

A PARENT'S GUIDE FOR GRADUATION

of Students with Disabilities in Arizona



March 2021

INTRODUCTION

This document is an adaptation of released guidance about Graduation from the Arizona Department of Education. The Arizona Department of Education’s document can be found at:

<https://www.azed.gov/sites/default/files/2019/08/Graduation%20AZ%20TAS%201%2031%202020.pdf?id=5d49e65b1dcb2516ac6d1296>.

This parent guide was developed by Raising Special Kids, Arizona’s Parent Training and Information Center in collaboration with the Arizona Department of Education Exceptional Student Services and Dispute Resolution. The purpose of this document is to provide critical information for families as their children plan for graduation and life after high school. This adaptation is meant to be a companion document only. It does not replace or alter guidance issued by the Arizona Department of Education. This document will outline what it means to graduate from high school in Arizona.

COMMON TERMS

ADE/ESS: Arizona Department of Education Exceptional Student Services

ARS: Arizona Revised Statutes. State law that defines how Arizona implements federal law and regulations.

Cohort: Students who are educated at the same period of time such as the graduation class of 2021.

FAPE: Free Appropriate Public Education. Students in special education are entitled to a FAPE. A FAPE is defined as special education and related services that are provided at public expense, under public supervision and direction, and at no cost to parents. These must be provided in conformity with each student’s individualized education program (IEP).

IDEA: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Our nation’s federal special education legislation.

IEP: Individualized Education Program. Every student eligible for Special Education has an IEP that outlines supports and services, and other information that is reasonably calculated to allow the child to make progress in the general education curriculum and advance from grade to grade or to make progress in light of their individual circumstances.

LRE: Least Restrictive Environment. It is a principle that guides the student’s educational program. Students with IEPs should be with students in general education to the “maximum extent that is appropriate.” LRE may be delivered in a variety of classroom settings such as general education, resource, self-contained etc.

PEA: Public Education Agency. Traditional public school or charter school. A PEA is not a private school.

Postsecondary: Any activity or education that prepares the student for life after high school.

Special Education: Specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability.

How does the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) describe a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)?

All children with disabilities are entitled to a FAPE. Special education and related services are designed to meet the student's unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living provided at no cost to the parents.

How does high school graduation affect the right of a child with a disability to receive a FAPE?

Parents should talk to their child's IEP team about the courses the student will take when their child starts high school. The ideal for students with IEPs would be to earn a high school diploma in four years just like their non-disabled peers.

Students are entitled to receive a FAPE until they graduate with a regular high school diploma or "age out".

If the student starts their last year of school at the age of 21, Arizona law allows that student to finish that school year, even though they have turned 22 years of age during the year.

A student who has dropped out of high school before earning a high school diploma, may re-enroll with their PEA up until the year they turn 22 years of age.

Examples:

- Carmen is 18 years old and has earned a regular high school diploma along with her non-disabled peers in four years. She is no longer entitled to a FAPE.
- Ebony has not yet earned a regular high school diploma and is 21 years old. Ebony turns 22 in July, before the next school year starts. As the school year has not yet started, Ebony is no longer entitled to a FAPE and has effectively "aged out" of high school.
- Luis has not yet earned a regular high school diploma and is 21 years old. Luis turns 22 in October, which is during the school year. Luis is entitled to a FAPE and can remain in school until the end of that school year.
- Joe drops out of high school at 18 years of age without earning his high school diploma. Joe can re-enroll with his PEA up until the year he turns 22.

What is a regular high school diploma in Arizona?

A regular high school diploma is a document given by a public education agency's (PEA) governing board to a student who has met the graduation requirements established by the Arizona State Board of Education and the PEA. A student earns a high school diploma by getting passing grades in courses that are aligned with the State's academic standards.

The PEA has the responsibility to make sure that the course content is aligned to Arizona's Academic Standards. The student's teachers determine if a student has earned a passing grade in their course. Students must earn passing grades in their coursework to receive credit toward a regular high school diploma.

Special Education departments can explain which classes in the curriculum are aligned with state standards. Parents should discuss these standards during IEP meetings. The IEP team determines which accommodations and modifications are needed by the student to allow them to access the coursework and make academic progress.

The student's placement does not determine whether the student will receive a high school diploma. If the course content is aligned with Arizona's Academic Standards, and the student passes the class, they can earn credit toward a regular high school diploma.

If a parent disagrees with the PEAs determination that the student has earned a regular high school diploma and is no longer eligible to receive a FAPE, or did not receive a FAPE, the parent may file a request for a due process hearing or a request for mediation.

Does a certificate issued by the PEA qualify as a regular high school diploma?

No, a certificate issued by the PEA does not qualify as a regular high school diploma.

All students should be given the opportunity to earn a regular high school diploma.

If a student is not on track to earn a regular high school diploma, PEAs can issue an alternative credential. This option is **NOT** considered a regular high school diploma but is a recognition of the student's accomplishments. **A student who has not earned a regular high school diploma still has the right to receive a FAPE.**

There are instances in which a student may not receive a regular diploma. For a small group of students, even when provided with substantial support, accommodations, curriculum modifications, and services beyond their peers, the ability to meet minimum state standard requirements may not be possible.

