

FAMILY TIP SHEET SERIES:

What Should I Know About Diploma Options?

The Basics

Tennessee has four diploma options for students graduating from public high schools. Students have until the May following their 21st birthday to finish requirements for the diploma.

- The **regular high school diploma** is the traditional diploma for high school students.
- The **special education diploma** is for students who receive special education services and are not able to meet the requirements of the regular high school diploma.
- The **occupational diploma** focuses on job/career skills for students. It requires independent completion of certain tasks.
- The **alternate academic diploma** is an option for students who take the state's alternate assessments. It is aligned with the coursework load for a student getting a regular high school diploma.

Who Can Help Me?

Talk to your student's teacher and the rest of the IEP team to make a decision about diploma options. Here is a [diploma decision guide](#) from the TN Department of Education.

**If you are concerned that your IEP team is not providing your child with the right supports or diploma path, contact Disability Rights Tennessee:
1(800) 342-1660
Gethelp@disabilityrightstn.org**

Myths

Myth #1: My child has to choose between the occupational and alternate academic diploma

What Questions Should I Ask?

- Can my child complete the requirements for a regular diploma by the time he or she is 21?
- What supports and accommodations have the IEP team provided to help my child get a regular high school diploma?
- Which diploma will help my child meet their career or education goals?
- When can my child change their diploma option during high school?

Students can earn both the occupational and alternate academic diploma. Most students will work on the requirements for the alternate academic diploma first, before completing the two years of work experience needed for the occupational diploma.

Myth #2: It doesn't matter which diploma my child gets

Diplomas tell colleges, employers, and adult disability services about your child's skills and knowledge. The kind of diploma your child earns will affect their job or college options. If they do not get a regular high school diploma, they can't attend four-year colleges, universities, or community colleges.

Myth #3: I need to make a decision on the type of diploma for my child in their first year of high school

It's good to begin thinking about diploma options early. However, you don't need to make the decision on the diploma options during freshman year. The IEP team can't even decide about the occupational diploma until the end of sophomore year. You can revisit the diploma option during high school.

FAMILY TIP SHEET SERIES:

What Should I Know About Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS)?

The Basics

Pre-employment transition services (or Pre-ETS) is a program that helps students with disabilities prepare for life after high school. Pre-ETS are offered to students between ages 14-22. This program is a partnership between high schools and the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program. Topics covered in pre-employment transition services might include:

- Learning about jobs
- Learning about college or training programs
- Getting jobs or internships
- Practicing skills needed for jobs and/or living on their own
- Learning how to speak up for themselves

Myths

Myth #1: My child needs to be a VR customer to participate in Pre-ETS

Your child does not need to be a VR customer to participate in Pre-employment transition services. As long as your child has a disability, they will be eligible for

Pre-employment transition services. You can show proof of disability through an IEP, 504 plan, or doctor's diagnosis.

What Questions Should I Ask?

- Does my child's school offer Pre-ETS?
- How often does the Pre-ETS provider come to the school?
- What skills are they working on with students?
- Do providers work individually with my child?
- Can the Pre-ETS provider come to my child's IEP meeting?
- How is Pre-ETS different than transition services my child is already receiving?

Myth #2: Parents can't request Pre-ETS

Anyone can request Pre-ETS. Family members, teachers, students, advocates, or others can contact their VR office to request Pre-ETS. Local school districts will work with VR to find a provider.

Myth #3: Pre-ETS costs money

All Pre-ETS services are free.

Myth #4: Pre-ETS activities are the same for all students and all schools

Pre-employment transition services should not be a set package for all students. Not all students will receive all pre-employment transition services. Some services are provided in group settings. Some will be individualized to students. Talk to your child's teacher and Pre-ETS provider to learn more about how Pre-ETS is offered in your child's school.

Who Can Help Me?

Talk to your child's teacher to see if Pre-ETS are offered in their school.

If Pre-ETS are not offered in your child's school, contact your local VR office. Find the office closest to you at this link: <https://www.tn.gov/humanservices/ds/office-locator-trc-ttap.html>. Contact the state VR agency at (615) 313-4891.

FAMILY TIP SHEET SERIES:

What Should I Know About Supported Decision-Making?

The Basics

Once your child turns 18, they are considered a legal adult and can make their own educational, health, and financial decisions. This is called the “age of majority.” Sometimes parents go to court to become a conservator for their child so they can make decisions for them. Conservatorship takes away all of your child’s legal rights. Keep in mind: someone who is incarcerated has more rights than someone under a conservatorship. Supported decision-making helps people with disabilities make their own choices about their life with support from a team. Supported decision-making looks different for everyone.

