

# Diplomas and Graduation Policy Q & A



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This policy Q & A addresses the topics related to diplomas and high school graduation.

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## What legal document describes school regulations and procedures for accreditation?

Each state department of education has a document stating the required rules, regulations, and standards that their schools must follow. These documents are individualized to each state and might vary considerably from one state to the next. Therefore, it is important to become familiar with your state's rules and regulations. In Nebraska, the Department of Education drafted Rule 10: Regulations and Procedures for the Accreditation of Schools (Title 92, Nebraska Administrative Code, Chapter 10). The most recent revision became effective September 15, 2012 and all high schools are required to adopt and implement the graduation requirement regulations by the beginning of the 2014-2015 school year (003.05A).

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### **What is the national graduation rate?**

On a national level, approximately 70% of all students graduate from high school (U. S. Department of Education, 2009). However more recent reports seem to indicate that this rate is increasing. The U.S. Department of Education reported that the current national on time graduation rate was 81% with ethnic subgroup averages ranging from 93% for Asian/Pacific Islanders to 68% for Black and Native American students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). In Nebraska 86% of all students graduate from high school, which makes Nebraska the 4<sup>th</sup> ranked state in the nation for graduation rate. Unfortunately, only 70% of youth with disabilities graduated from Nebraska high schools and only 52% of students with limited English proficiency graduated. Also, only 78% of students with economic disadvantages graduated from Nebraska high schools. It is important to note that these are just averages and graduation rates are subject to vary considerably across states and across school districts and schools within Nebraska, specifically. Thus, each district should keep track of their individual graduation rates and look for ways to improve them.

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### **What are the graduation requirements?**

Each state department of education reserves the right to create their own graduation requirements. However, some states such as Colorado, Iowa, and Kansas do not have state requirements ([National Center on Secondary Education and Transition \[NCSET\], 2003](#)); in these states it is up to the local education agency (LEA) to establish requirements. Within state-determined requirements, individual school districts, or LEAs, can exercise some liberty in terms of the specific courses required, the curriculum used, and additional graduation requirements on top of those appointed by the state. For example, the Nebraska Department of Education Rule 10 states that high school students must acquire a total of 200 credits, ninth through twelfth grade, in order to graduate. Of those credits, 80 percent must be from core curriculum classes (003.05). Additionally, in Lincoln Public Schools, high school students also must pass the Reading and Writing Demonstration Exams in order to be eligible to graduate.

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### **What is the core curriculum?**

Core curriculum is a term used in Nebraska to describe the curriculum that all students must complete in order to graduate. It is not related to the national discussion of the “Common Core Curriculum” which is a controversial curriculum guide that has been adopted by some states. Each state may determine the curriculum requirements for graduation, and how much latitude districts have within any state requirements.

In Nebraska, students need 200 credits to graduate, but only 80 of those must come from this “core curriculum”. The remaining 120 credits are “electives” that can be chosen by the student based on interest and future goals. Examples of these classes might include choir, band, foreign language, or

mechanics. In Nebraska, the required core curriculum might include, but is not limited to, the following (003.05A) (79-729):

- 40 credit hours of language arts with course content focusing on composition, verbal communication, literature, research skills, and technical reading and writing (003.05A1)
- 30 credit hours of mathematics with course content focusing on algebra, geometry, data analysis, and probability (003.05A2)
- 30 credit hours of science with course content focusing on biology, earth/space, physical science, laboratory, and science inquiry (003.05A3)
- 30 credit hours of social studies/history with course content focusing on civics/government, geography, United States and world history, and economy (003.05A4)

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### **Do all students have to follow the core curriculum plan to receive a diploma?**

In Nebraska, a student's individualized education plan (IEP) may prescribe a different course of instruction. For example, in some schools, students who qualify for Special Education are exempt from the reading and math demonstration exams, which are additional graduation requirements in some districts. In these situations, students with an IEP take classes that teach the same basic skills as are measured on these exams, thus, demonstrating knowledge in these areas. It is said that these students then graduate in accordance with their IEP requirements. These requirements and exceptions are the same for ELL students as well. ELL students in special education follow the special education requirements and those ELL students without a special education verification must meet the school's core requirements.

