesota](#) to a low of 25 percent in [Nevada](#). Nationwide, the rate is 68 percent.

Seventeen states offer *only* a regular diploma. The number of diplomas and other options available to students with disabilities, in addition to a regular diploma, ranges from one to six across the states.

However, most states make allowances for students with disabilities to receive a regular diploma, such as:

- reducing the number of credits required to obtain a regular diploma,
- substituting alternative courses,
- lowering performance criteria,
- granting extensions,
- using the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) to set terms for graduation requirements.

Only 2 states ([Arizona](#) and [Oregon](#)) indicate that they allow no exceptions to graduation requirements for students with disabilities.



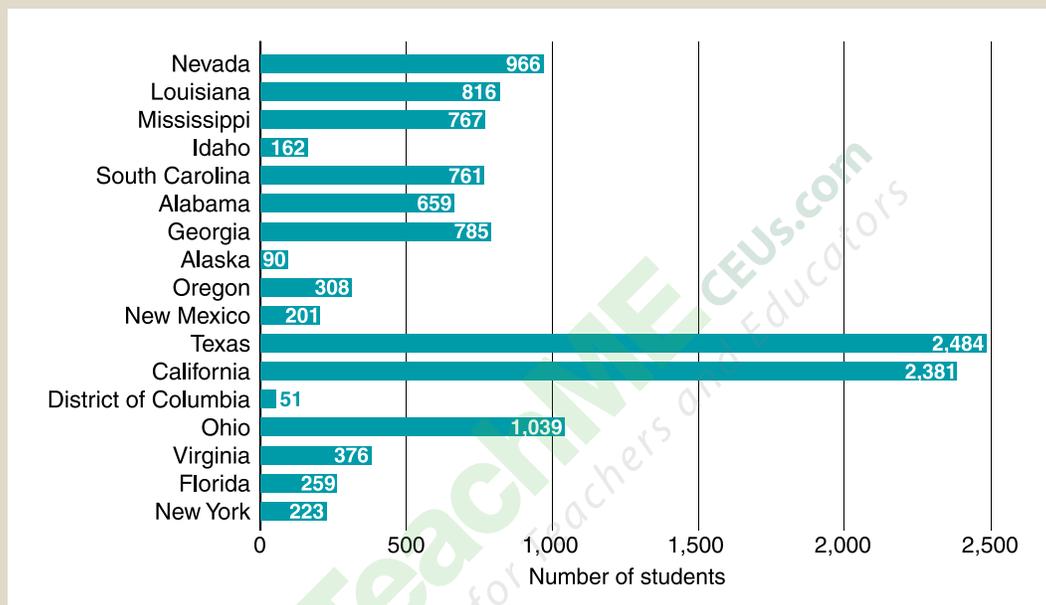
Sources: www.IDEAdata.org, IDEA Part B Exiting, State-Level Data Files, 2010-2011 Diploma Options, Graduation Requirements, and Exit Exams for Youth with Disabilities: 2011 National Study, NCEO Technical Report 62

Note: Utah has been excluded from this analysis due to quality concerns about data.

While 17 states fall below the nationwide rate of 68 percent, half of all students with SLD in the country are educated in these states.

More than 12,000 additional students with SLD would have received a regular diploma in 2011 if these 17 states had graduated students at the nationwide rate (see table below for state-by-state information).

Potential Additional Graduates in States Below All States Rate



Sources: www.IDEAdata.org, IDEA Part B Exiting, State-Level Data Files, 2010-2011

INTRODUCING: New Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate

In 2008 the U.S. Department of Education issued a federal regulation requiring all states to calculate high school graduation using the same uniform method. Known as the **Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR)**, this new rate was first reported by states for the 2010-2011 school year, available at <http://www2.ed.gov/documents/press-releases/state-2010-11-graduation-rate-data.pdf>.

The ACGR is available for all students, by racial/ethnic groups, and by special populations such as students with disabilities, and provides a more accurate picture of graduation than the leaver rate.

