



Diploma Pathways

In Tennessee, there are four different diploma options available to students graduating from a public high school. The four options include a regular high school diploma, a special education diploma, an occupational diploma, and an alternate academic diploma. Each of these diploma types has different eligibility requirements to fulfill, as well as different implications for which pathways students can take when they leave high school. Each diploma type, its requirements, and its implications are outlined below.

Regular High School Diploma

The regular high school diploma is the traditional diploma earned by high school students.

Requirements:

- The student must successfully complete 22 credits, specified by course subject.
- The student must complete the ACT or SAT exams prior to graduation, if the student was enrolled in a Tennessee public school during their 11th grade year.
- The student must have a satisfactory record of attendance and discipline.
- The student must take and pass a U.S. Civics test that has been created by the Local Education Agency (LEA).

Implications:

- Students with a regular diploma are able to attend traditional postsecondary educational opportunities such as four-year colleges or universities, community colleges, and colleges of applied technology.
- This is the best diploma option for employment as it is the most widely recognized by employers.

Special Education Diploma

The special education diploma is a pathway for students who will not be earning a regular education diploma.

Requirements:

- The student will not be able to meet the requirements of a regular high school diploma.
- The student has received special education services and supports, *and* the student has made satisfactory progress on their IEP.
- The student has exhibited satisfactory attendance and conduct.

Implications:

- Students will not be eligible to attend a traditional 4-year college or university or community college.
- Students can attend certain programs at a college of applied technology.
- If the student has a diagnosis of an intellectual disability (ID), they can also apply to college programs for students with ID called inclusive higher education programs, which are sometimes referred to as



Comprehensive Transition Programs (CTPs). These programs tend to be affiliated with 4-year universities and sometimes with community colleges.

- Special education diplomas do not count in a high school's graduation rate.
- Special education diplomas are often not recognized by employers.
- Students are able to continue working toward an occupational or regular education diploma until the age of 22 after they have earned their special education diploma.

Occupational Diploma

The occupational diploma emphasizes vocational and career outcomes. This diploma is for students who are on track to earn a special education diploma and will not earn a regular high school diploma. The student and IEP team can determine whether they want to pursue the occupational diploma at the end of the student's 10th grade year or 2 years prior to the student's expected graduation date.

Requirements:

- The student has received special education services and supports, and the student has made satisfactory progress on their IEP.
- The student has exhibited satisfactory attendance and conduct.
- The student must complete at least 2 years of paid or non-paid work experience.
 - The two years of work experience will look different from county to county. The IEP team can determine what level of work experience they require from that student.
 - The student may participate in paid, unpaid, or a combination of work.
 - The setting for work can be within the school, off-campus, or a combination as determined by the IEP team.
- The student has completed the Skills, Knowledge, and Experience Mastery Assessment (SKEMA).

Implications:

- Students receiving an occupational diploma will not be eligible to attend a traditional 4-year college or university or community college.
- Students can attend certain programs within a college of applied technology.
- If the student has a diagnosis of an intellectual disability (ID), they can also apply to college programs for students with ID called inclusive higher education programs, which are sometimes referred to as Comprehensive Transition Programs (CTPs). These programs tend to be affiliated with 4-year universities and sometimes with community colleges.
- Students are able to continue working toward a regular education diploma until the age of 22.
- The student's two years of required work experience will likely be attractive to future employers.

Alternate Academic Diploma

The alternate academic diploma (AAD) is a diploma option for students who are assessed on the state alternate assessments. It recognizes the academic learning and success of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities by counting toward the district graduation rate. It is recommended that the IEP team decides if the student will pursue the AAD before entering high school so that the student has time to earn all the required credits.



Requirements:

- The student must have participated in the high school alternate assessments.
- The student must earn the prescribed 22-credit minimum.
- The student receives special education services or supports and has made satisfactory progress on an individualized education program (IEP).
- The student has satisfactory records of attendance and conduct.
- The student has completed transition assessments that measure, at a minimum, postsecondary education and training, employment, independent living, and community involvement.

Implications:

- AAD must be earned within the adjusted cohort timeframe of four years plus one summer. A student may continue working toward earning this diploma outside of that timeframe, but it will not be included in the graduation rate once they have exceeded the timeframe.
- Students receiving an alternate academic diploma will not be eligible to attend a traditional 4-year college or university or community college.
- Students can attend certain programs within a college of applied technology.
- If the student has a diagnosis of an intellectual disability (ID), they can also apply to college programs for students with ID called inclusive higher education programs, which are sometimes referred to as Comprehensive Transition Programs (CTPs). These programs tend to be affiliated with 4-year universities and sometimes with community colleges.
- The AAD will indicate to potential programs and employers that students have a level of knowledge and skills for learning.
- A student may earn both the alternate academic diploma and the occupational diploma. It is recommended that the alternate diploma is earned first by following the four-year and one summer trajectory required to get the AAD.
- Pursuing both the AAD and occupational diploma helps students gain academic and job readiness skills that would make them more employment-ready. After a student earns the AAD, they may continue to receive special education services through the end of the year in which they turn 22-years old.

Earning Multiple Diplomas

Once a student earns a general education diploma, they are no longer eligible for special education services. However, students that earn the special education, alternate academic, or occupational diplomas are eligible to continue receiving special education services until the age of 22. During this additional time, students can work toward gaining an additional diploma, and these options are listed below.

- Students that earn the occupational diploma can continue working toward earning the regular education diploma.
- Students that earn the alternate academic diploma can continue working toward earning the occupational diploma.
- Students that earn the special education diploma can continue working toward earning either the general education diploma or the occupational diploma.

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