

## Georgia's Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Amendment: State-defined Alternate Diploma for Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities – Frequently Asked Questions

- **Why is Georgia creating an Alternate Diploma?**
  - The creation of this State-defined Alternate Diploma addresses the issues identified by the U.S. Department of Education during federal monitoring, allows for better inclusion of students with significant cognitive disabilities assessed via the Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA) 2.0 in graduation rates, and creates a tighter alignment between the instruction received, assessment taken, and diploma for which a student is eligible.
  - In Fall 2018, the U.S. Department of Education did regular monitoring and gave Georgia a finding for including students with the most significant cognitive disabilities who earned a Regular Diploma in the cohort graduation rate. Due to that finding, Georgia applied for an Alternate Diploma, which would allow students with the most significant cognitive disabilities to be included in the cohort graduation rate. Students receiving this Alternate Diploma would count toward the four-year cohort graduation rate, regardless of the year they received their diploma – provided they graduated within the time period for which the state ensures the availability of a free appropriate education for students with disabilities (age 22).
  - We believe this is a positive change for students with significant cognitive disabilities and will allow schools to serve those students without being penalized if they do not graduate within their four-year cohort – which may not be what's best for that individual student.
- **Which students qualify for the new Alternate Diploma?**
  - Only students with the most significant cognitive disabilities who take the GAA are eligible to receive the Alternate Diploma. The eligibility criteria for the GAA can be reviewed [here](#).



Instruction/Standards	Assessment	Diploma
Georgia Standards of Excellence	→ Georgia Milestones	→ Regular
Alternate Content Standards	→ GAA 2.0	→ Alternate

- **What is this new Alternate Diploma and how will it impact these students' future postsecondary and/or transition opportunities?**
  - The Alternate Diploma is the document awarded to students with the most significant cognitive disabilities who were assessed using the alternate assessment aligned to alternate academic achievement standards. While this diploma is standards-based and aligned with the state requirements for the Regular High School Diploma, it is not a Regular High School Diploma. Therefore, an Alternate Diploma does not terminate Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for students with an Individualized Education Program (IEP). The requirements for the Alternate Diploma are the same requirements these students currently meet to obtain a Regular Diploma.
  - For postsecondary and transition opportunities, many of those institutions will still allow it for transition opportunities and, like with the Regular Diploma, there would be admissions criteria for postsecondary institutions.
  
- **When will this new Alternate Diploma go into effect, and when will the first students graduate with this diploma?**
  - The Alternate Diploma option will be available for students who entered ninth grade during the 2020-2021 school year and beyond.
  - Students with the most significant cognitive disabilities who were in high school prior to the 2020-2021 school year who take the GAA and complete other requirements will still receive the Regular Diploma.

### 9th Grade Cohorts by Year/Diploma Type

16-17	17-18	18-19	19-20	20-21	21-22	22-23	23-24	24-25	25-26	26-27
9th grade - REGULAR DIPLOMA										
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			9th grade - REGULAR DIPLOMA							
				9th grade - ALTERNATE DIPLOMA						
					9th grade - ALTERNATE DIPLOMA					

- **How does the Alternate Diploma apply to four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) calculations?**
  - Students receiving this State-defined Alternate Diploma will count toward the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate, regardless of the year they receive their diploma – provided they graduate within the time period for which the state ensures the availability of a free appropriate public education (FAPE) for students with disabilities. In Georgia, this is when a student has reached age 22.
  
- **What happens if a student with the most significant cognitive disabilities who takes the Georgia Alternate Assessment withdraws from school without receiving the Alternate Diploma?**
  - At the time of exit, students will be included in the denominator regardless of how they exit.
  
  - A student who receives the State-defined Alternate Diploma will be counted in the numerator.
  
  - A student who receives any other credential or drops out will be counted in the denominator only.

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