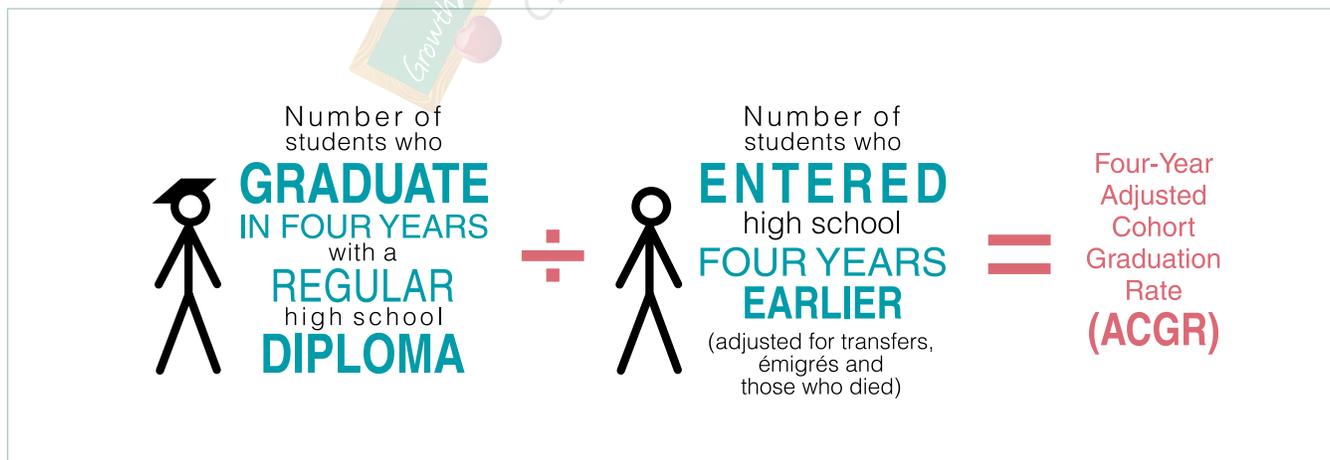
The ACGR is not available by the student's disability type. However, the ACGR for all students with disabilities provides a more valid comparison across states as well as the gaps within states. This comparison shows significant variability in the rates across states and the gaps within states as shown on the table on page 14.

The ACGR is a significant new source of information on the graduation rate of students with disabilities. However, each state is allowed to define the students with disabilities (SWD) subgroup for the ACGR. For example, some states may define the SWD subgroup as:

- Only students who entered high school as a SWD and also exited as a SWD;
- Only students who were SWDs at graduation;
- Anyone who was ever a SWD between entering high school and graduation;
- Or some other method.*

This variation in definitions adds to the unreliability of making comparisons across states.

*Source: Personal communication with Office of Special Education Programs, USED, March 21, 2013.



Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) for the 2010-2011 school year for All Students and Students with Disabilities

	All Students Rate (%)	Students with Disabilities Rate (%)	Difference (% Points)
Mississippi	75	23	52
Alabama	72	30	42
Louisiana	71	29	42
Nevada	62	23	39
Georgia	67	30	37
South Carolina	74	39	35
Virginia	82	47	35
New York	77	48	29
Alaska	68	40	28
Florida	71	44	27
Maryland	83	57	26
Oregon	68	42	26
Wyoming	80	57	23
Connecticut	83	61	22
Michigan	74	52	22
Delaware	78	56	22
North Carolina	78	57	21
Colorado	74	53	21
Hawaii	80	59	21
Indiana	86	65	21
Minnesota	77	56	21
District of Columbia	59	39	20
Wisconsin	87	67	20
Washington	76	56	20
Rhode Island	77	58	19
West Virginia	76	57	19
North Dakota	86	67	19
Tennessee	86	67	19
Illinois	84	66	18
Iowa	88	70	18
Maine	84	66	18
Vermont	87	69	18
California	76	59	17
Massachusetts	83	66	17
New Hampshire	86	69	17
Utah	76	59	17
Nebraska	86	70	16
New Mexico	63	47	16
Missouri	81	68	13
Montana	82	69	13
Ohio	80	67	13
Pennsylvania	83	71	12
Arizona	78	67	11
Kansas	83	73	10
New Jersey	83	73	10
Texas	86	77	9
Arkansas	81	75	6
South Dakota	83	84	-1
Idaho	+	+	+
Kentucky	+	+	+
Oklahoma	-	-	-

Comparison of the Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) for the 2010-2011 school year for All Students and Students with Disabilities

ACGR rates for students with disabilities range from a high of 84 percent (South Dakota) to a low of 23 percent (Mississippi and Nevada).

Mississippi has the largest gap in graduation rates at 52 points (75 percent for all students versus 23 percent for students with disabilities).

Seven states have graduation gaps of 35 percentage points or greater (Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Nevada, Georgia, South Carolina, and Virginia).

Twenty-three states and the District of Columbia have graduation gaps of 20 percentage points or greater.

Note: ACGR data are not reported for Idaho, Kentucky, and Oklahoma.

