

**GRADUATION CONSIDERATIONS
FOR
STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

**A Decision-Making Framework
For IEP Teams**

**A Technical Assistance Document of the
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For IEP Teams**

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Written and Edited by

Lloya Fritz

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BACKGROUND

When is a student ready to graduate from high school? School and state standards clearly define what curriculum requirements students must meet in order to graduate from the general education program with a regular diploma. However, there is no established criterion for students in special education who are not likely to meet the graduation requirements for a regular diploma. This makes answering the question, “When is a student ready to graduate from high school?” difficult for students with disabilities.

In light of this issue, the Nebraska Department of Education Special Populations Office saw the need to provide guidance. The Nebraska Planning Council on Developmental Disabilities awarded a grant to the Department of Education to develop a guide to assist students with disabilities, their families, and other members of Individual Education Program (IEP) teams in determining when a student is ready for graduation from high school. As a result of this grant, a task force of interested parents and professionals was brought together to discuss the issue of graduation readiness for students with disabilities. Through a series of facilitated meetings, the group gathered information and developed recommendations that resulted in the content of this guide.

TASK FORCE MEMBERSHIP

Task Force members for this project were:

Sue Adams	NE. Health and Human Services
Janet Anderson	NE. Legislature
Connie Biaggio	Seward Public Schools
Marlene Brondel	League of Human Dignity
Glenda Davis	Parent Training and Information of Nebraska
Linda Douglas	Lincoln Public Schools
Janet Drudik	NE. Vocational Rehabilitation
Rene Ferdinand	Arc of Nebraska
Cindy Fisher	Parent
Lloya Fritz	Contractor/Report Writer
Jack Gilsdorf	NE. Department of Education
Mary Gordon	Developmental Disabilities Planning Council
Jeanne Heaston	NE. Department of Education
Sue Herdt	Minatare High School
Les Kimmons	Parent Training and Information of Nebraska
Sally Kingston	Educational Service Unit #8
Betsy Kosier	Contractor/Facilitator
Kay Rehtus	NE. Health and Human Services
Richard Schoonover	Bellevue Public Schools
Mary Schutt	ENCOR
Jack Shepard	NE. Department of Education
Carla Sorensen	Developmental Disabilities System
Bill Zabel	ServiceLinc

OVERVIEW OF ISSUE

Most students with disabilities graduate with their peers and receive a regular diploma. However, there are some students with disabilities who may not be able to meet the standard curriculum requirements needed to graduate from high school with a regular diploma. Students with disabilities are eligible for special education services until they meet the graduation requirements to receive a regular, signed diploma or until the end of the school year in which they reach age 21. There are no specific curriculum requirements that students with disabilities must meet in order to graduate from high school. Instead, they may graduate with a signed, regular diploma when they meet the transition goals in their Individual Education Program.

Being entitled to receive educational services until age 21 allows students with disabilities to continue their education beyond the traditional four years of high school. For these students, the decision of when to graduate is to be an individualized one, made by the Individual Education Program (IEP) team. However, it is widely recognized by families and educators that it can be a difficult decision to make and that there are no clear guidelines to help direct that decision.

If a student with disabilities does not meet the standard curriculum requirements for a regular diploma, how is it determined when s/he is ready to leave educational services? Or, if a student meets the curriculum requirements but does not meet the transition goals in his/her IEP, is s/he ready to graduate? If students with disabilities are eligible for educational services until age 21, should they automatically stay in school until then? Should they graduate with their peers and move into the adult world after four years of high school? How can the IEP team develop a plan for graduation? The short answer to all of these questions is that the decision of when a student should graduate is to be based upon the goals established for the individual student. That makes it sound much easier than it really is. What goals should be developed and what needs and circumstances should the team consider? How will they know when the student is ready and has gained the maximum benefit from his/her high school education? This guide will attempt to assist the student and his/her Individual Education Program team as they try to answer these questions.

LEGAL BASIS

What are the legal requirements regarding graduation?

Nebraska State Statute (79-729) specifies that all students who graduate from Nebraska high schools must possess certain minimum levels of knowledge, skills, and understanding. Each high school must require at least 200 credit hours for graduation, with at least 80 percent of those credit hours from the core curriculum. However, these requirements do not apply to students with disabilities whose Individual Education Programs (IEPs) prescribe a different course of instruction.