Myths

Myth #1: I will not be able to attend my child’s IEP or other planning meetings unless I’m their conservator

After 18, your child will decide who attends their IEP and other planning meetings. You are still allowed to attend these meetings as long as your child wants you to be there. Talk about this at IEP meetings before your child turns 18 so everyone is on the same page.

What Questions Should I Ask?

- Who is the “ideal candidate” for supported decision-making?
- If my child cannot sign their name or communicate, how can they participate in supported decision-making?
- Can I see an example of a supported decision-making agreement?
- Can supported decision-making agreements change over time?
- If I choose conservatorship, how can I set it up to give my child as many rights as possible?
- My child’s school is having a lawyer come in to set up conservatorships for all parents of a student with a disability. I feel uncomfortable with this. What should I do?
- How can I stay involved in my child’s IEP after they turn 18 if I’m not a conservator?

Who Can Help Me?

Contact the **Center for Decision-Making Supports** to learn about an array of options to support decision-making as your child transitions to adulthood.

Website: tndecisionmaking.org
Contact staff directly: (800) 835-7077 or ds@theartcn.org

Myth #2: If my child can’t make decisions on their own, I need to be a conservator

We all need help making decisions sometimes. Decision-making takes practice. Sometimes students need an accommodation to communicate or better understand information. For example, if your child can’t sign their name with a pen on a paper, that doesn’t mean they can’t make decisions about their life. They need an accommodation.

Myth #3: My child with an intellectual or developmental disability can’t get benefits unless I’m their conservator

Your child does not need a conservator to get benefits. As long as your child still wants you involved, you will still be able to help them understand and apply for government benefits.

Myth #4: Conservatorship is the only option to keep my child safe

It is safe for everyone to learn how to make their own decisions and practice making choices. Research shows people who make

their own decisions are actually safer. In some cases, you might explore options that will provide protection without taking away all of your child’s legal rights. These options include durable power of attorney, becoming a representative payee, joint bank account, a special needs trust, and more.

FAMILY TIP SHEET SERIES:

What Should I Know About Vocational Rehabilitation?

The Basics

The Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program provides services to help people with disabilities prepare for and be placed in jobs. An application is completed with a VR Counselor. The Counselor will collect information to determine eligibility for services. The Counselor will work together with your child to develop an Individualized Plan for Employment. This plan will include needed services and supports to achieve career goals.

Myths

Myth #1: My child can't meet with vocational rehabilitation until they turn 18

Vocational Rehabilitation may be involved before your child turns 18. VR services may begin at age 14 in the school by providing Pre-Employment Transition Services. Your child doesn't need to be determined eligible for VR to get these transition services. Your child can also apply for further VR services before the age of 18. The VR Counselor can attend IEP meetings and work with your child to develop an employment plan before leaving high school.

Who Can Help Me?

Call your local VR office to schedule an appointment with a VR counselor. Find the closest office to you:

(615) 313-4891

<https://www.tn.gov/humanservices/ds/office-locator-trc-ttap.html>

If you need additional information about vocational rehabilitation or have concerns about services provided/not provided, contact the Client Assistance Program:

<https://www.disabilityrightstn.org/get-help>
1(800) 342-1660

What Questions Should I Ask?

- What do I need to prepare before my first meeting with a counselor? What items do I need to bring?
- Are Pre-Employment Transition Services in my child's school? If not, how can I get them in the school?
- Is there someone I can contact if I disagree with a decision by VR?
- Is there a waiting list for services?
- What types of services does VR provide?
- What will the process look like for developing my child's Individualized Plan for Employment (or IPE)?
- What are the assessment options VR can provide to help my child figure out what they want to do for a job?
- If my child finds a job, how long will VR provide assistance?

Myth #2: My child has too severe a disability to get vocational rehabilitation services

VR serves individuals who have significant problems obtaining employment due to disabilities. VR must serve individuals with the most significant disabilities first.

Myth #3: I will have to pay for any services my child receives

There are no income related eligibility requirements for VR services. Some services may require financial participation depending on income

Myth #4: VR won't help my child with college

Vocational Rehabilitation helps individuals with disabilities develop a career path, not just get a job. If achieving your child's career goal requires education or training, VR may be able to help fund college or training programs needed for that career goal.

FAMILY TIP SHEETS:

What Should I Know About How Work Impacts SSI Benefits?

