



In the Spotlight

Monthly Issues of Interest Presented By
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IEP 'Diplomas' Leave Some Students with Disabilities Empty-Handed

...without that regular high school diploma in hand, the future for many looks questionable.

John* is an extremely bright 17 year-old with a learning disability who struggles with most academic subjects in school. When it comes to computers, John is practically a genius. In addition to attending school, John works part time for his uncle who runs a website development company. According to John's uncle, he is a talented, motivated and reliable worker. Based on these details it would appear that despite John's learning disability and struggles in school, his future looks promising and that he can expect to have a high-earning career in the computer industry, right? Wrong! If New York State's current policy regarding the awarding of high school diplomas does not change, it is unlikely that John will be able to graduate high school with a "regular" high school diploma, his potential ticket to a successful future. Instead, John is slated to receive what is termed an "IEP diploma", which is essentially considered unacceptable as a high school diploma. An IEP diploma is basically just a document that indicates it's recipient met the goals of his/ her or Individualized Education Plan (IEP). An IEP diploma is not viewed as a true diploma by most employers, post-secondary educational institutions or the military and all too often unknowing students and their parents are left wondering why they weren't told as much before they graduated. In our world today, with the employment market as competitive as it is and growing more so every day without that regular

Currently in New York State, there are three primary "diploma" options for students with disabilities. The first is a Regents diploma, which requires students to pass all of the Regents exams. A second option is a local diploma, which requires students with disabilities to pass Regents Competency Tests (RCTs). Students who receive a local diploma still must attempt to take the Regents exams but if they fail these exams, can take the RCTs to get the local diploma. The third option is the so-called IEP diploma, which is not really a diploma. There is a fourth option for students who exit school and that is a GED. In order to receive a GED, however, students first have to *dropout* of school and pass a GED exam and the GED exam is rigorous in its own right. For many students with disabilities, getting a Regents diploma or a local diploma is not feasible. Some students, no matter how hard they try, are just not able to pass these exams. This doesn't mean, however, that they aren't intelligent, employable students, but because there is no true intermediary diploma many more students with disabilities end up getting tracked for an IEP diploma than should.

Many students with learning disabilities, Aspergers and mental health disorders have been misdirected to IEP diplomas. As a result, their post-secondary opportunities are seriously limited. They are unable to go to community college, into the armed forces, or be hired by many employers and their earning power, once hired, is significantly decreased.

(OVER)

**John is a real student in New York State but his name and the circumstances surrounding his story have been changed to protect his privacy.*

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The Learning Disabilities Association of New York State (LDANYS) was chartered by the New York State Board of Regents in 1958 and is a statewide 501c3 nonprofit, parent-driven organization that advocates on behalf of children and adults who have learning disabilities. LDANYS is the New York state affiliate of the Learning Disabilities Association of America. Our regional affiliates located throughout the state provide a variety of programs and services for children and adults with learning and other developmental disabilities and their families.

For more information about our organization or about the content contained here, please contact our state office at 518-608-8992.

Empty-Handed- Continued

Technically speaking, the IEP diploma is supposed to be reserved for the very small percentage of students who qualify for the Alternate Assessment in New York State and who are unlikely to pursue employment or post-secondary opportunities. Only approximately 2% of students with disabilities are in the Alternate Assessment track yet a significantly higher percentage of students with disabilities graduate with an IEP diploma. At the same time, there are a group of students with and without disabilities that are not able to successfully meet the testing requirements for a Regents or Local Diploma. For them, alternative diploma tracks should be developed including a Career Tech High School Diploma that is at the same level as a Regents Diploma.

LDANYS supports recent efforts undertaken by the New York State Board of Regents to re-examine the policy surrounding the issuance of IEP diplomas. First and foremost, the name 'IEP Diploma' should be discontinued. Using the terminology "diploma" is misleading to students and families who think they/ their child is receiving a legitimate high school diploma only to find out after the fact that it is basically the equivalent of an attendance certificate. A multi-tiered approach to high school com-

pletion eliminating all references to the IEP and meeting the needs of all students must be implemented.

It is very important that students with learning disabilities and their parents receive appropriate information from guidance counselors, CSE Chairpersons and School Administrators regarding the limitations of IEP 'diplomas'. They also need to be aware of the opportunity for students with disabilities to stay in school until the age of 21 or to return to school to receive a regular high school diploma, even if they've previously received an IEP 'diploma' and the opportunity to take five years to obtain a regular high school diploma if necessary.

The original intent of using the IEP diploma terminology when it was first established years ago was to celebrate the achievements of students with disabilities which is certainly understandable but for too many it has become a misleading and inappropriately used ticket to nowhere. As the educational system has moved toward a system of higher learning standards and expectations for ALL students, regardless of disability, so too should a corresponding system of awarding diplomas that truly rewards and recognizes students for what they've achieved and what they are capable of in the future.