What are the legal requirements regarding graduation for a student with disabilities?

All special education services are governed by federal law, as defined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA does not require that an Individual Education Program contain specifically identified graduation criteria or a graduation plan. However, IDEA 2004 specifies that the IEP must include appropriate measurable postsecondary goals based upon age appropriate transition assessments. Assessments are to be related to training, education, employment, and where appropriate, independent living skills. Schools are responsible and accountable for developing transition goals for each student through the IEP team and implementing the educational processes needed for teaching the student in preparation for graduation and transitioning into the community.

Graduation criteria can be described in terms of accomplishment of the student's transition goals, plus receipt of other services that have been identified in the student's IEP. This means that the decision of when to graduate a student with disabilities rests with the IEP team. This is true even if the student meets the established credit hour requirements for graduation, but does not meet the transition goals specified in his or her IEP. The decision of when to graduate that student still rests with the IEP team.

Are there other requirements regarding graduation?

An important legal requirement related to graduation addresses parental notification. Regulations require that prior written notice be given to the parents of the student with a disability when a change of placement is to occur. Graduation is considered a change in placement. A school district may not graduate a student without providing this notice in a reasonable timeframe. In meeting the requirements for providing notice, the Individual Education Program team must have a plan developed that determines when graduation will occur for the student. A meeting is to be

held prior to graduating a student with a disability to review the IEP to ensure that graduation requirements will be met and that the goals and objectives of the IEP will be completed.

An additional requirement regarding graduation for students with disabilities is addressed in IDEA 2004. This requirement states that students graduating with a regular diploma or aging out shall be provided a summary of their academic achievement and functional performance. This summary is to include recommendations on how to assist the student in meeting his or her postsecondary goals.

What about other questions related to graduation?

A related question that often arises when discussing graduation relates to the student's participation in a graduation ceremony. If a student doesn't end his/her educational services after the traditional four years of high school, when should s/he take part in a graduation ceremony? Some students with disabilities may participate in the graduation ceremony with their peer or age group (sometimes referred to as "social graduation"), but do not receive a signed diploma. They may receive a certificate of attendance or an unsigned diploma at that time, which allows them to continue receiving educational services. Others may wait to participate in a graduation ceremony after they've officially ended educational services. This is a decision to be made based upon the individual student and school district policy. Appendix A of this document discusses these options in greater detail.

Appendix B of this guide addresses other commonly asked questions related to graduation. Specific questions regarding individual students should be addressed to personnel of the student's local school district.

ABOUT TRANSITION

Before discussing how to make plans for graduation, it is important to understand the concept of transition. Transition planning is critical to a student's success and plays an important role in determining readiness for graduation.

What is transition?

Transition is the term for the "bridge" between school and adult life for students with disabilities. This is a time to be used for preparing students for life after high school and includes planning for post-secondary education or training, employment, and community living.

What is transition planning?

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a federal law governing the provision of Special Education services. IDEA 2004 requires a student's Individual Education Program (IEP) to include appropriate measurable postsecondary goals and the transition services needed to assist the student in reaching those goals, beginning no later than the first IEP to be in effect when the student is age 16. The transition plan is to focus on the student's school courses and provide details on how instruction and community experiences will be provided to prepare the student for adult living and employment. In addition to planning and receiving information about services available while in school, students and their families are to receive accurate, understandable information about community services or agencies that may be able to assist them after they leave high school. Additionally, representatives of any agency that is likely to be responsible for providing or paying for transition services identified in the IEP should be involved in the development of the transition plan.

What are transition services?

Transition services include activities and supports designed to lead the student to identify his/her interests and strengths and to begin to work on the skills needed to be successful in employment and adult living. Transition services and supports can be provided by a variety of sources including schools, families, community members, and agency providers. The transition planning process consists of setting goals, developing a plan to meet those goals, and determining the transition services that are needed to ensure that the student is prepared for life after high school.

Why is transition planning important?

Although not required until age 16, beginning the transition planning process in middle school or early high school helps students explore what they want for themselves following high school. Effective transition planning assists students in school by involving them in meaningful activities to prepare them for adult living after their high school years.

