

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What are the different types of diploma options that exist? What opportunities do each of these diplomas offer students?

The state of Tennessee has four diploma options available to students graduating from a public high school: a regular high school diploma, a special education diploma, an occupational diploma, and an alternate academic diploma.

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

Students who graduate with a special education diploma are able to attend certain programs at TCATs. Students who have a diagnosis of intellectual disability can also apply to college programs for students with ID known as Inclusive Higher Education Programs. Many local universities have these programs designed specifically for students with ID. Students that earn a special education diploma are eligible to continue receiving special education services until age 22. Students can work toward earning an occupational or general education diploma during this time.

Students who graduate with an occupational diploma are able to attend certain programs within a college of applied technology. They may also be eligible to attend college programs for students with intellectual disability if they have a diagnosis of an intellectual disability. The main difference between the special education diploma and the occupational diploma is the occupational diploma's emphasis on vocational and career outcomes. Students that earn the occupational diploma are eligible to continue receiving special education services until age 22. Students can work toward earning a general education diploma during this time.

Students who graduate with an alternate academic diploma (AAD) are able to attend certain programs within a college of applied technology. They may also be eligible to attend college programs for students with intellectual disability if they have a diagnosis of an intellectual disability. The AAD counts toward the school's high school graduation rate, but the student must earn the AAD within the first four years of high school plus one summer to count in the graduation rate. Students that earn the AAD are eligible to continue receiving special education services until age 22. Students can work toward earning the occupational education diploma during this time. Earning both diplomas is a great choice because it ensures students gain their academic and job readiness skills.

2. When does the IEP team need to make a decision about the diploma track that a student will take? Can the student only earn one diploma?

In order to earn a regular high school diploma or alternate academic diploma, the IEP team should attempt to make this decision before the student's freshman year of high school to ensure the student can complete all required credits. The student and IEP team can determine whether the student will pursue the occupational diploma at the end of the student's 10th grade year or 2 years before the expected graduation date. Thus, they would decide about the special education diploma at this time as well.

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.

3. How does the IEP team decide which diploma track a student should take?

Diploma tracks should be determined on an individual basis, taking a student's goals, preferences, interests, needs, and strengths into account. Decisions should not be made based on disability type. The IEP team should consider how the student's educational pathway will lead them to meeting their postsecondary goals. For example, Giovanni is interested in going to a four-year college to earn a degree in business so he can work in sales at a technology company. If he pursued a special education, alternate academic, or occupational diploma, he would not be able to achieve his goal. In general, the regular high school diploma will give students the most options for postsecondary education and employment. Before the student and IEP team chooses to pursue an occupational, alternate academic, or special education diploma, they should investigate whether these diplomas would be accepted at the student's desired postsecondary program.

4. With the alternate academic diploma, there seem to be fewer students earning the occupational diploma. How can we ensure these students have necessary job skills?

After students have earned the alternate academic diploma, they are still eligible to receive special education services until the age of 22. Thus, students can work toward earning the occupational diploma after receiving the AAD. If students do not intend to stay after graduating with the alternate academic diploma, they could potentially take work-based learning courses as elective courses to learn necessary job skills. However, earning both the alternate academic and the occupational diploma is a great way to ensure students receive all their academic and job readiness skills.

5. Which considerations should be taken into account when a student is deciding whether to pursue postsecondary education?

There is a lot to consider when a student is deciding whether to pursue postsecondary education. Some considerations may include:

- If the student has expressed a strong desire to pursue postsecondary education
- Whether the student will be able to keep up with the academic rigor of their classes
- Which accommodations are available at the postsecondary level
- If the student can independently navigate a campus safely
- Whether the student should disclose their disability
- If the school will accept a student with the student's chosen diploma type
- If there are specific scholarships available for individuals with disabilities

6. How can I help students learn about postsecondary education options?

There are many ways to teach students about postsecondary education options. For example, you can take your class on a campus visit or go to a college fair, have students research admissions requirements or different postsecondary programs, teach students about the kinds of jobs or careers you can get with different degrees, and set up meetings with school counselors to discuss postsecondary education.

7. Are there accommodations for students with disabilities in postsecondary settings? If so, how do students gain access to these accommodations?

Yes, there are accommodations for students with disabilities in postsecondary settings. The difference between receiving accommodations in public schools and postsecondary education lies in the laws that require that these accommodations be provided to students. In public schools, students receive services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) or Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. Under these acts, educators must provide supports that ensure a student successfully makes progress on education goals. Students are no longer covered under IDEA in postsecondary education. Instead, students are covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. These laws emphasize that students have access to postsecondary education and do not guarantee the students will make progress. Both ADA and Section 504 require that the school provides reasonable accommodations for a student, if the student discloses their disability.

The key here is that in order for students with disabilities to receive accommodations in postsecondary education, they must disclose their disability to their school's office of disability services. Postsecondary settings do not have to provide accommodations if a student has not disclosed their disability to the office of disability services. When disclosing, the student should be able to provide diagnosis information (e.g. assessments, official diagnosis documentation, etc.), types of accommodations received in the past and anticipated accommodations for the postsecondary setting (e.g. Summary of Performance), and a description of how the disability affects the student academically and/or socially.

Accommodations for students with disabilities vary from campus to campus. To find out what different postsecondary settings offer, call their Disability Services office or explore their website. After a student discloses their disability, the disability services office will work with the student to identify individualized accommodations that will help the student access the curriculum.

8. Are there any postsecondary education options for students with intellectual disability (ID)?

Yes, inclusive higher education programs are postsecondary education programs for students with intellectual disability. Some of these programs are recognized by the US Department of Education as Comprehensive Transition Programs (CTPs). If a program is classified as a CTP, it means students are eligible to apply for federal financial aid. These programs often involve academic and life skills classes, internships, participation in extracurricular activities, and peer mentoring. Tennessee has six CTPs; check out the [Tennessee Inclusive Higher Education Alliance website](#) for more information on these programs. To learn more about national programs, check out [Think College's resources](#).

9. How can I prepare students for postsecondary education during the school day?

There are a number of different ways to prepare students for postsecondary education. Some activities include:

- Taking trips to visit schools and attend college fairs
- Exploring the kind of jobs or careers that students can get with different degrees
- Researching different types of educational settings and admissions requirements
- Explicitly teaching students about disclosure
- Role playing different scenarios involving disclosure
- Teaching self-advocacy skills to students (e.g. teaching students to lead their own IEP meetings)
- Giving students the opportunity to communicate needed accommodations to general education teachers so they can build their self-advocacy skills
- Exploring different financial aid options for postsecondary education and helping students apply

Last updated April 16, 2020