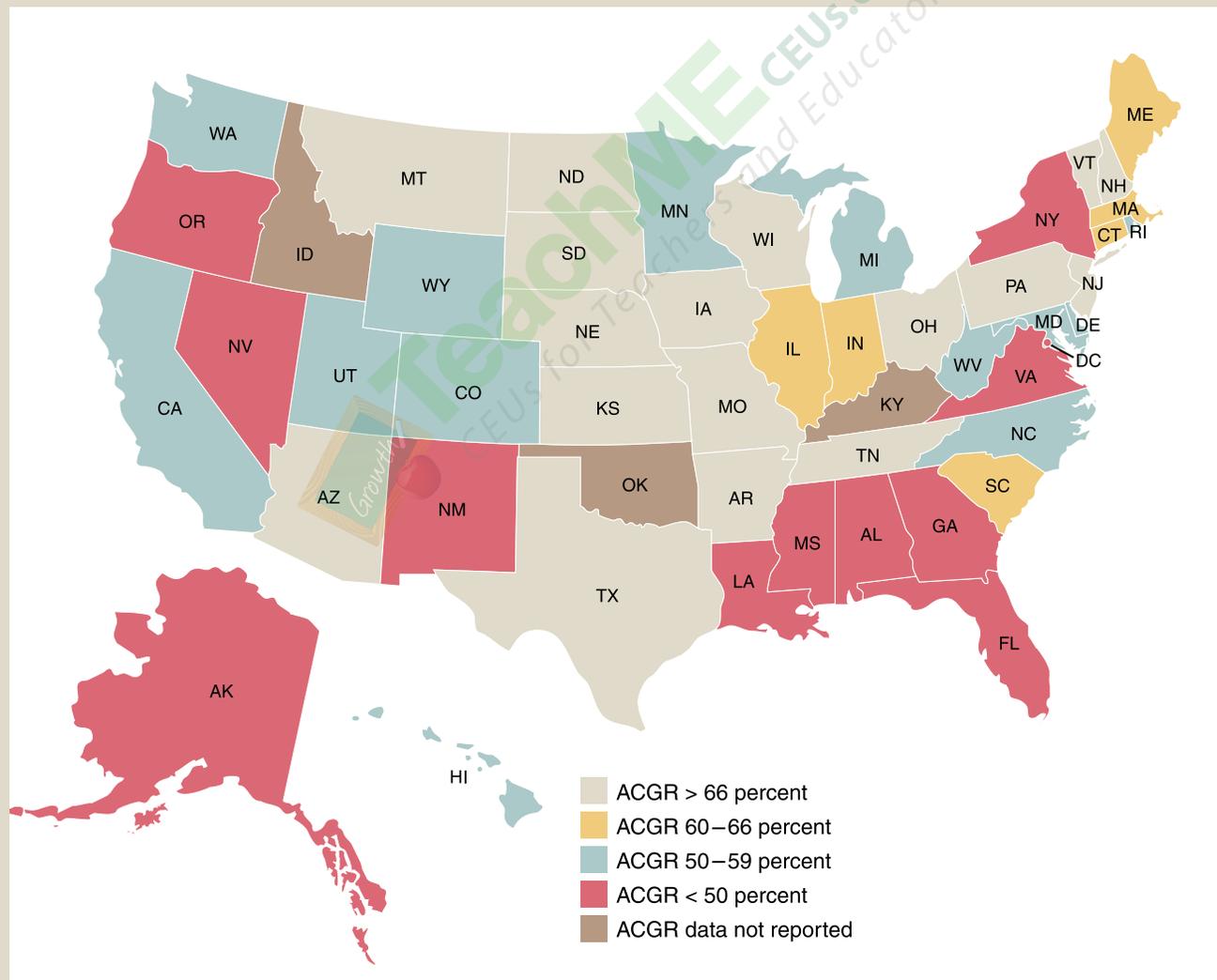
It can be presumed that the gap between students with disabilities and students without disabilities is larger than the gaps shown here since the "all students" graduation rate includes students with disabilities.

As shown on the map below, 11 states, heavily concentrated in the southeast, have Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rates below 50 percent as well as the District of Columbia. Thirteen states have rates between 50 and 59 percent, six states have rates between 60 and 66 percent. Only 17 states have Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rates above 66 percent.

“The South is an Achilles heel for graduating students with disabilities. Many states have graduation rates below 50 percent, in part because most students with disabilities are not on track to receive a regular diploma.”

*Robert Balfanz
Co-Director, Everyone Graduates Center
School of Education, Johns Hopkins University*

State-by-State Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) for Students with Disabilities



Source: Provisional Data File: SY2010-2011 Four-Year Regulatory Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rates, U.S. Dept. of Education, 2012

Dropping Out

The rate at which students with SLD drop out of school also varies widely across states—from a high of 49 percent in **South Carolina** to a low of seven percent in **Hawaii**. Nationwide, the dropout rate is 19 percent.

Twenty-two states have dropout rates higher than the nationwide rate.

In three states—**Louisiana**, **Nevada**, and **South Carolina**—more students with SLD drop out than leave with a regular diploma.

See table on page 17 for additional state-level information.

Getting a Certificate

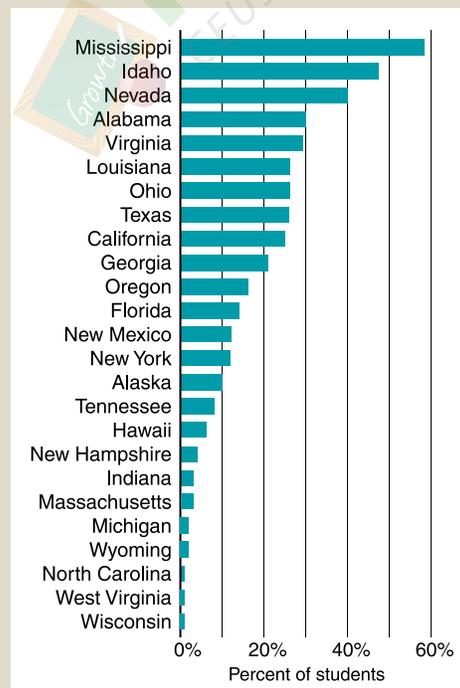
Many states have policies that provide other types of documents to be awarded to students with disabilities. These documents provide recognition for students who complete school but do not satisfy the requirements for a regular diploma.