A transition plan is designed to accomplish the following:

- Work with the student and his or her family to think about goals for life after high school and to develop a long-range plan to get there.
- Design the high school experience to ensure that the student gains the skills needed to achieve his or her desired goals for life after high school.
- Identify and link the student and family to any needed services, supports or programs before the student leaves the school system.

How does transition planning assist in determining readiness for graduation?

A main focus in transition planning is the identification of the skills, services, and support the student will need to be prepared for life after high school. Goals are developed based on what the student wishes to achieve and a plan is made to help the student reach his or her goals. The IEP team can gauge the student's readiness for graduation and entry into the adult world by measuring his/her progress in achieving the goals that have been established in the transition plan.

A FRAMEWORK FOR TRANSITION PLANNING

The following suggestions are intended to assist in guiding the student and his/her IEP team through the transition planning process. This is not a comprehensive list of all that needs to be done and some items may not be applicable for all students, but it may be used as a guide. It is important to remember that transition planning is not a one-time event, but is a process that spans the student's high school years.

Prior to age 16, the student should begin to:

- Identify interests, preferences, and needs and know how to communicate these to others.
- Identify broad goals for the future, including plans for independent living and employment.
- Identify and develop a plan to learn skills necessary for independent living. This should address issues such as communication, personal care, daily living skills, money management, and transportation.
- Explore career options, possibly by participating in job exploration activities.
- Discuss plans for graduation.

By age 16, the student should:

- Identify and develop a plan to learn skills to lead to employment. The plan may include classroom instruction, job exploration activities, part-time employment, or volunteer work.
- Determine whether s/he plans to continue with education after high school. If so, the high school course of study needs to be designed to meet admission requirements of the post-secondary program.
- Work through the application process for adult service agencies, if it is anticipated that such services will be needed.
- Practice independent living skills such as budgeting, shopping, cooking and housekeeping, as appropriate.
- Review and further develop plans for graduation.

By age 18, the student should:

- Inquire about the application process for Supplemental Security Income (SSI).
- Continue coordination with adult service agencies, as needed.
- Continue job exploration activities.
- Visit colleges or vocational/tech schools, if applicable. Work with high school and college personnel to ensure admissions requirements and needs for accommodations are met.
- Continue to review and further develop plans for graduation.

DECISION-MAKING FRAMEWORK

As the task force discussed considerations regarding graduation, recommendations resulted in two related arenas: *decision-making principles* and *areas for IEP team exploration*. The *decision-making principles* describe the desired quality of decision-making processes that determine each student's course of action toward readiness. They offer an inclusive perspective regarding how to promote continuity and coordination across the state in the context of established legal, procedural and local parameters.

This section contains the foundation of what emerged from facilitated discussions among an array of individuals who care about and work with students with disabilities. The content is intended to support students and the rest of their IEP team members in the process of decision-making, and to encourage inclusive dialogue well before the event of graduation. The discussion results have significant value because they demonstrate how different views can come together to develop a shared understanding of what is most important in preparing each student for graduation and post-school experiences.

These guidelines express the collective belief of the task force that it is desirable for decisions about graduation to include all stakeholders early and be a reflection of:

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------|
| ~Commitment and interdependence | ~Practicalities |
| ~Natural relationships | ~Short and long-term vision |
| ~Realism | ~Formal partnerships |
| ~Logical sequences or building blocks | ~Inclusive information exchange |
| ~A wealth of community resources | ~Self-determination |
| ~A broad spectrum of perspectives and experiences | ~Passion for what is possible |

Expressed in the form of *decision-making principles*, the material offers a template, or standard, for making realistic and well-considered choices. Rather than fading into the background, they serve as evaluation criteria at any stage of decision-making and provide an individualized and principled basis for the steps each student takes toward readiness. They also provide a common language when considering how to ensure that a decision-making process is responsive. When used along with the guidelines regarding *areas for exploration* (to follow), the task force is confident that decisions will result in the most realistic and durable outcomes that address the unique needs of each student and others in his/her environment.

All members of IEP teams – parents, students, educators, providers, etc. – are encouraged to implement decision-making processes that satisfy the principles below. The elements are not in ascending or descending order; each item provides a way to measure the suitability of a process and a common basis for adopting, abandoning or adapting how decisions are made regarding graduation readiness. This approach ensures mutual accountability for outcomes that fully address students' needs.

