

Diploma or Certificate?

What Illinois families of students with disabilities need to know about graduation, well before senior year.



START HERE

Accepting a regular high school diploma ends your child's special education services. That decision cannot be undone. A certificate of completion does not end services. 34 CFR 300.102(a)(3)

The two paths, side by side

	REGULAR DIPLOMA	CERTIFICATE OF COMPLETION
Meets state graduation requirements	Yes	No
Ends IEP services	Yes, right away	No, services continue
Admission to a four year college	Generally yes	Generally no
Federal financial aid (Title IV)	Generally yes	Rarely, narrow exception only
Military enlistment	Generally yes	No
Can return to school after	No	Yes, until the age limit

Six Illinois facts worth knowing

- **There is no "alternate diploma" in Illinois.** ISBE has not adopted one. There is a regular diploma, or a certificate of completion.
- **Your child can walk at graduation and keep services.** Brittany's Law requires every district to have a policy letting a student who has finished four years of high school join the ceremony and receive a certificate. 105 ILCS 5/14-16
- **The diploma can be deferred.** If your child has met graduation requirements but the IEP still calls for transition or related services, the diploma *must* be deferred. 23 IAC 226.50(c)(3)(A)
- **Services can continue through age 21,** and if your child turns 22 during the school year, through the end of that year. 23 IAC 226.50(c)(1)
- **You must get written notice one year ahead** of an anticipated diploma, saying services will end and that you may request an IEP meeting. 23 IAC 226.50(c)(3)(B)
- **A GED is not a regular diploma,** including the credential Illinois renamed the "State of Illinois High School Diploma." 34 CFR 300.102(a)(3)(iv)

Watch out for these

- **Nobody says it out loud.** The path gets set through course placement, without the words "diploma" or "certificate" ever being used.
- **"We don't want to hold them back."** Staying enrolled for transition services is not being held back. It is a service your child is entitled to.
- **Notice that looks routine.** The graduation notice arrives looking like any other form. Read anything about an anticipated graduation date carefully.
- **Unanswered credit questions.** If no one will say whether a modified class earns diploma credit, ask again in writing.

When this actually gets decided



Questions to ask at your next IEP meeting

- 1 Is my child working toward a regular diploma or a certificate of completion? **Please put the answer in the IEP.**
- 2 Which of my child's classes earn credit toward a diploma requirement, and which do not?
- 3 May I have my child's credit audit and the district's board policy on graduation requirements?
- 4 What would need to change, in supports, placement, or courses, for a diploma to be reachable?
- 5 What is my child's anticipated graduation date, and have I received the written notice one year in advance?
- 6 Does the IEP call for services beyond graduation requirements? Will the diploma be deferred?
- 7 What transition programming exists here for students ages 18 to 22?
- 8 Has my child been referred to DRS? Are we on the PUNS list? Who is doing that, and when?

Three things that make the difference

- **Name the goal first.** Decide what life should look like the September after high school, then choose the credential and courses that get there, not the other way around.
- **Ask early, and in writing.** A verbal answer in the hallway disappears. A documented one can be reviewed and revisited.
- **Connect to adult services while your child is in school.** DRS and PUNS have waiting lists, and eligibility does not depend on which credential your child receives.

If you disagree with the team

- **Request an IEP meeting** to review the graduation recommendation. The graduation notice you receive one year in advance must tell you that you have this right. 23 IAC 226.50(c)(3)(B)
- **Ask for IEP facilitation.** A trained neutral helps the team, at no cost to you, with no legal clock started.
- **Mediation, a state complaint, or due process** are also available through ISBE. 23 IAC 226.560, 226.570, Subpart G



Talk with a coach, free

Family Matters supports Illinois families of students with disabilities, ages 0 to 26, in English and Spanish. We can help you prepare for your meeting. www.fmptc.org

Legal Disclaimer: Family Matters is not a legal services agency and cannot provide legal advice or legal representation. Information received from Family Matters is not intended as legal advice and should not be used as a substitution for legal advice.

Funding Statement: The contents of this material were developed/revised under grants from the US Department of Education, #H328M150037, #H328M200072. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the US Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government. Project Officer Dr. Anna Macedonia.