

DRAFT --The Repeal of the Special Diploma in Florida and Standard Diploma Options for Students with Developmental Disabilities.

Students with disabilities should not lose options they had for a diploma with Florida's shift from the Special Diploma to the Standard Diploma.

Many parents of students with developmental disabilities supported the repeal of the special diploma during the 2014 legislative session because of concerns that the special diploma did not have meaning in the job market or for post-secondary educational opportunities. The Council supported and continues to support a standard high school diploma for all students, including students with the most significant disabilities. However, the Council is concerned that the implementation of this legislation will result in students with disabilities losing access to a diploma that they once had.

While the special diploma had problems associated with its meaning, it provided two options for youth with significant disabilities that helped them with the transition from school to the workplace or post-secondary education. Previously, these students had access to two pathways: Special Diploma Option 1 with more emphasis on academics and inclusion, and Special Diploma Option 2 with greater emphasis on employment and community competencies. Students benefitted from learning activities that have helped them become employed and tax paying members of their communities.

The new legislation passed in 2014, broadly offered two options for students with disabilities to obtain a standard diploma; the Standard Diploma via Access Points and the Standard Diploma Option for Students with Disabilities Pathway. The Standard Diploma via Access Points offers an academic option to the Standard Diploma for students with disabilities, including those with more significant intellectual and developmental disabilities, by providing a modified curriculum. There is the perception that receipt of a Standard Diploma via Access Points will result in open access to post-secondary education, the military and employment options on the same level as all other Standard Diplomas. It is questionable, however, that this will occur, even though the diploma is titled "Standard Diploma". Parents, students, and educators must be made aware of what this Standard Diploma means and what outcomes they can expect.

The Standard Diploma Option for Students with Disabilities Pathway was originally intended to provide students with the most significant intellectual and developmental disabilities an employment competency pathway for accessing a Standard Diploma. However, initial discussions regarding implementation include not permitting a modified curriculum and requiring a level of paid employment that even students functioning at higher levels may not be able to meet. These elements will effectively exclude students with disabilities and particularly students with more significant cognitive disabilities from accessing this diploma option.

Finally, students who cannot achieve a standard diploma will receive a certificate of completion. The certificate of completion is a certificate of attendance and record coursework completed. The language included in the 2014 legislation requiring parents to declare an intention for their students to pursue either a standard diploma or a certificate of completion causes the Council concern. The certificate of completion is typically not a goal a student would work toward. Presenting the certificate of completion as an option of choice could result in a significant number of students who do not earn any type of diploma. The Council agrees that parents should be notified of options and that the certificate of completion is awarded to show attendance and course work that was completed. However, it does not denote a scholastic track that a student should work to attain.