Decision-Making Principles

Best practices provide consistency and meaningful decision-making processes regarding graduation that:

- Apply to the range of special education students who move from public education and may or may not enter adult services such as those in the Developmental Disabilities System, Behavioral Health System, Vocational Rehabilitation or others; and
- Reflect a transition planning continuum involving academic, life, social, emancipation and other skill development or preparation in a variety of learning/experiential settings; and
- Are driven by the importance of:
 - Flexible, individualized, student-centered progress;
 - Maturation, social, life/functional, and/or vocational skills, information, tools and experience;
 - Coordinated, two-way, geographically realistic and early cross-system involvement and information exchange;
 - Positive experience that enhances opportunities for success as a productive community member and minimizes trauma;
 - Student input (wants, interests, concerns and dreams);
 - Multiple perspectives and mutual support for students' benefit;
 - Parent/family input (wants, interests, concerns, dreams and observations); and
 - A planning and decision-making process that fosters more clarity and predictability.

Decisions that are consistent with these criteria lay the foundation for a thorough exploration of factors affecting transition and graduation readiness.

AREAS FOR IEP TEAM EXPLORATION

While the *principles for decision-making* provide the foundation that guides the decision-making process, the second set of guidelines developed by the task force describes the areas that the Individual Education Program team may wish to explore when developing the transition plan and making a plan for graduation. These can be grouped under five *areas of exploration*:

- *Individual Perspectives & Awareness* – area related to the student’s understanding and awareness of him/herself and the world;
- *Academic* - area related to the student’s educational or academic abilities;
- *Vocational* – area related to the student’s abilities in regard to his/her employment future;
- *Personal/Social/Interpersonal* – area related to the student’s abilities in regard to self and interactions with others; and
- *Independent Living* – area related to the student’s ability to live in the adult world.

There are key questions that should be asked in each of the five areas of exploration. Examples of the key questions are on the following page. These questions are intended to serve as a springboard for discussion and consideration. Other questions may need to be added, depending upon the individual circumstances of the student.

KEY QUESTIONS IN AREAS FOR EXPLORATION

Following is a set of questions that the IEP team may wish to consider when discussing each area to be explored. The team should begin asking these questions as they begin the transition planning process for the student and continue to review and ask them at least annually throughout the student's high school years. As the team examines the areas (such as Academic, Vocational, Independent Living, etc.), it is important that these questions be asked in each context related to the student's life.

These questions are:

- ❖ *What is important to the student personally? What does s/he want?*
- ❖ *What does the student want and need to know? How aware is the student of his or her options?*
- ❖ *What do the parents want and need to know? How aware are they of the options available?*
- ❖ *What natural supports are available for the student?*
- ❖ *What information is needed to assist in the decision-making process?*
- ❖ *What voices, perspectives, or experiences of others should be considered?*
- ❖ *What do the student's environment and community have to offer?*
- ❖ *What services and/or supports might the student need to be successful in the adult world? If adult agency services or post-secondary education are recommended, what needs to be done to prepare the student?*

In considering these areas for exploration, the IEP team may wish to break down the process into questions that are *oriented to the student* and those that are *oriented to the student's environment*. Exploring the issues *oriented to the student* includes looking at the strengths, abilities, preferences, and interests of the student. This includes examining the expectations demonstrated or expressed by the student. Exploring the issues *oriented to the student's environment* takes into consideration school, home, family, relationships, community, and opportunities that are available. Understanding how the environment may impact the student is an important piece of the process.

Once these areas have been explored, it is important that the team take the next step to identify what action needs to be taken to assist the student in reaching his/her goals. These actions, identified as "*steps to reach expected outcomes*" will form the basis for the transition activities that will take place during the student's high school years. The transition activities will then lead the student to be prepared for graduation and entry into the adult world.

The following chart represents examples of questions that might be asked in each area for exploration and steps to be taken to reach expected outcomes for the student. As with the rest of the transition planning process, these and other questions should be asked and reviewed throughout the high school years.