These documents are known by different names, including:

- IEP diplomas
- Special Education diplomas
- Occupational or Vocational diplomas
- Certificates of completion, attendance or achievement

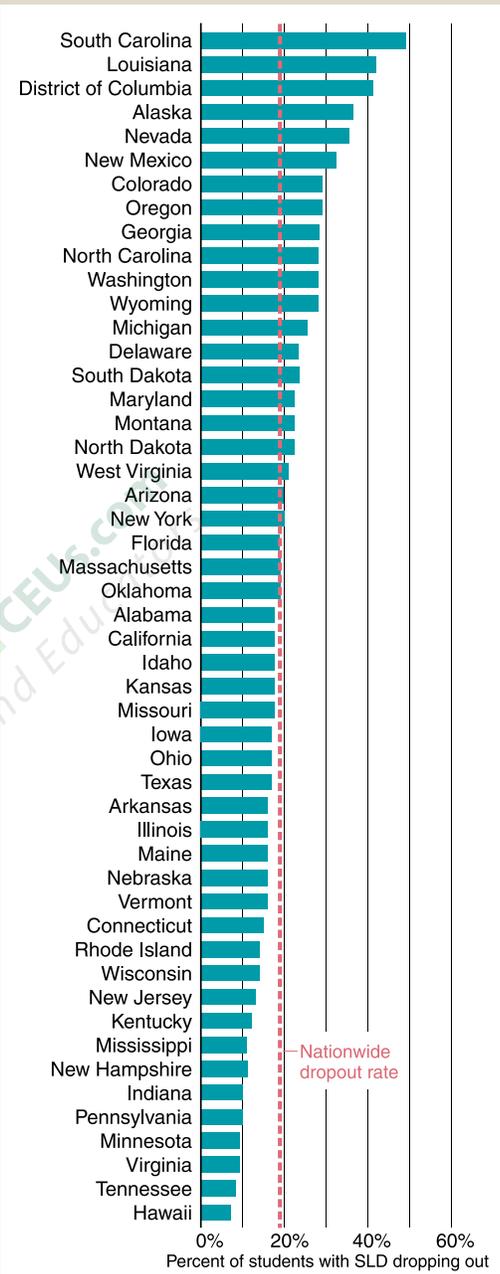
In three states, (**Idaho***, **Mississippi**, and **Nevada**) more students with SLD receive a certificate than receive a regular diploma.

