

Students and the Graduation Dilemma

◆ The Diploma

For many students with disabilities, a high school diploma (and when to accept it) is sometimes a dilemma. Rather than being a celebration of a job well done, a high school diploma can be an end to special education services and supports a student has been entitled to under the law, even though the student has not reached his or her 21st year. For this reason some families wonder, "When is the best time for our student to accept the diploma?"

If the student and family believe that additional transition services are needed from their school district, they may be able to arrange with their school district to continue school, but "participate" in the graduation ceremony with their classmates. In such cases, the student does not accept the diploma at the ceremony, but rather, receives it once they have completed school.

◆ Are School Systems Required to Provide Services After Graduation?

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) entitles students with disabilities to a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) through the age of 21 (26 in the state of Michigan). Many students, parents and schools have assumed this means through the age of 21 or completion of high school (which ever comes first). However, the U.S. Department of Education was asked if school systems could provide transition services after graduation. The Department commented:

The IDEA neither requires nor prohibits the provision of services to a student after the student has completed the state's graduation requirements. Thus, if the student is still within the eligible age range for FAPE within the state, the state at its discretion could continue to provide needed transition services or contribute to the cost of those services through cost arrangement with another agency—provided that all applicable requirements of this part are met.

◆ What Should You Do if You are Faced with a Graduation Dilemma?

Find out about your state law:

- What is the upper age limit for special education services?
- Does the law specify that a high school diploma results in the termination of services?

Plan ahead:

- Make sure your child's IEP has a transition plan (this is required for students 16 and older, and can be written for students 14 or younger).
- Discuss how the student's transition goals addressed in the IEP will be accomplished before all services from the school district have ceased.

The National Transition Network is a collaboration of the University of Minnesota; University of Vermont; Colorado State University; University of Arkansas; University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign Technical Assistance for Parent Programs; and PACER Center. Its headquarters are at the Institute on Community Integration (UAP), University of Minnesota, Pattee Hall, 150 Pillsbury Dr. SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455, (612) 626-8200.