AREAS FOR EXPLORATION

Individual Perspectives and Awareness	Academic	Vocational	Personal/Social/ Interpersonal	Independent Living
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Areas Oriented to the Student:</i></p> <p>~ What are the student's likes and dislikes?</p> <p>~ What are the student's expectations and/or fears?</p> <p>~ What impact do relationships have?</p> <p>~ How does the student see him/herself?</p> <p>~ How does the student see him/herself in relation to others?</p> <p>~ What are the student's expectations regarding services or supports after graduation?</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Areas Oriented to the Student:</i></p> <p>~ What are the student's academic abilities?</p> <p>~ What academic skills will the student want/need to use outside of school (such as reading for pleasure, daily life math skills, writing and computer skills)?</p> <p>~ To what extent does the student feel s/he is reaping benefit from the academic experience?</p> <p>~ What are the student's expectations regarding post-secondary education or training?</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Areas Oriented to the Student:</i></p> <p>~ What are the student's occupational interests?</p> <p>~ What personal and vocational skills does the student have to offer (social skills, workplace behavior and attitudes, quality and accuracy)?</p> <p>~ What vocational experiences has the student had (worksite visits, job-shadowing, completing applications, interviewing, part-time jobs, etc.)?</p> <p>~ To what extent does the student feel s/he is reaping benefit from his/her vocational experiences?</p> <p>~ What are the student's expectations regarding his/her employment future?</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Areas Oriented to the Student:</i></p> <p>~ What are the student's abilities in communication?</p> <p>~ What are the student's abilities in interacting with others and participating in group activities?</p> <p>~ How appropriate are the student's personal management skills and behaviors?</p> <p>~ To what extent does the student exhibit socially responsible behavior (complying with rules/laws, sexual awareness, etc.)?</p> <p>~ What are the student's abilities in the areas of self-awareness and self-confidence?</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Areas Oriented to the Student:</i></p> <p>~ What are the student's abilities in the area of independent living? Skills to be considered include: personal care, household maintenance, financial management, medical needs, recreation and leisure, transportation, community access, etc.</p> <p>~ How willing is the student to relocate in order to live independently?</p> <p>~ What is the student's ability to seek assistance when needed?</p> <p>~ What are the student's expectations regarding his/her ability to live independently?</p>

Individual Perspectives and Awareness	Academic	Vocational	Personal/Social/ Interpersonal	Independent Living
<p><i>Areas Oriented to the Student's Environment:</i></p> <p>~ What are the parental or family expectations, dreams, and fears for the student?</p> <p>~ What observations do parents/family have?</p> <p>~ What are the parents' expectations regarding services or supports for the student after graduation?</p>	<p><i>Areas Oriented to the Student's Environment:</i></p> <p>~ Based on the perspectives of others, to what extent is the student reaping benefit from the academic experience?</p> <p>~ What is the relationship between the student's academic abilities and his/her employment goals?</p> <p>~ What are the parents' expectations regarding post-secondary education or training?</p>	<p><i>Areas Oriented to the Student's Environment:</i></p> <p>~ What vocational experiences and supports are available to the student during high school?</p> <p>~ What vocational supports will be available to the student post-high school (vocational training and assessments, job coaching and placement, etc.)?</p> <p>~ What are the parents' expectations regarding the student's employment future?</p>	<p><i>Areas Oriented to the Student's Environment:</i></p> <p>~ What opportunities are available for the student to learn and practice personal, social, and interpersonal skills?</p> <p>~ What is the impact of the student's environment on relationships and friendships?</p>	<p><i>Areas Oriented to the Student's Environment:</i></p> <p>~ How willing are the parents/family to relocate or have their son/daughter relocate?</p> <p>~ What supports will be available to the student post-high school for independent living (daily living, housing, medical care, transportation, etc.)?</p> <p>~ What are the parents' expectations regarding the student's ability to live independently?</p>

