

Alternate Pathway to Graduation

The Arkansas Department of Education began work in April 2017 to determine whether the state should consider developing a State-Defined Alternate Diploma option for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. This work began with a group of ADE staff reviewing new federal guidance.

ESSA Requirements ([NCEO Brief](#)):

- Standards-Based
- Aligned with State Requirements for Regular Diploma
- Obtained During Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) Period
 - FAPE Period in AR- End of the school year in which the student turns 21
- State Defined

A task force representative of multiple stakeholder groups was convened to determine whether a State Defined Alternate Diploma for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities was needed in Arkansas. The task force met on October 19, 2017, and November 15, 2017, and the following stakeholder groups were represented:

- Parents
- Teachers
- District Administrators
- Charter Schools
- Arkansas Rehabilitation Services
- Family Advocacy
- Easter Seals Outreach
- ADE Specialists

In preparation for the task force meeting, members were provided the following resources:

- [NCEO document](#)
- NCEO [presentation](#)
- [CCSSO - ESSA: Key Provisions and Implications for Students with Disabilities](#)

The task force completed the following activities:

- Developed an Arkansas definition of Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities
- Reviewed current Arkansas credit requirements;
- Considered whether current Arkansas diploma options meet the needs of all students, including students with the most significant cognitive disabilities;
- Reviewed diploma options from other states;
- Considered pros and cons of developing a state-defined alternate diploma.

Key details of task force meetings:

- The Dynamic Learning Maps (DLM) alternate assessment was explained. Arkansas transitioned to DLM as the alternate assessment for literacy, math, and science for the 2018-2019 school year. DLM provides instructional supports to strengthen instruction in areas on the alternate

assessment. DLM has developed Essential Elements (alternate achievement standards) for literacy, math, and science that are aligned to grade-level content standards.

- Stakeholders reviewed multiple states' graduation diploma types.
- Surveys were created at the first meeting. At the second meeting, survey results from the following groups were reviewed:
 - District administrators
 - Counselors
 - Teachers
- Survey results indicated a need for
 - More professional development for instruction in academic areas for students with significant cognitive disabilities.
 - More information pertaining to work-force possibilities for students with disabilities.
 - Training for all teachers, general education and special education, pertaining to inclusive practices and appropriate accommodations.
 - Training for all teachers and administrators on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) practices.
- Survey results also indicated that
 - Many feel that it is appropriate for a student's IEP to serve as his or her graduation plan. Under ESSA, the practice of graduating with the IEP as the graduation plan is deemed a "lesser standard."
 - There are misunderstandings relating to students who stay after their fourth year of high school.
 - Most respondents felt that an alternate pathway to graduation would be a good thing for our state.

The work of the task force resulted in the following recommendations:

- Arkansas should move forward to develop an Alternate Pathway to Graduation that will positively affect teaching and learning for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.
- This new pathway will include graduation requirements that align with the general pathway to graduation.
- All students should receive the same diploma, but the transcript would differentiate the courses. Functional skills and work-based learning experiences will be incorporated.
 - For example, if the current pathway requires four ELA courses and four mathematics courses, the alternate pathway will require four English courses or *explorations* and four mathematics courses or *explorations*. However, the content of these courses would be appropriate for this population.
- DLM provides alternate achievement standards for ELA, math, and science.
- Groups of special educators, general educators, and staff from institutions of higher education met in July to develop alternate achievement standards for American History, World History, Civics, and Economics.
- Alternate achievement standards have been developed for a Fine Arts course and for Health and Wellness.

- The Fine Arts course is being developed through collaboration with Virtual Arkansas. In addition to meeting the Fine Arts graduation requirement, this course will also meet the digital course requirement.
 - The Health and Wellness standards have been developed through collaboration with Easterseals Outreach.
- DLM staff offered professional development for teachers who teach students with significant cognitive disabilities at each educational service cooperative in Summer 2018.
- Additional professional development will be provided by ADE in Summer 2019.

[Proposed Alternate Pathway to Graduation Requirements](#)

Communication Outreach:

- [Five Things Administrators Need to Know](#)
- [Five Things Teachers Need to Know](#)
- [Five Things Parents Need to Know](#)