



California Alternative Pathways to a High School Diploma Workgroup Report

Provided to the chairs of the relevant policy committees and budget subcommittees of the Legislature, the Executive Director of the State Board of Education, the Superintendent of Public Instruction, and the Director of Finance

Authorized by the Budget Act of 2020, Senate Bill 74

October 1, 2021

*Funded by the California Department of Education,
Special Education Division*

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1. SUMMARY 4

SUMMARY

The Alternate Pathways to a High School Diploma (Alt Pathways) Workgroup, authorized by the Budget Act of 2020, Senate Bill 74, met from December 2020 to July 2021 to make recommendations to the California State Legislature, State Board of Education, Department of Education, and Department of Finance pertaining to the examination of existing and potential additional pathways to a high school diploma for students with disabilities. Since its inception, California's state accountability system, through its dashboard, has identified students with disabilities as the student group with the lowest high school graduation rate compared to all other measured student groups.

The legislation specifically charged the Alt Pathways Workgroup with studying existing and developing new alternate pathways for students with disabilities to access the core curriculum in order to satisfy the requirements for a high school diploma; developing an alternate diploma aligned to the state's alternate achievement standards for students with significant cognitive disabilities, consistent with federal law; and other related matters necessary to meet the purpose set forth in this provision.

The workgroup established a common, foundational vision to guide their work: that all students with disabilities, including students with significant cognitive disabilities, should enter high school knowing they have the opportunity to earn a high school diploma. The workgroup agreed in order to realize this vision, California's education system must both provide clearly articulated pathways for every student to earn a high school diploma, and ensure students, families, and educators clearly understand and are able to plan for how each individual student can access all of the learning and necessary requirements a to earn a high school diploma.

Consistent with current federal law contained within the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), every student with a disability should have an opportunity to earn a high school diploma that allows them to pursue any postsecondary college, training, or employment options, and meaningfully and fully participate in their community. The expectation under the IDEA is that every student receives the support and services they need in order to access the same opportunities as their peers without disabilities. This includes a high school diploma. In the spirit of the IDEA, and equality of opportunity for students with disabilities, the recommendations developed by the Alt Pathways Workgroup attempt to identify existing barriers to earning a high school diploma for students with disabilities and explore the opportunity to develop a pathway for students with significant cognitive disabilities to also obtain a high school diploma (based on the state's alternate achievement standards). Historically, this latter group of students has received a high school certificate of completion in lieu of a high school diploma, which has proven challenging when attempting to gain competitive integrated employment and access to postsecondary opportunities because the certificate of completion is not formally or widely recognized within the business communities or institutes of higher education (see section 5.E.ii).

The workgroup agreed and research supports that participating in high-quality core instruction in the general education classroom to the greatest extent possible produces the best outcomes for students with disabilities. Access to the core curriculum through supports and accommodations as detailed in an individualized education program (IEP), and early, thoughtful transition planning must set the stage, so that general and special education teachers, staff, and families have a road map in how to support each student

with a disability to access their grade-level standards, and ultimately earn a high school diploma.

Although SB 74 charged the workgroup with developing recommendations pertaining to developing “...new alternate pathways for students with disabilities to access the core curriculum in order to satisfy the requirements for a high school diploma”, in addition to “...developing a new alternate pathway for students with significant cognitive disabilities to earn a high school diploma”, the workgroup concluded that in lieu of creating a set of new alternate pathways (other than creating a new pathway for students with significant cognitive disabilities), the state should increase access to the full range of pathway options already provided all students, and in some cases, currently afforded to specific named student groups. This includes better access and support for students with disabilities to meet existing state and local requirements for earning a regular diploma, and the allowance for some students with disabilities to earn a diploma through meeting state requirements for graduation only. The workgroup warned that creating separate pathways for students with disabilities could lead to the perpetuation of existing siloes between general and special education and exclusion of students with disabilities in rigorous high school coursework and postsecondary opportunities.

Therefore, the workgroup recommended that in addition to maximizing California’s existing diploma pathways, the state should create only one brand new pathway, specifically for students with significant cognitive disabilities, who currently do not have a pathway to a diploma. It was also recommended that California provide better access to two existing traditional pathways to earning a high school diploma for the majority of students with disabilities. The workgroup supports:

1. A newly defined high school alternate diploma-pathway exclusively for students with significant cognitive disabilities, that allows high school diploma attainment through meeting state minimum course requirements using California’s Alternate Achievement Standards, and that also meets federal graduation criteria for state accountability;¹
2. Equitable access across all California local educational agencies (LEAs) to an existing diploma-pathway option that only requires meeting the minimum state standards for graduation and not additional local requirements. This allowance should be determined on an individual student basis with the IEP team expectation always starting with how a student can meet all state and local requirements for graduation. This opportunity would allow for the IEP team to carefully determine that the student would benefit from only meeting state (and not local) minimum graduation requirements, and to essentially waive local requirements for graduation; and
3. A significant increase in statewide guidance, training, and technical assistance, to allow greater access for students with disabilities to all existing traditional high school courses and pathways, with the expectation that most students will meet all state and local high school graduation requirements.

For the purposes of this report, “diploma-pathway(s)” refers to distinct ways of meeting specific statutory graduation requirements and does not denote the specific educational

¹ This pathway aligns to the “state-defined alternate diploma” as allowed by ESSA.

model used to meet such requirements, for instance career technical education (CTE) pathways, traditional high school pathways, or regional occupational programs.