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Special Education Field Advisory

From: James P. DeLorenzo

Subject: Skills and Achievement Commencement Credential for Students with Severe Disabilities

Sections 100.5, 100.6, 100.9 and 200.5 of the Regulations of the Commissioner of Education have been amended to replace, beginning with the 2013-14 school year and thereafter, the New York State (NYS) individualized education program (IEP) diploma with a Skills and Achievement Commencement Credential for students with severe disabilities who are eligible to take the New York State Alternate Assessment (NYSAA).

In this context, students with severe disabilities means students who have limited cognitive abilities combined with behavioral and/or physical limitations and who require highly specialized education, social, psychological and medical services in order to maximize their full potential for self-fulfillment and meaningful participation in society. Students with severe disabilities may experience significant speech, language, and/or perceptual-cognitive impairments, and evidence challenging behaviors that interfere with learning and socialization opportunities. These students may also have extremely fragile physiological conditions and may require personal care, physical/verbal supports and assistive technology devices.

The Skills and Achievement Commencement Credential will provide this group of students who are exiting school after attending at least 12 years, excluding kindergarten, with a commencement certificate similar in form to the diploma issued by the school district. The Skills and Achievement Commencement Credential must be accompanied by documentation of the student's skills and strengths and levels of independence in academic, career development and foundation skills needed for post-school living, learning and working.

Skills and Achievement Commencement Credential: Requirements

The Board of Education or trustees of a school must (and the principal of a nonpublic school may) issue a Skills and Achievement Commencement Credential to each student with a severe disability in accordance with the following rules.

1. Only students with disabilities who have been instructed and assessed on the alternate performance level for the State learning standards are eligible for this credential award.
2. The credential may be awarded any time after such student has attended school for at least 12 years, excluding kindergarten or received a substantially equivalent education elsewhere; or at the end of the school year in which a student attains the age of 21.
3. The credential would not be considered a regular high school diploma in accordance with State standards or for federal accountability purposes.
4. The credential must be similar in form to the diploma issued by the school district or nonpublic school, except that there shall appear on the credential a clear annotation to indicate the credential is based on achievement of alternate academic achievement standards (see Attachment 1).
5. The credential must be issued together with a summary of the student's academic achievement and functional performance (Student Exit Summary – see State Developed Model Form Attachment 2) and must include documentation of the student's:
 - achievement against the Career Development and Occupational Studies (CDOS) learning standards <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/cte/cdlearn/>;
 - level of academic achievement and independence as measured by NYSAA;
 - skills, strengths, interests; and
 - as appropriate, other achievements and accomplishments.
6. For students less than 21 years old, the credential must be provided with a written assurance that the student continues to be eligible to attend the public schools of the school district in which the student resides without payment of tuition until the student has earned a regular high school diploma or until the end of the school year in which the student turns age 21, whichever occurs first.

Skills and Achievement Exit Summary Model Form

The Department has, with extensive stakeholder participation, developed a recommended model form for districts to use to meet the documentation requirements that must accompany an award of a Skills and Achievement Commencement Credential. For students with severe disabilities, use of this form would also meet the federal and State requirement for the summary of academic achievement and functional performance that must be provided to a student with a disability upon exit from school. The model Exit Summary form includes those competencies/skills identified as important for post-secondary living, learning and working. Use of this form would ensure consistency in documentation across the State for students exiting with this credential.

Whether the district uses the State-developed model form or a locally-developed form, it must include specific documentation of the student's:

1. level of achievement and independence for each of the CDOS standards, including, but not limited to:
 - career development;
 - integrated learning; and
 - universal foundation skills including:
 - basic skill in reading, writing, listening, speaking, math and functional math;
 - thinking skills;
 - personal qualities;
 - interpersonal skills;
 - use of technology;
 - managing information and resources; and
 - systems skills.
2. academic skills, as measured by the State assessment for students with severe disabilities (i.e., NYSAA); and
3. strengths and interests and, as appropriate, other student achievements and accomplishments.

Instruction to Prepare Students for the Skills and Achievement Commencement Credential

In order for students to develop the competencies that must be documented with the credential award, students must be provided instruction in CDOS learning standards and be provided opportunities, as appropriate, to engage in instructional and work preparation experiences, both in school and, whenever possible and appropriate, in the community. Schools are encouraged to review their curriculum instruction for students with severe disabilities to ensure that such students have maximum opportunities to achieve their highest academic and career development potentials.

The Learning Standards for CDOS include key ideas, performance indicators describing expectations for students, and sample tasks suggesting evidence of progress toward the standards (see <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/cte/cdlearn/documents/cdoslea.pdf>). The *Career Development and Occupational Studies (CDOS) Resource Guide with Core Curriculum* is a companion document to the CDOS learning standards. It further develops the core content for each learning standard and career major. The document is also rich with teacher developed classroom activities that help students achieve the CDOS standards (see <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/cte/cdlearn/cdosresourceguide.html>).

Transition Planning and Services

To appropriately prepare a student for the Skills and Achievement Commencement Credential, the school must develop an individual transition plan documented in the student's IEP. Beginning with post-secondary goals projected for the student, the IEP transition plan identifies the needs of the student to meet those post-secondary goals and recommends annual goals and services to incrementally prepare the student to meet his/her post-secondary goals for living, learning and working. Individualized transition planning must begin as early as possible, but not later than the school year in which a student turns age 15. The coordinated set of transition activities must be focused on improving both the academic and functional achievement of the student with a disability to facilitate his/her movement from school to post-school activities.

High school transition planning includes exploring post-secondary opportunities and employment options and should include connecting with the adult service agencies that may provide the student with services when he or she is no longer eligible for a free appropriate public education after the age of 21. For additional information on transition planning, see <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/specialed/publications/transitionplanning-2011.htm>.

To guide instruction and planning, educators are strongly encouraged to use the State's model Student Exit Summary form (Attachment 2), beginning very early in a student's educational years, for transition planning, goal setting and annual progress reporting purposes.

Training and Resources for Technical Assistance on the Skills and Achievement Commencement Credential

In the coming year, additional training and guidance regarding the Skills and Achievement Commencement Credential will be available through the State's Regional Special Education Technical Assistance Support Centers and the Department's website. Questions regarding this memorandum and the credential should be submitted to skillscred@mail.nysed.gov.

Attachments