

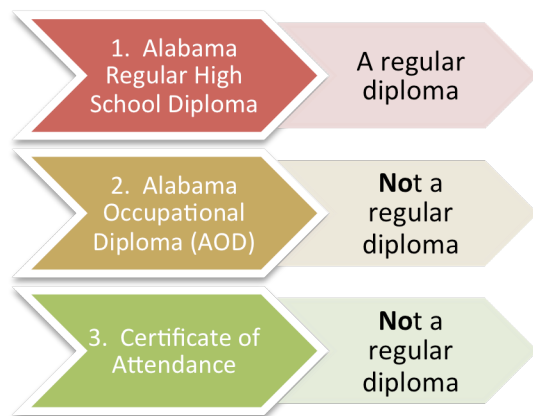
Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program

Is Your Child Going to Lose His Right to Special Education Services after Age 18?

Alabama's high school diploma program changed in big ways in 2013. Unless the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) takes action, your child could lose his legal right to special education services beyond his senior year of high school because of these changes.

Alabama's Old Diploma Program

Prior to 2013, all Alabama students with disabilities were awarded 1 of 3 exit documents upon graduation, depending on the course of study they pursued:



Federal and state laws provide that until a student with disabilities is awarded a **regular** diploma, he can stay in school until 21 years of age. So, if a student received either the AOD or Certificate of Attendance when he graduated, he was entitled to return to school after graduation and continue to receive schooling services until he either earned the Alabama Regular High School Diploma or turned 21.

For these AOD or Certificate students, who have more significant academic and functional needs, these extra years in school are important to help them prepare for life as adults. **They are able to continue in school to develop vital academic, vocational, and daily living skills that will enable them to live as independently as possible as adults.**

Alabama's New Diploma Program

In 2013, Alabama changed its diploma plan, doing away with the AOD and Certificate. Now, only one exit document - the "Alabama High School Diploma" - is awarded to students, regardless of the course of study they pursue. Under state law, the Alabama High School Diploma is a **regular** diploma. This new diploma plan applies to all students, including those who are due to graduate in spring 2014.

Impact on Your Child

Let's say your child is going to participate in graduation ceremonies with his peers in a few weeks. Before the diploma change, your child was going to be awarded the AOD or Certificate of Attendance and was planning to return to school in fall 2014 to continue his education.

When your child is awarded the Alabama High School Diploma at graduation, he will lose his right to further schooling. Remember...the Alabama High School Diploma is a regular diploma; once a student fulfills his course requirements and receives that diploma, his right to further education ends. **Your child will have graduated with a regular diploma and will not be able to return to school.**

Even if you don't have a graduating senior this year, your child eventually will be affected by the loss of the right to continued education between ages of 18-21. **Unless the ALSDE acts, your child's legal right to further special education beyond his senior year is gone.**

Next Steps

ADAP has been talking to the ALSDE for a number of months about how this new diploma plan threatens a child's legal rights to special education services. ALSDE staff has been responsive to the concerns we've voiced but, **as of today**, no policy proposal has been announced to protect a student's right to schooling services as a young adult.

What can you do while the ALSDE develops a solution that unequivocally protects your child's right to special education services after his senior year?

- While not foolproof, when you attend your child's spring IEP meeting, tell the IEP Team that you **do not** want your child to graduate this spring even if he has – on paper – completed all the course requirements that would have enabled him **in the past** to be awarded the AOD or Certificate of Attendance and that would **now** allow him to be awarded the Alabama High School Diploma. Make sure your comments are documented in writing in your child's IEP.
- At the meeting, develop an IEP for the coming year. If you need help writing an appropriate IEP that is individualized to your young adult child's needs, contact ADAP. Make sure the IEP written for your 18-21 year old student doesn't neglect **age-appropriate community-based opportunities for employment and daily living skill development**. We can help with that.

- Your child has a right to participate in graduation activities with his peers even if he is not technically leaving school. Don't hesitate to let him enjoy senior class graduation activities. But, be clear with school staff that he is not to be awarded a diploma at graduation regardless of whether he has technically completed his course requirements.

Let Us Know What You Think: Your Opinions Matter!

- Let us know what you think of the potential loss of your child's legal right to special education services after age 18 and how it might impact your child. Also, contact us to learn more about what you can do to protect your child's right to postb senior year services and to be kept informed about this important policy matter in the coming weeks.

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