Students with SLD Receiving Certificates



Source: www.IDEAdata.org, IDEA Part B Exiting, State-Level Data Files, 2010-2011

State-by-State Dropout Rates for Students with SLD

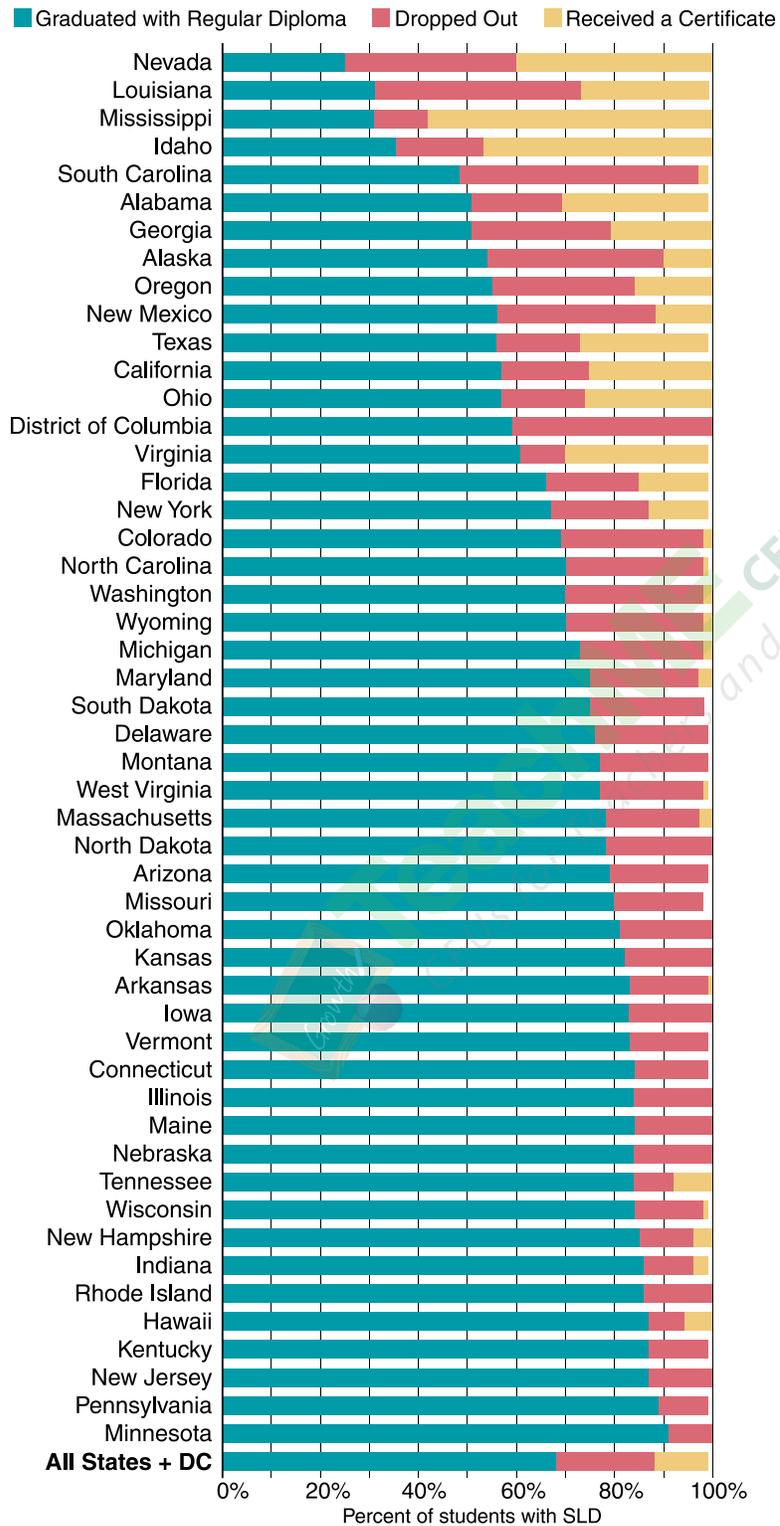


Source: www.IDEAdata.org, IDEA Part B Exiting, State-Level Data Files

Note: Utah has been excluded from this analysis due to quality concerns about data.

*Idaho indicated only one diploma option on the NCEO survey, yet reported students in this category on the IDEA Part B data collection.

How Students with SLD Exit High School



Each state's rate of graduation with a regular diploma, dropping out, and awarding certificates (if applicable) is presented in the table at left.

Sources: IDEA 618 Data Tables, Part B Exiting, www.ideadata.org/PartBData.asp, and www.ideadata.org/PartBExiting.asp

Note: Utah has been excluded from this analysis due to quality concerns about data.

DIPLOMAS and Other Exit Options

The 2011 National Study of State Diploma Options, Graduation Requirements and Exit Exams conducted by the National Center on Educational Outcomes documented the variation across states in the ways students with disabilities may exit high school. Information on these options was collected in a survey of states between May 2010 and May 2011.

Thirty-four states offer multiple high school exit options for students with disabilities, including those with SLD. A comparison of the graduation rate of students with SLD in the 2010-2011 school year and the number and type of options available to students with disabilities indicates that, at least in some

instances, the more options offered to students in fact results in fewer high school graduates. For example:

- The state with the lowest graduation rate ([Nevada](#)) also offers the largest number of options (seven);
- Three states ([Alabama](#), [Florida](#), and [Mississippi](#)) offer an Occupational/Vocational diploma which is available only to students with disabilities. These states award students with disabilities a regular diploma at lower rates than the nationwide rate;
- Eight states offer an IEP/Special Education diploma ([Connecticut](#), [District of Columbia](#), [Florida](#), [Georgia](#), [Nevada](#), [New York](#), [Virginia](#), and [West Virginia](#)). All of these states have graduation rates at or below the nationwide rate except Connecticut.

Graduation rate and exit options for all states are presented in the table on page 19.