Individual Perspectives and Awareness	Academic	Vocational	Personal/Social/ Interpersonal	Independent Living
<p><i>Steps to Reach Expected Outcomes:</i></p> <p>~ Identify the activities and experiences needed to assist the student in gaining a greater understanding of self.</p> <p>~ Develop and implement a plan for providing the needed support, training, and experience to expand the student's awareness and identify his/her perspectives. Such activities may take place in the classroom, in the home, and/or in the community.</p>	<p><i>Steps to Reach Expected Outcomes:</i></p> <p>~ Identify the academic skills that the student needs to gain in order to be prepared for life after high school. If post-secondary education services will be utilized, consideration should be given to the requirements for success in those services.</p> <p>~ Develop and implement a plan for providing the needed support, training, and experience in academics. The needed academic skills may be taught using alternate teaching strategies or experiences as necessary. Such activities may take place in the classroom, in the home, and/or in the community.</p>	<p><i>Steps to Reach Expected Outcomes:</i></p> <p>~ Identify the vocational skills the student needs to develop in order to be prepared for employment or for further vocational training. If adult agency services will be needed, consideration should be given to the skills required for success in those services, while maximizing his/her independence.</p> <p>~ Develop and implement a plan for providing the needed support, training, and experience in vocational skills. Teaching the needed vocational skills may include classroom training, experiences in the home, and/or on-the-job experiences.</p>	<p><i>Steps to Reach Expected Outcomes:</i></p> <p>~ Identify the support, training, and/or experiences the student needs to develop appropriate and effective personal, social, and interpersonal skills.</p> <p>~ Develop and implement a plan for providing the needed support, training, and experience in the area of personal, social, and interpersonal skills. Such activities may take place in the classroom, in the home, and/or in the community.</p>	<p><i>Steps to Reach Expected Outcomes:</i></p> <p>~ Identify the support, training, and or experiences the student needs to be prepared for independent living or to receive further training in independent living skills. If adult agency services will be needed, consideration should be given to the skills required for success in those services, while maximizing his/her independence.</p> <p>~ Develop and implement a plan for providing the needed support, training, and experience in independent living skills. Such activities may take place in the classroom, in the home, and/or in the community.</p>

IN SUMMARY

There is no easy answer to the question, “How do we determine when a student with disabilities is ready to graduate from high school?” However, it is hoped that this guide will assist students with disabilities, their families, and educators when making this important decision.

It is intended that the use of this guide will ensure both a meaningful decision-making process and allow for an individualized exploration process for each student. The process will provide students and their IEP teams with a principled plan of action that respects each student’s circumstances and environment. Following this process allows for careful consideration to assist in developing a plan for graduation that will be right for the student and ensure his/her successful entry into the adult world.

GRADUATION OPTIONS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

The Individual Education Program (IEP) team is responsible for determining whether a student has completed a course of study that makes him/her eligible to receive a signed, regular diploma. Even if the student with disabilities will continue his/her education program until the end of the school year in which s/he reaches age 21, the IEP team may recommend that the student would benefit from participation in the graduation ceremony with peers. Since this has often been a source of confusion for families and districts in Nebraska, legislation in 2008 (LB 1153) addressed this issue, resulting in the following state law.

Certificate of Attendance and Participation in High School Graduation Ceremony

Nebraska State Statute 79-770, enacted July 18, 2008, states: At the request of a parent or guardian, a school district shall issue a certificate of attendance to a student who receives special education services under the Special Education Act, who has reached seventeen years of age, and who has not completed his or her individualized education plan. A school district shall allow a student who receives a certificate of attendance under this section to participate in the high school graduation ceremony of such high school with students receiving high school diplomas. A student may receive only one certificate of attendance and may participate in only one graduation ceremony based on such certificate. The receipt of a certificate of attendance pursuant to this section shall not affect a school district's obligation to continue to provide special education services to a student receiving such certificate.

This section does not preclude a student from receiving a high school diploma by meeting the school district's graduation requirements established pursuant to section 79-729 or in his or her individualized education plan or receiving a diploma of high school equivalency under section 79-730 upon completing the requirements of such section. The school district may allow a student who has previously participated in a graduation ceremony based on a certificate of attendance to participate in an additional graduation ceremony when such student receives a high school diploma.

Source: Laws 2008, LB1153, § 1. Operative date July 18, 2008.

Graduation Options

Prior to the enactment of LB 1153, the Nebraska Department of Education's Transition Advisory Committee developed the following information regarding best practices in graduation options for students with disabilities. These options are still valid and it is recommended that this issue be addressed in the district's graduation and/or school board policy, and district policy handbook.

Upon completion of a course of study that meets the following requirements, the student will be awarded a regular diploma using any of the following program options:

Option 1

A student completes a standard course of study based upon meeting all requirements for graduation and IEP/Transition goals.