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### **Can students with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and a later graduation date attend graduation ceremony with their class?**

In the state of Nebraska, students receiving special education services who have not completed their IEPs at the age of 17 can participate in graduation activities without jeopardizing future education services (79-770; Rule 51 004.04). The school should provide the student with a certificate of attendance to participate in the high school graduation ceremony. Students can participate in graduation events receiving a certificate of attendance only once (79-770). Receiving a certificate of attendance does not preclude the students from receiving their high school diploma or diploma of high school equivalency under section 79-730. Upon completing his/her IEP requirements, the student is then permitted to attend the graduation ceremony in which he/she receives a high school diploma (Rule 51 004.04A).

It is important to note that these requirements may vary by state and it is advised that all school officials and staff check with individual state requirements.

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**What happens to students who do not complete the graduation requirements?**

Students who are within 20 credits of graduation and who enroll in summer school to complete the requirements go through the graduation ceremony in the spring and then receive the actual diploma at the end of summer school. Because of the nature of the ceremony, no students receive actual diplomas on that day so all students are handed the same piece of paper. As a result there is no difference between current actual graduates and future potential graduates.

Students who are more than 20 credits away from graduation are strongly encouraged to return to school. Some choose to attend a different high school or program to complete requirement, while others choose a General Education Development (GED) option. Many times these courses are offered through a local community college (e.g., Southeast Community College). Some drop out and later choose to return or work on a GED. As long as they are under the age of 21 they may return to high school to complete graduation requirements.

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**What is the purpose of the Diploma of High School Equivalency Act?**

According to Nebraska Department of Education Rule 82, the High School Equivalency Program is intended to provide participants “with training and examinations for a diploma of high school equivalency” (003.03E). This act provides funding to various organizations whose purpose is to help students who have dropped out of high school to come back and earn their General Education Development (GED).

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**Can students earn high school credit before entering high school?**

Middle school students who are enrolled in courses that are equivalent to core curriculum in high school can receive high school credit for those specific courses (92 NAC 10-003.05B).

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**If I transfer from one high school to another, will my high school credits transfer with me?**

Schools are required to accept high school credit earned at Interim Program Schools. Also, schools are required to issue diplomas to students who have met graduation requirements from accredited high schools (003.05C; 92 NAC 18).

## **How do students who have dropped out of high school earn a diploma?**

Adults who did not earn a high school diploma can earn it by passing the General Education Development (GED) exam or returning to high school before the age of 21. The GED is offered nation wide, and can be taken by any individual who meets the state requirements. The Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) requires that all applicants be at least 16 years old, with a properly completed application and transcripts from the last high school in which they were enrolled. The NDE also provides Adult Education programs to prepare people for the GED. A list of programs in Nebraska can be found on their website ([www.education.ne.gov](http://www.education.ne.gov)).

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## **Who is eligible to take Adult Education classes and to take the General Education Development (GED) exam?**

According to the Nebraska Department of Education, people who want to take the GED exam must be a minimum of 16 years of age and have officially withdrawn from school. See [GED Testing Requirements and Diploma Issuance](#) for more details. Adult education classes are not required in order to be eligible for a GED.

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## **What diplomas are available to students upon completing high school?**

According to the National Study on Graduation Requirements and Diploma Options for Youth with Disabilities (National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, 2003), there are seven diploma options given to students with disabilities. Each individual state is given discretion in deciding which diploma(s) to use. These diploma options include: honors, regular/standard, IEP/special education, certificate of attendance, certificate of achievement, occupation diploma, or other. States can utilize all seven diplomas (e.g., Nebraska), just one diploma (e.g., New Jersey), or any combination of these (e.g., North Dakota, New York, and Michigan). Because there is such variety in the number and type of diplomas being used by each state it is important to check with local regulations.

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## **How is credit assigned to students who are in alternative or special education programs?**

Course credit is generally assigned based on credit hours; however, the number of credit hours per class and for graduation are subject to vary from district to district. In LPS, one credit hour is equivalent to one period per week during one semester (18 weeks). Most semester-long courses meet 5 days a week for 18 weeks in a semester and receive 5 credit hours. Some courses (e.g., on-line learning courses) generate credit based on completion of the course requirements rather than hours spent in class. Courses that include work experience require 90 clock hours of employment to earn 5 credit hours. While these examples are specific to Lincoln, NE, all other school districts have a similar system for calculating credit hours.

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