

Time to Ask Questions?



Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

Sixteen-year-old Deanna was on the honor roll. She was a successful student in 10th-grade regular ed classrooms, and the school provided curriculum modifications to ensure Deanna would *be involved and make progress in the general ed curriculum* (per Federal Special Ed law). Everything was hunky-dory—this determined teen was proud of herself, and her parents were overjoyed. Deanna, who was born with Down syndrome, had been in inclusive classrooms throughout her school career. She was looking forward to receiving her diploma at graduation, then working toward a two-year degree at the community college.

Imagine the shock and dismay when Deanna and her parents learned that she would not be awarded a high school diploma, but only a “Certificate of Attendance.” Her mother, Maxie, was astounded and outraged! “But my daughter is on the honor roll,” she exclaimed to the school counselor. That didn’t matter. According to the school’s guidelines, because Deanna was on a “modified curriculum,” her grades “didn’t really count,” and she would *not* be receiving academic credit for any of her classes. No diploma for Deanna!

Like most parents, Maxie assumed that if her daughter participated in regular ed classes and passed them, she would receive academic credits, which would earn her the coveted high school diploma. Have you assumed the same thing? If so, it’s time to make some calls to your school district and/or your state department of education—and ask lots of questions! Try to speak to more than one person, as a way of double-checking what you’re told.

Find out if more than one type of diploma is available; and if so, what criteria must be met for each? Try to learn everything you can, including the history of the policy (whatever it is) and who is in charge of making the policy (get names, job titles, and phone numbers). Finally, ask what options or alternatives might be available.

By asking lots of questions when traveling and meeting new people, I’ve learned that in some places, this issue is decided by a state’s department of education and affects all students in that state. In other states, however, the decision is left to local school boards.

What *are* the options if a student who receives special ed services will not receive a diploma, but only a Certificate of Attendance or a Certificate of Completion? There are several, so don’t panic!

If you learn that your middle- or high school student will not be receiving a standard academic diploma, call a family meeting to discuss this with your child. Talk about what having a diploma means and alternatives to the traditional high school diploma. Many homeschooled students do not get traditional high school diplomas. Instead, they take the GED test and receive a diploma issued by the state, and students can successfully enroll in post-secondary education with a GED. There are many options for homeschooling via the Internet, as well as Internet-based organizations that will provide a student with a valid diploma after parents send in information that details the child’s homeschooling experience. At many community colleges, a GED is *not* a requirement for

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enrollment. Instead, a potential student can take the ATB (Ability to Benefit) test.

But there's more to know about this: at some community colleges or other post-secondary schools, a student doesn't need the GED or an ACT/SAT test to enroll; these simply allow the student to receive financial aid. Instead, a student may be required to take the school's placement tests (the ATB or other) to determine which classes are appropriate. So under these circumstances, if parents have the funds to pay for their children's college, no other "requirements" need to be met for a student to move on to post-secondary education!

Furthermore, let's keep all options on the table for college or other post-secondary education/training for all students—regardless of type or severity of disability—for the experiential value! Consider that students who *do not* have disabilities enroll in college or other post-secondary training for all kinds of reasons: to learn, of course, but also to grow up, get away from home, meet a husband or wife, kill time before having to get a job and act like an adult, and for many other reasons!

Why shouldn't students with disabilities be able to go on to college/post-secondary training for any of those same reasons? And if we're concerned about a student being able to learn the academics, the student can audit the classes. In general, when auditing a class, the student is not required to do the homework or take the tests, and no grade is given and no credit is earned. The student can learn all he can, enjoy the experience, and learn and grow!

If you and your child decide a high school diploma is worth pursuing, you'll need to work with your child's current school (and perhaps call an IEP meeting) to decide if this is possible. If your child has been in self-contained/special ed classes most of his life, the odds of successfully moving in this direction are probably not high, especially if the student only

has a couple of years of school left. How, for example, could the student cram four years of academics into two years? But other positive options include looking into alternative high schools, private schools, correspondence schools, and/or homeschooling.

For several years, I've preached that if a high school student is miserable in school (by virtue of being segregated and isolated, not being educated, not learning what he needs for his future, being "taught" only lifeskills by teachers who have low expectations, or whatever) then it's time to consider leaving school and moving on! The student can continue studying on his own at home or with a mentor (like homeschooling), take his GED (most communities offer free or low cost GED preparation and students can study the GED for free on the Internet), go on to college or trade school (in many states, 16-year-olds can attend community college), start his own business, and/or get a job. There's no one simple answer that applies to everyone; students and their families can explore a variety of options. And far from being a frightful time, this can be a wonderful time in a young person's life—it's up to us to make it happen. (Many families who have decided to leave public school special ed behind have breathed a collective sigh of relief, knowing that the future of their child is now back in their hands and their days of wrangling with the special ed system is over.)

If your child is still in elementary school, you can explore the options described above, and also decide if the diploma/certificate issue is one you and other parents want to challenge. If so, there's probably no time to waste—changing a bureaucracy takes time. Learn as much as you can, gather allies, and get on with it!

The "diploma or certificate" issue is disturbing and it seems patently unfair to students—whose progress and basic education are often held hostage by school policies that leave students segregated and uneducated. But with the love, vision, and creativity of their families, the futures of young people with disabilities are bright!