April 24, 2014

MEMORANDUM

TO: City and County Superintendents of Education

FROM: Thomas R. Bice
State Superintendent of Education

RE: Diploma Pathways for Students with Disabilities

Alabama has made substantial improvements to the options students have for earning the Alabama High School Diploma. Many of the changes impact students with disabilities. The following information serves to clarify information related to the new opportunities.

Students with Disabilities Now Have Three Pathways for Earning the Alabama High School Diploma: General Education Pathway, Essentials/Life Skills Pathway, and Alternate Achievement Standards (AAS) Pathway

- Students with disabilities may choose between the General Education Pathway and the Essentials/Life Skills Pathway.
- Core content area courses for students with disabilities can be General Education courses, Essentials/Life Skills courses, or a combination of both.
- Movement between the General Education Pathway and the Essentials/Life Skills Pathway is allowed.
- Students with significant cognitive disabilities who meet the criteria for the Alabama Alternate Assessment are eligible for the AAS Pathway.

Substitute and Equivalent Courses

- Substitute and equivalent courses are available for some of the content area courses.
- Equivalent courses include at least a 90 percent match in content.
- Substitute courses are approved as an appropriate replacement, but they do not include a 90 percent match in content.
- In addition to the numerous Career Technical Education equivalent/substitute courses that are available, International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), and Postsecondary equivalent courses offer high expectations and increased flexibility.

Essentials/Life Skills

- Essentials/Life Skills courses were formerly known as Alabama Occupational Diploma (AOD) courses.
- Local education agencies (LEAs) are required to offer Essentials/Life Skills courses.
- Essentials/Life Skills courses must be taught by a highly qualified content-area teacher.
Essentials/Life Skills courses may be taught within a general education course (with two rosters) or as a stand-alone course.

If Essentials/Life Skills courses are taught within a general education course there must be differentiated instruction for the different courses.

Students with and without disabilities may take Essentials/Life Skills courses.

These courses are not appropriate for students who are planning to attend a four-year college.

These courses are not accepted by four-year colleges or the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA).

Students taking these courses may be eligible to attend a community college if they meet the institution’s admissions requirements. Community college admissions requirements typically include a minimum American College Testing (ACT) score.

It is important for each student to pursue the course work that is appropriate for his/her desired post-school outcome. Schools must work very closely with students and parents to ensure there is no confusion about the limitations of certain course work and/or pathways.

**Work Component for Students Who Take Four or More Essentials/Life Skills Courses**

- Any student, with or without a disability, who completes four or more core courses on the Essentials/Life Skills pathway is required to complete the following work component:
  - Community-Based Work Instruction
  - Two Career and Technical Education Courses in a Sequence
  - Workforce Essentials or Transition Services II
  - Cooperative Education/Work-Based Experience or Life Skills Occupational Preparation
  - Cooperative Education Seminar

**Students Pursuing the Alabama Occupational Diploma**

- Students in the 2010-2011 or later cohort are no longer required to pass the *Alabama High School Graduation Exam* (AHSGE) in order to earn the Alabama High School Diploma.
- The exception rule for students with disabilities who pass the graduation exam to be awarded an Alabama High School Diploma is being phased out since the AHSGE is no longer required.
- Students in the 2009-2010 or earlier cohort must meet the previous graduation requirements and are still eligible for the exception rule related to the AHSGE and receiving an Alabama High School Diploma.
- Students with disabilities in the 2010-2011 or later cohort who meet all requirements for the AOD should be awarded the Alabama High School Diploma.

**Alternate Achievement Standards**

- The AAS pathway is designed for students with significant cognitive disabilities who are working toward the Alabama Extended Standards and take the *Alabama Alternate Assessment*.
- The AAS core content-area courses are based on the Alabama Extended Standards for English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies.
- The courses for AAS Life Skills, AAS Pre-Vocational, AAS Vocational, AAS Community-Based Instruction, and/or AAS Elective Course are locally developed. Each class/school/LEA is expected to have course syllabi on file and documentation that the students completed the objectives.
- One of the locally developed AAS Life Skills courses should align to the topics in the Career Preparedness course that other students are required to take. This means it should include content related to Career and Academic Planning, Computer Applications, and Financial Literacy.
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- AAS courses (and Alabama Extended Standards) may be taught in a variety of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) options. The AAS courses (and Alabama Extended Standards) are not restricted to separate classrooms.
- Students with significant cognitive disabilities who are in the 2010-2011 or later cohort will be awarded the Alabama High School Diploma if they complete the courses on the AAS pathway, as outlined in the Alabama High School Diploma Substitute Courses for Students with Disabilities.