Graduation Rates, Diploma and Other Exit Options by State

STATE (lowest to highest)	Percentage of Students with SLD Graduating w/ Regular Diploma	Number of Diplomas and other options available to Students with Disabilities	Honors Diploma	Regular Diploma	IEP/Sp.Ed Diploma	Attendance Certificate	Achievement Certificate	Occupational Diploma	Other
Nevada	25%	7	✗	✗	✗	✗			✗ (Adult, Advanced, Standard with CTE)
Louisiana	31%	5		✗			✗		✗ (Career, Skills Certificates, Other Endorsements)
Mississippi	31%	3		✗	✗			✗	
Idaho	35%	1		✗					
South Carolina	48%	1		✗					
Alabama	51%	4	✗	✗				✗	✗ (Graduation Certificate)
Georgia	51%	3		✗	✗	✗			
Alaska	54%	3		✗		✗	✗		
Oregon	55%	5	✗	✗		✗	✗		✗ (Extended or Modified)
New Mexico	56%	3	✗	✗	✗				
Texas	56%	3	✗	✗			✗		
California	57%	4		✗		✗	✗		✗ (Golden State Endorsement)
Ohio	57%	2	✗	✗					
District of Columbia	59%	2		✗	✗				
Virginia	61%	5	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗		
Florida	66%	4		✗	✗	✗		✗	
New York	67%	3	✗	✗	✗				
Colorado	69%	4	✗	✗	✗	✗			
North Carolina	70%	2		✗		✗			
Washington	70%	1		✗					
Wyoming	70%	3		✗		✗	✗		
Michigan	73%	1		✗					
Maryland	75%	1		✗					
South Dakota	75%	1		✗					
Delaware	76%	3	✗	✗		✗			
Montana	77%	1		✗					
West Virginia	77%	2		✗	✗				
Massachusetts	78%	2		✗					✗ (Districts may offer other types)
North Dakota	78%	1		✗					
Arizona	79%	1		✗					
Missouri	80%	2		✗		✗			
Oklahoma	81%	1		✗					
Kansas	82%	3		✗		✗	✗		
Arkansas	83%	1		✗					
Iowa	83%	3		✗		✗	✗		
Vermont	83%	1		✗					
Connecticut	84%	1		✗					
Illinois	84%	2		✗		✗			
Maine	84%	1		✗					
Nebraska	84%	3		✗		✗	✗		
Tennessee	84%	3		✗	✗	✗			
Wisconsin	84%	4		✗		✗	✗		✗ (High School Equivalency Diploma)
New Hampshire	85%	2		✗		✗			
Indiana	86%	3	✗	✗		✗			
Rhode Island	86%	2		✗		✗			
Hawaii	87%	3	✗	✗		✗			
Kentucky	87%	3	✗	✗			✗		
New Jersey	87%	1		✗					
Pennsylvania	89%	2		✗					✗ (Recognition of Achievement)
Minnesota	91%	1		✗					

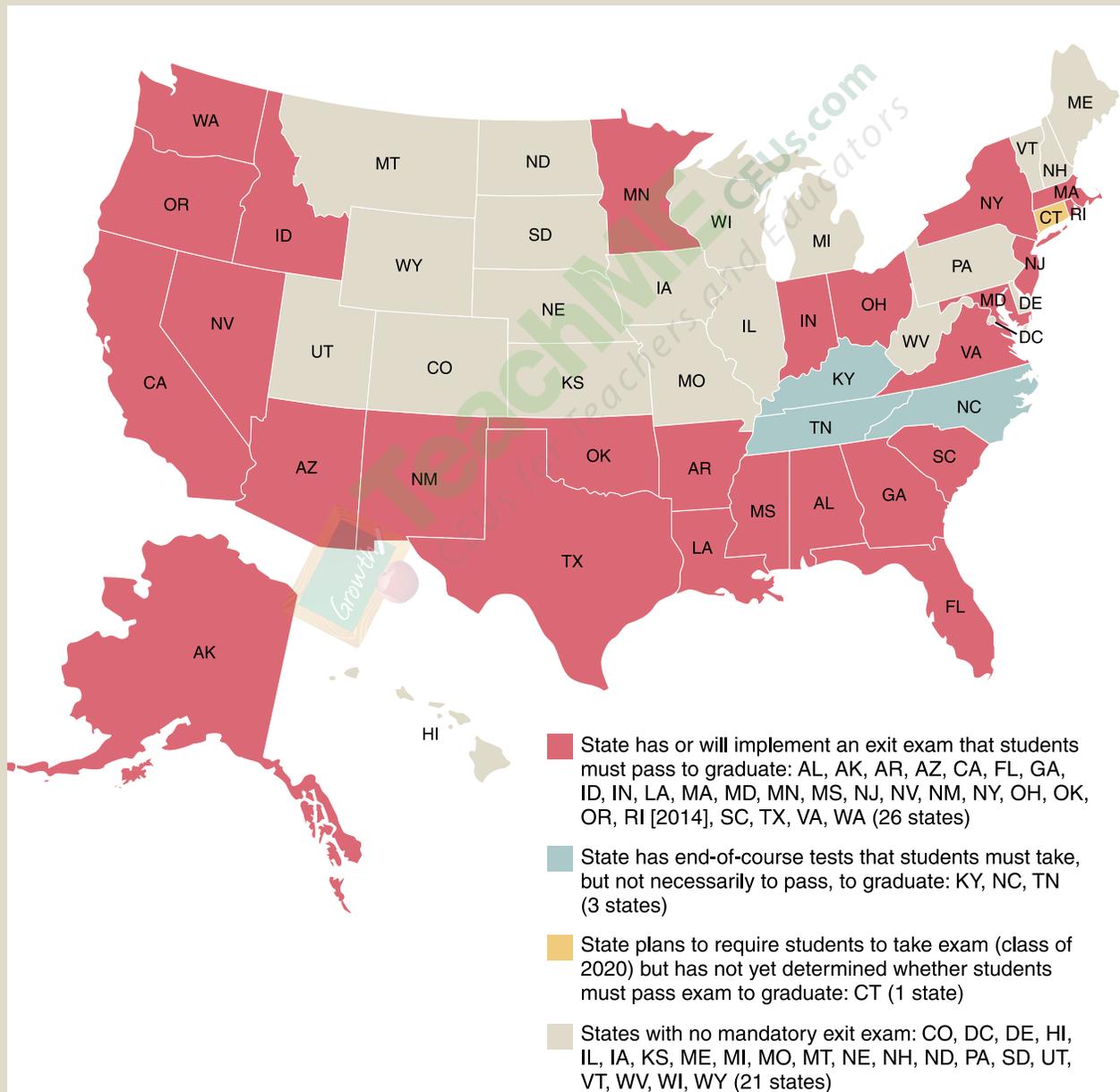
Sources: IDEA 618 Data Tables, Part B Exiting, www.ideadata.org/PartBData.asp and www.ideadata.org/PartBExiting.asp
 Diploma Options, Graduation Requirements, and Exit Exams for Youth with Disabilities: 2011 National Study, NCEO Technical Report 62