How are Arizona's graduation requirements determined?

The Arizona State Board of Education has determined that 22 credits are the minimum number of credits required to earn a high school diploma.

The minimum required credits are listed below:

- English or English as a Second Language: 4 credits
- Social Studies: 3 credits
- Mathematics: 4 credits
- Science: 3 credits
- The Arts or Career and Technical Education: 1 credit
- Locally Prescribed Courses: 7 credits

Can a student's PEA require more than 22 credits?

Yes. A PEAs governing board can require students earn additional credits above the 22 required credits.

Does a student have to get a certain score on Arizona's assessment AzM2 to earn a regular high school diploma?

No. Most students in grades 3 – 8 and grade 10 (cohort 2022) take this assessment in English Language Arts and Mathematics. There are a limited number of specific accommodations allowed by Arizona law available to students while taking AzM2. The score a student receives on the AzM2 does not impact their ability to earn a regular high school diploma.

Can students who participate in the Multi-State Alternate Assessment (MSAA) receive credit toward graduation for course work?

Yes. Arizona administers the MSAA for English and Math in grades 3 – 8 and 11. The MSAA is a comprehensive assessment system designed to evaluate students with significant cognitive disabilities. Students whose coursework is aligned to the State's academic standards through core content connections, can receive credit toward graduation upon the successful completion of coursework. The IEP team determines which students take this assessment. The actual number of students eligible to take this assessment is very minimal.

Must a student with a disability pass the civics test to graduate?

Not always. A student with a disability must pass the civics test if he or she is learning at a level appropriate for the pupil's grade level in a specific academic area and a passing score on the statewide assessment or the civics test is required by the pupil's IEP team.

The student's IEP team decides whether to make these components a requirement for graduation for the student.

Parents are encouraged to discuss the civics test requirement during the IEP meeting.

PEAs are required to document on a student's transcript if he or she passed the civics test. If the IEP team decides that a student does not need to pass the civics test, PEAs can indicate on a student's transcript that the civics test requirement has been met.

Is participation or completion of a school-offered cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) program required for graduation?

Maybe. Arizona Revised Statutes makes CPR training participation mandatory for all students. The student's IEP team decides whether the student will participate in the CPR program instruction.

It is unclear in the law whether the CPR course is required for graduation.

What is the IEP team's role regarding graduation requirements?

IEP teams may determine the sequence of courses and which classes the student may take.

The IEP team develops annual goals (academic, behavioral, and transition-focused) that enable students to progress in their course of study. A Student does not have to meet these goals to graduate from High School.

IEP teams may not alter the number of credits nor the subject matter areas required to graduate with a regular high school diploma.

What is the difference between high school graduation and "aging out" of high school?

When a student graduates from high school, the student receives a high school diploma and is no longer eligible for FAPE.

When a student with a disability completes the school year in which he or she turns 22, the student "ages out" of special education and is no longer eligible to receive FAPE whether or not they have met graduation requirements.

How are postsecondary transition goals and activities different from graduation requirements?

Graduation requirements are the minimum course of study established by the Arizona State Board of Education that a student must meet to receive a regular high school diploma.

Postsecondary transition activities are intended to help a student with a disability pursue further education/training, employment, and independent living after high school. IDEA requires schools to list measurable postsecondary goals (MPGs), course of study and coordinated set of activities in a student's IEP in the year they turn 16 years of age.

The course of study listed in the IEP should provide the student with the opportunity to gain knowledge and skills directly related to their MPGs. These courses are not designed to be an exhaustive list of graduation requirements. Transition activities are integrated into and occur simultaneously with a student's coursework. They are **NOT** delayed until after coursework has been completed. Secondary transition activities are required for a FAPE and are critical to the success of a student in their adult life.

The course of study outlined in a student's IEP is part of the transition activities and NOT the student's graduation plan.

What additional documentation is required when a student with a disability graduates with a regular high school diploma or ages out of special education?

PEAs must provide the student with a summary of his or her academic achievement and functional performance. **This document is called a Summary of Performance.** It must include recommendations to assist a student exiting high school in meeting his or her postsecondary goals. Additionally, the PEA must provide prior written notice documenting the change of placement.

Can a student participate in the graduation ceremony if he or she does not earn a regular high school diploma?

Maybe. The graduation ceremony refers to the event where students are called alphabetically to the stage to shake the hand of the school officials. Arizona has no specific law or policy regarding who can participate in graduation ceremonies. **The decision about whether a student may participate lies with the individual PEA.** Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act prohibits PEAs from limiting participation in graduation ceremonies to only students who graduate with a regular high school diploma.

Where can I get additional help to understand this topic?

Raising Special Kids is Arizona's designated Parent Training and Information Center and operates under Part D of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). For clarification of the contents of this document, or to discuss your child's individual situation, please contact:

Raising Special Kids

info@raisingspecialkids.org

Central Arizona: 602-242-4366

Northern Arizona: 928-444-8834

Southern Arizona: 520-441-4007

Toll Free (statewide): 800-237-3007

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Developed by Raising Special Kids in collaboration with
Arizona Department of Education Exceptional Student Services
and Dispute Resolution.