Graduation and Students with Disabilities

- According to the IDEA, students with disabilities who have not earned a regular high school diploma are entitled to services up to age 21.
- Therefore, the awarding of the Alabama High School Diploma must be deferred for students with disabilities who will remain in school until age 21.
- It is imperative the IEP Team work with the student and his or her parent(s) to determine the anticipated date of exit for each student with a disability.
- Awarding the Alabama High School Diploma prematurely would deny a student his or her right to receive services until age 21 and would be considered a denial of Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE).
- Graduating with the Alabama High School Diploma is considered a change of placement for a student with a disability. The Notice of Intent Regarding Special Education Services must be used to document the proposed change of placement (graduation) to ensure that the student and parent have been fully informed of the proposed termination of services.
- If they choose, students who stay in school until age 21 must be allowed to participate in graduation activities with their class. The LEA determines whether the student is given a blank sleeve or a locally developed certificate during the ceremony with their class, but they should not be awarded the diploma until the year of their agreed upon date of exit.
- It is clear LEAs are concerned about the effect deferring the diploma could have on graduation rate.
- The ALSDE is working on a plan to allow an LEA to get credit for students who stay until age 21 or at least identify a way to minimize the effect of deferring the diploma.

A PowerPoint presentation that includes this information has been prepared. The PowerPoint is enclosed and is also posted on the Alabama State Department of Education Web site (www.alsde.edu, Department Offices, select Special Education, select Hot Topics).

For questions or clarifications related to students with disabilities and the new diploma and/or graduation please contact Special Education Services at 334-242-8114 or by e-mail at speced@alsde.edu.

TRB/DC/SWR
Enclosure
cc: City and County Coordinators of Special Education
    Mrs. Sherrill W. Parris
    Dr. Linda Felton-Smith
    Ms. Crystal Richardson
    Dr. DaLee Chambers

FY14-2057
Students with Disabilities

Alabama High School Diploma & Graduation

Alabama State Department of Education
Special Education Services
April 2014

Multiple Pathways to the Same End

- General Education
- Essentials/Life Skills
- Alternate Achievement Standards

Regular Alabama High School Diploma
Alabama Occupational Diploma (AOD)
Certificate of Attendance

Alabama High School Diploma
Multiple Pathways to the Same End

- Students with disabilities now have three pathways for earning the Alabama High School Diploma.
- Students with disabilities may choose between the General Education pathway and the Essentials/Life Skills Pathway.
- Core content-area courses for students with disabilities can be General Education courses, Essentials/Life Skills courses, or a combination of both.
- Movement between the General Education Pathway and the Essentials/Life Skills Pathway is allowed.

Multiple Pathways to the Same End

- Students with significant cognitive disabilities who meet the criteria for the Alabama Alternate Assessment are eligible for the Alternate Achievement Standards (AAS) pathway.
General Education Pathway

16 Credits
Four years each of English, Math, Science, and Social Studies

1 Credit
Physical Education

1/2 Credit
Health Education

1 Credit
Career Preparedness

3 Credits
CTE/Foreign Lang/Arts

2 1/2 Credits
Electives

General Education Pathway

16 Credits
or any CTE substitute equivalent in English, Math, Science, Social

1 Credit
Physical Education

1/2 Credit
Health Education

1 Credit
Career Preparedness

3 Credits
CTE/Foreign Lang/Arts

2 1/2 Credits
Electives
Essentials/Life Skills Pathway

- **16 Credits**: Four years each of ESSENTIALS/LIFE SKILLS English, Math, Science, and Social Studies.
- **1 Credit**: Physical Education
- **1/2 Credit**: Health Education
- **1 Credit**: Career Preparedness
- **3 Credits**: 2 CTE & Workforce Essentials
- **2 1/2 Credits**: Cooperative Education Seminar/Work-Based Experience Electives

Essentials/Life Skills

- Formerly known as Alabama Occupational Diploma (AOD) courses.
- LEAs are required to offer Essentials/Life Skills courses.
- Must be taught by a highly qualified content area teacher.
- May be taught within a general education course (with two rosters) or as a stand-alone course.
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Essentials/Life Skills

- Students with and without disabilities may take Essentials/Life Skills courses.
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- These courses are not accepted by four-year colleges or the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA).
- Students taking these courses may be eligible to attend a community college if they meet the institution's admissions requirements. Community college admissions requirements typically include a minimum ACT score.
- It is important for each student to pursue the course work that is appropriate for his or her desired post school outcome. Schools must work very closely with students and parents to ensure there is no confusion about the limitations of certain course work and/or pathways.

Work Component for Students Who Take 4 or More Essentials/Life Skills Courses

- Any student, with or without a disability, who completes four or more core courses on the Essentials/Life Skills pathway is required to complete the following work component:
  - Community-Based Work Instruction
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**Alternate Achievement Standards Pathway**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>16 Credits</th>
<th>1 Credit</th>
<th>1/2 Credit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Four years each of AAS English, Math, Science, and Social Studies</td>
<td>Physical Education or Adapted PE</td>
<td>AAS Pre-Vocational, AAS Vocational, AAS Community Based Instruction, and/or AAS Elective Course, or Electives</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 Credit</th>
<th>3 Credits</th>
<th>2 1/2 Credits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AAS Life Skills</td>
<td>AAS Life Skills</td>
<td>AAS Pre-Vocational, AAS Vocational, AAS Community Based Instruction, and/or AAS Elective Course, or Electives</td>
</tr>
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- Stay tuned for further details.

Multiple Pathways to the Same End

FOR QUESTIONS OR CLARIFICATIONS, PLEASE CONTACT SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES
334.242.8114
speced@alsde.edu