High School Exit Exams

The requirement to pass an “exit exam” in order to receive a regular diploma has been on the rise for several years. According to the Center on Education Policy’s 2012 annual report on state high school

exit exams, 26 states currently have or will soon implement an exit exam requirement (see map). A sizable majority of students with SLD are educated in states with exit exam requirements.

States High School Exit Exam Policies, School Year 2011-2012



Source: State High School Exit Exams: A Policy in Transition, Center on Education Policy, Washington, D.C., 2012

Some states use end-of-course exams rather than an exit exam. End-of-course exams allow students to be tested on the knowledge and skills they have gained from a specific course rather than from a comprehensive exam that assesses knowledge accumulated over several years and across subject areas. As noted in the NCEO study, “end-of-course exams may eliminate an ‘all or nothing’ scenario in exit exams, but also could shift the contingency of graduation onto a single academic subject in which a student struggles.”

Other variations across states include:

- Grade at which students first take the exam
- Academic content tested
- Number of times a student can retake the exam or a portion of the exam
- Remediation available to students failing the exam
- Use of different tests and/or passing scores for students with disabilities
- Accommodations allowed during test-taking (eight states allow the use of non-approved accommodations* while 12 states do not)

As with diploma options and graduation requirements, this exit exam variability across states can be a contributing factor to the rate at which students with SLD leave school with a regular diploma.

*Non-approved accommodations, often called “modifications,” are changes in setting, timing, scheduling, presentation, or response that are considered to alter what the test is supposed to measure.

Conflicting Expectations

Research conducted with high school students with SLD and their parents has shown conflicting expectations. Parents tend to hold lower expectations for their child’s future achievements than students hold for themselves. Parental expectations are important because research has found they are associated with both student achievement and post-high school outcomes.

Students Said:

- 88 percent expected to definitely graduate with a regular high school diploma
- Three percent expected not to earn a diploma

Parents Said:

- 59 percent expected their child to graduate with a regular diploma
- 10 percent felt their child probably or definitely would not leave school with a regular diploma

Sources:

Wagner, M., Newman, L., Cameto, R., Levine, P., and Marder, C. (2007). *Perceptions and Expectations of Youth With Disabilities. A Special Topic Report of Findings From the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2)* (NCSE 2007-3006). Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.

NLTS2 Wave 1 (2001) Parent Survey, Parent Expectations Table 213

One State's Recipe for Success

The state of **Kansas** stands out as one state with a high graduation rate for students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD)—82 percent earned a regular diploma in the 2010-2011 school year, compared to the nationwide rate of 68 percent.

Kansas also has one of the smallest gaps between all students graduating in four years (83 percent) and those with disabilities (73 percent). This 10 point gap—compared to gaps as large as 52 points—speaks to the success Kansas is having with its students with disabilities.

Here are a few important factors in the state's success:

One Diploma

Kansas offers only one diploma option to students with disabilities—the same regular diploma available to all its students. The state sets the minimum requirements for its regular diploma and local districts may add—but not reduce—those requirements, even for students with disabilities. This ensures that all students earning a regular diploma have completed the necessary coursework under the same requirements. In the words of one Kansas official, “I have a high level of confidence that students with disabilities who are awarded a regular diploma have completed the same rigorous academic requirements as all our students.”

Avoiding other options for students with disabilities—such as IEP diplomas or Occupational diplomas—also avoids the temptation to take students off track for the regular diploma. The more options available, the higher the risk of choosing the path of least resistance.

Opportunity to Learn

Kansas believes the best place for students with disabilities to learn rigorous academic content is in the general education classroom. Being taught by teachers who are licensed and certified in the subject they teach is critical to maximizing the

opportunity to learn. Only by experiencing the same content in the same environment as students without identified disabilities can those with SLD be ensured equal access.

A focus on including students with SLD in the general education curricula will become even more important as Kansas—like most states—moves to full implementation of the Common Core State Standards in the 2013-2014 school year.

Allowances for Extra Time

Implementation of the new Four-year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate, now required to be used by all states, presents some challenges for high schools when it comes to students with disabilities. Kansas quickly recognized these challenges and responded with two policies that don't penalize schools for providing appropriate services to students with disabilities.