The student would be eligible to receive a signed, regular diploma and participate in the graduation ceremonies.

Option 2

A student completes the standard or modified course of study, but not the IEP/Transition goals.

The student may participate in graduation ceremonies with his/her peers without receiving a signed regular diploma. The student may continue to receive services and supports from the school district until the IEP/Transition goals are met or until the student completes the school year in which s/he reaches the age of 21. At this time, the student will receive a signed, regular diploma.

Option 3

A student completes his/her IEP/Transition goals, but not the standard course of study.

When a student's disability prevents him/her from completing the standard course requirements for graduation, the IEP team must identify IEP/Transition goals for graduation that are consistent with the student's individual needs. Upon completion of those goals, the student will be allowed to graduate with a signed, regular high school diploma. A student may elect to participate in graduation ceremonies with peer classmates or upon completion of his/her course of study.

Graduation Considerations

- It is recommended that graduation be addressed in all transition plans. Plans for graduation should be considered in development of the course of study and reviewed annually.
- The receipt of a signed, regular diploma terminates the service eligibility of students with special education needs.
- It is recommended that all diplomas awarded by a school district be identical in appearance, content and effect, except that symbols or notations may be added to individual student's diplomas to reflect official school honors or awards earned by students.
- A student who receives a document such as a certificate of attendance, unsigned diploma, or blank folder is eligible to continue receiving special education services until receipt of a signed, regular diploma or until the end of the school year in which the student turns 21.
- It is recommended that the IEP team review and document that all requirements for receipt of a signed, regular high school diploma have been met.

DISCUSSION POINTS REGARDING GRADUATION

1. Are special education rights transferred from parents to students when the student reaches the age of majority?

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) allows each state to enact procedures that would transfer special education rights from parents to students when they reach the age of majority. However, in Nebraska, there is no such procedure to do that. Special education rights do not transfer from parents to students when they reach the age of majority.

2. Must an IEP contain graduation criteria?

IDEA does not include a requirement that an IEP contain specifically identified graduation criteria or a graduation plan. However, the IEP must include appropriate measurable postsecondary goals and the transition services (including courses of study) needed to assist the student in reaching those goals. Graduation criteria can be described in terms of accomplishment of those goals, plus receipt of certain transition services. The decision to graduate a student must be made by the IEP team. A district should convene a meeting prior to graduating a student with a disability in order to review the IEP to ensure that graduation requirements will be met and the goals of the IEP will be completed. In addition, graduation constitutes a change of placement, and therefore requires prior written notice.

3. If a student quits school at the age of sixteen, is s/he still eligible for special education services?

A school district is responsible for providing special education services for students until they meet graduation criteria for a regular, signed diploma or until the end of the school year in which they reach age 21. If a student drops out of school, the district should notify the parents and the student that the student is still eligible to receive special education, and make every effort to continue to provide special education for that student. If the student and parents refuse services, the school should obtain documentation to that effect. As best practice, the district should continue to send notice to the student and parents each time the IEP is scheduled for review, and keep on file the most recent copy of that student's IEP.

4. Can a student participate in a graduation ceremony and continue to receive transition services the following year?

If it is age or socially appropriate for students to participate in the graduation ceremony with their peer group, they can do so. However, the issuance of a regular signed diploma would end eligibility for special education services for those students. A certificate of attendance, an unsigned diploma or a blank folder would be appropriate to give to these students at the ceremony, thus allowing them to continue with transition services until IEP transition goals are met or until the end of the school year in which they reach age 21. See Appendix A for further discussion related to this question.

5. Is a student entitled to receive adult agency services upon graduation?

School systems are required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to provide educational services to meet the needs of students with disabilities. This is known as entitlement. It is important that students and families know that there is no entitlement for services in adult agencies such as Vocational Rehabilitation or the Division of Developmental Disabilities. These agencies have specific criteria that individuals must meet in order to be eligible for their services. Services may be provided only after the individual has made application, been determined eligible, and funding has been made available. For these reasons, it is especially important that connections are made early with adult agencies to ensure that there are no gaps in services once the student graduates.

6. Is a student who receives a General Educational Development (GED) diploma still eligible to attend high school?

A student who completes a GED is still eligible for a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) if s/he has not received a regular high school diploma and has not reached the maximum age of 21 by the end of the school year.