

Modifications, Accommodations, Graduations, Oh My!

The Pros and Cons of a Modified Diploma

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High school graduation is an important and impressive milestone for students. However, for parents of students with disabilities, it can also be stressful. Parents may feel unfamiliar with the options available to their children. What is a modified diploma? Why might a student receive a modified diploma instead of a regular high school diploma? What are the pros and cons of this option, and who gets to decide? Fortunately, parents should be involved in this decision, and modified diplomas can be a good option for many students.

What is a modified diploma?

A modified diploma is awarded to students who have a “documented history” of being unable to meet grade level achievements “due to learning or instructional barriers.” A “documented history” means evidence in the student’s file that demonstrates inability to meet grade level achievements even with modifications or accommodations.

A modified course is a class that has been changed or altered for the student after other strategies (like an accommodation) have failed. An accommodation changes how a student learns or demonstrates knowledge of the material. For example, a student who has a very difficult time writing an essay might give an oral presentation instead, still demonstrating mastery of the content. A modification, on the other hand, changes what a student is taught or expected to learn. For instance, if a high school student cannot do high school level math, that student would be given math work at their individual level, so they might be learning and working on addition or subtraction instead.

An “instructional barrier” is any physical, cognitive, or emotional barrier that impairs the student’s ability to meet grade level achievement. This could be many different things! It could be a learning disability, a psychological disorder, or more. Basically, a modified diploma is available to students who have struggled to meet academic standards due to some type of learning obstacle.

Who can earn a modified diploma?

Students can earn modified diplomas for many different reasons. Modified diplomas are not only available for students with special needs! Some other examples include students with English as a Second Language (ESL) or students with a 504 plan. A modified diploma is an option even if a student does not have an Individualized Education Program (IEP).

Additionally, any student who receives a modified diploma must still be provided with a free appropriate public education (FAPE). For students with disabilities who have an IEP, this requirement extends through the end of the school year during which the student turns 21 years of age. Therefore, if a student has an IEP and graduates with a modified diploma, they are still entitled to transition services for as much as three years after receiving the modified diploma.

Who decides if a student is eligible for a modified diploma and when is that decision made?

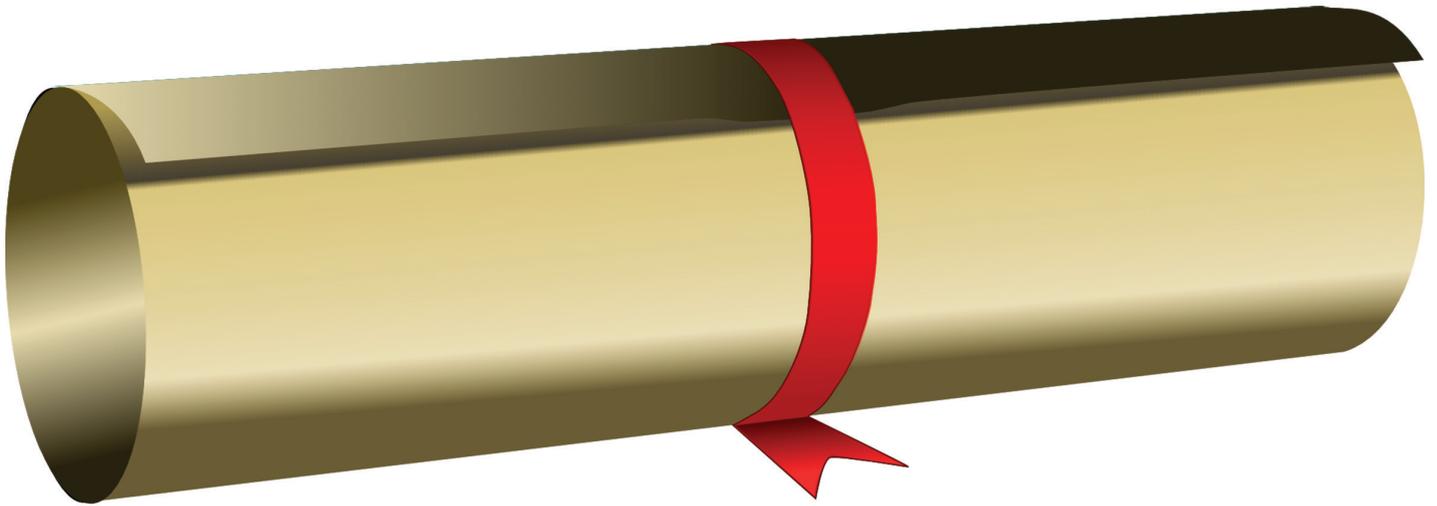
The student’s “school team” decides if a student should receive a modified diploma. The school team should include the student and it must include the parent; other members of the school team are determined by the district. If a student has an IEP, then that student’s school team can be the same as the student’s IEP team. IEP teams should remember that choosing a modified diploma needs to follow the requirements of any other decision considered by the IEP team.

Students can be identified as working toward a modified diploma as early as by the end of sixth grade. A school team cannot decide on a modified diploma for a student before sixth grade. Additionally, a modified diploma decision technically should not be decided any later than two years before the student leaves high school, although it can be made later as circumstances dictate. The point is that a decision must be made, yet can be reconsidered and changed by the IEP team at a later date, if necessary. (Although the amount of work required by the student to pursue a standard diploma after earning modified credits can be daunting and does not happen often.)

It’s also important to bear in mind that the legal requirements of diplomas vary from state to state. Oregon, for example, has different types of diplomas while Washington does not. To earn a standard diploma in Oregon, a student must meet specific core requirements. Those requirements are modified for the student who is earning a modified diploma. Whereas in Washington, there are not different types of diplomas, but the IEP team has the ability to modify the work required for the student to earn the diploma.

Pros of a Modified Diploma

Not all courses need to be modified for a student to receive a modified diploma. The purpose of modification is to encourage the student to work toward their goals while helping them with accommodations or modifications they



might need. The student doesn't need to reach a specific level of proficiency. Each student is expected to develop an education plan and earn credit at that particular student's level of ability. Districts are still required to provide the student with access to literacy instruction, access to needed courses, modifications, supports, and academic content. Additionally, a student who earns a modified diploma can still participate in the high school graduation ceremony.

In the employment context, a student who graduates with a modified diploma can answer an employment question related to whether the student has earned a diploma with a "yes."

Cons of a Modified Diploma

Probably the biggest downside is that most four-year universities do not accept a modified diploma. Community colleges do accept a modified diploma, although all new freshmen are required to take an initial placement exam. Community colleges can also offer remedial courses (that don't go toward college credit) for students who have received modified diplomas.

Additionally, not all branches of the military accept a modified diploma. Acceptance depends on the current needs of each branch, and that criteria can change quickly. All branches do require a minimum score on a placement test called the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB), though.

Conclusion

Modified diplomas have some drawbacks, namely, not all four-year universities or programs will accept one, but they can still be a great option for many students. A modified diploma can be beneficial for a student who may not be able to meet all the graduation requirements necessary for a traditional high school diploma. While this is typically a disability, it does not have to be. Other students, such as ESL students, may also be eligible for a modified diploma. A modified diploma is a team decision, and parents must be on that team. The decision is not permanent, however, and can be changed. High school graduation should be an exciting time in a student's life. Regardless of the diploma earned, it is an achievement for every student to celebrate.



Photos courtesy of Wendy Mayo

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