First, Kansas developed a separate exit code which allows schools to continue to serve students with disabilities who have completed the graduation requirements for a regular diploma. These are students who need additional services to assist in their transition to postsecondary education or work, as required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. If counted as a graduate, the school loses federal and state funding to help with the services for these students. If not counted as a graduate, the school is penalized accordingly. So, Kansas found a way for schools to receive credit for the student as a graduate and continue to provide transition services and receive funding.

In addition to the solution above, Kansas also allows the use of extended-year cohorts in counting toward graduation. This lets schools get credit for students who take an additional year to graduate and ensures that students aren't arbitrarily exited from school at the end of four years. Kansas is one of 17 states currently using the option of extended-year cohorts.

Conclusion

As the nation continues its efforts to improve the rate at which students graduate with a regular high school diploma, extra attention must be paid to students who continue to graduate at significantly lower rates—such as students with disabilities. Fortunately, there is an abundance of information and resources to assist high schools in how to recognize and address the issues that contribute to students dropping out and not graduating with a regular diploma.

Watering down the graduation requirements for students with disabilities—or worse yet, excusing them altogether—is not an option.

As states implement more rigorous academic standards and increase graduation requirements, attention must be given to evidence-based instructional practices and other efforts to improve the rate at which students with SLD earn a regular diploma. Instead of more options and less rigor, these students need more help, particularly in their elementary and middle school years, to ensure they are able to meet the challenge of completing high school successfully.

The information in this report and the recommendations that follow should/do provide a roadmap to ensure these students have every opportunity to fully achieve their potential as young adults.

Recommendations

To help improve the graduation rate of students with learning disabilities as well as ensure consistency and comparability in the graduation data for the subgroup of students with disabilities, the National Center for Learning Disabilities makes the following policy recommendations:

At the federal level:

- Congress and the U.S. Department of Education should continue to require use of the Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) for reporting and accountability purposes at the school, district, state, and federal levels for all groups of students as required under the 2008 graduation rate regulation. Use of extended-year cohorts, such as five- and six-year rates should continue to be allowed. However, these extended-year rates should be reported separately and the emphasis should remain on graduating students in four years.
- Congress should codify all aspects of the 2008 graduation rate regulation in the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), including the requirement to establish a single graduation rate goal and annual targets that apply to all student groups, and ensure that graduation is a *significant factor* in overall state-defined accountability systems for high schools.
- The U.S. Department of Education should establish a clear definition of the students who are included in the “students with disabilities” category of the ACGR. Currently, states are allowed to define the students included in this group which results in a lack of uniformity across states and compromises comparability.
- Congress and the U.S. Department of Education should incorporate use of the ACGR into all monitoring and compliance activities required under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Both the ACGR for students with disabilities and the graduation rate gap should be monitored and used to trigger improvement activities.
- Congress and the U.S. Department of Education should require states to implement evidence-based early warning systems in all high schools that have significant graduation rate gaps between all students and students with disabilities.
- Congress and the U.S. Department of Education should encourage states to collect and analyze the ACGR data for students with disabilities by disability type in order to better understand the needs and risk factors of this population. Most, if not all, states collect these data but aggregate totals when reporting to the Department of Education. Therefore, reporting disaggregated data is not an extra burden on states and could contribute significantly to developing targeted improvement plans in states, districts, and schools.
- Congress and the U.S. Department of Education should continue to fund studies on the graduation rate, dropout rate, and post-school outcomes of students with disabilities, including access to and success in postsecondary education and meaningful employment.

At the state level:

- States with low graduation rates for students with disabilities and/or significant graduation rate gaps between all students and students with disabilities should closely examine the diploma options, graduation requirements and exit exam policies that pertain to students with disabilities. This report and other research suggests that offering multiple diploma options may contribute to low numbers of students with disabilities earning a regular high school diploma.
- States should consider using the extended-year cohort graduation rate option allowed under the 2008 graduation rate regulation. The extended-year graduation rate allows schools and districts to get recognition for their successes graduating students who may struggle to graduate from high school in four years including students with disabilities. According to information released by the U.S. Department of Education in November 2012, 17 states are currently using extended-year cohort graduation rates.
- States should ensure that policies regarding students with disabilities do not encourage early decisions that would put students on an alternate route to exiting high school. Policies should keep students on a path to earning a regular diploma.
- States should provide a way for students with disabilities who have met the state's graduation requirements for a regular diploma but are remaining in school to receive transition services deemed necessary by their IEP, such as vocational education or adult services, to not count against the state as non-graduates in the four-year cohort calculation.
- States should provide clear, parent-friendly information regarding diploma options, graduation requirements and high school exit exam policies to ensure that parents are fully informed of consequences, including how alternate types of diplomas will be viewed by employers, postsecondary education (career or technical education and colleges) as well as the military.
- States should consider changes to state formulas that provide funds for special education to local school districts that involve, at least in part, the graduation rate of students with disabilities to create incentives to improve the graduation rate of students with disabilities.
- States and local districts should take maximum advantage of the resources and technical assistance provided by federally funded projects such as Check & Connect: A Comprehensive Student Engagement Intervention (checkandconnect.umn.edu), the National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities (www.ndpc-sd.org) and the National High School Center (www.betterhighschools.org).



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