The Basics

The Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program gives monthly payments to children and adults with disabilities who have very little income or resources. A person who gets SSI will also get Medicaid, known as TennCare in Tennessee.

Myths

Myth #1: My child will lose their SSI paycheck if they get a job

If your child gets a job, SSI will reduce the amount of their payment over time. The more income they have, the less their SSI check will be. Keep in mind: a person will always make more in wages than they will lose in benefits.

Myth #2: My child will lose TennCare if they get a job

As long as a person is receiving any SSI payment, they will keep TennCare. Even if your child makes too much to receive an SSI payment, they will be able to keep TennCare coverage in most cases. Your child would still need to meet the SSI disability criteria.

Myth #3: My child will not be able to get their SSI

What Questions Should I Ask?

- How much can my child make before they will lose their SSI payment?
- How can I figure out how much lower my child's SSI check will be if they begin working?
- How will savings affect my child's SSI check?
- Who do I contact if I think my child's SSI amount is not correct or I need to update information?
- What work incentives are my child eligible for?
- What do I need to prepare for my child's Age 18 determination or redetermination?

payments

back if they stop working or lose their job

Your child can reapply for SSI. If they continue to receive TennCare after losing SSI, they won't need to go through the entire application process again to get their SSI payments back.

Myth #4: My child will automatically continue to receive SSI payments after the age of 18

Your child might continue to receive SSI payments after the age of 18, but the SSI program will do a review of their case. The SSI program has different eligibility criteria for adults than children. Adults have to prove they are unable to work due to their disability. Before the age of 18, contact your local Social Security office and ask what you need to do to assure SSI will continue.

Who Can Help Me?

Benefits to Work is a program in Tennessee that can help you understand how benefits will be impacted by working. Ticket to Work will connect you with a benefits counselor.

Contact Ticket to Work:

<https://choosework.ssa.gov>

1 (866) 968-7842

Contact your Social Security office:

<https://go.transitiontn.org/ContactSS>

1 (877) 808-5461

FAMILY TIP SHEET SERIES:

What Should I Know About Employment and Community First CHOICES?

The Basics

Many people with disabilities get their health care through TennCare, Tennessee's Medicaid agency. Medicaid provides both medical and non-medical services. Non-medical services are called "long term services and supports." People with intellectual or developmental disabilities can get long term services and supports. These supports are provided through waiver programs. Employment and Community First CHOICES (ECF CHOICES) is a waiver program that helps people with disabilities find jobs and live on their own. You need to be on Medicaid to qualify for ECF CHOICES. There are waiting lists for this program, and people with urgent need will get into the program sooner. Here are the first four priority categories.

- A:** You have a job. You need help to keep your job.
- B:** You're about to finish school and you have a job offer. You can only get the job if you have help on the job.
- C:** You lost your job and need help finding a new one.
- D:** You're about to finish school. You don't have a job offer, but you want to work. You need help to get a job.

Someone in Category A would get into the program sooner than someone in Category D. [Read more information about the categories on TennCare's website.](#)

Myths

Myth #1: My child needs to be employed to get into ECF CHOICES

Your child does not need to be employed to get into ECF CHOICES. If your child is interested in working or willing to explore working, they are qualified to apply for the program. However, they might not get first priority acceptance into the program. [Read more information about who can apply to ECF CHOICES on TennCare's website.](#)

Myth #2: My child's disability is too significant for ECF CHOICES

The ECF CHOICES program provides supports and services for people with significant needs. As long as your child has an intellectual or developmental disability, they can qualify for ECF CHOICES.

Who Can Help Me?

If your child **does not** have Medicaid, contact the Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities in your region and ask for help in applying: www.tn.gov/didd/about/contact-information.html.

If your child **does** have Medicaid, then contact the number on the back of your child's insurance card. The managed care organization can help you apply for ECF CHOICES.

Your local chapter of The Arc can help answer questions about ECF CHOICES and support you in applying. Find your local chapter at <https://www.thearctn.org/Chapters.php>.

What Questions Should I Ask?

- When should my child apply for ECF CHOICES?
- How long is the waiting list?
- What category will my child be placed in?
- What kind of services and supports can ECF CHOICES provide?
- Who will be delivering the services?
- Who can I contact to find out the status of my application?

Myth #3: My child can't work. They will not be able to get into ECF CHOICES

Every person can work, no matter what their disability is. Sometimes, people need additional support. No one will be considered ineligible for ECF CHOICES because they can't work. They have to be willing to explore work and learn about supports, but they can choose not to work and still remain in the program.