

Frequently Asked Questions

Alternate Academic Diploma

On January 26, 2018, the State Board of Education approved the addition of the alternate academic diploma (AAD) within [high school policy 2.103](#). This new diploma will count toward the district graduation rate and will be implemented beginning in the 2018-19 school year.

1. What is the alternate academic diploma?

The AAD is a newly created diploma for students who are assessed on the state alternate assessments. The option for this new diploma was introduced in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). As a part of Tennessee's state [ESSA plan](#), the AAD policy was developed by the department and approved by the State Board of Education. This new diploma recognizes the academic learning and success of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. The requirements of the diploma align to the academic coursework and ACT requirements of students earning a regular diploma in order to ensure that all students are provided access and opportunities to learn and participate in rigorous, meaningful instruction.

2. Why was the alternate academic diploma added to the high school policy?

The ESSA regulations require the state-defined alternate diploma to be:

- standards based,
- aligned with the state requirements for the regular high school diploma, and
- obtained within the time period for which the state ensures availability of a free public education under section 612(a)(1) of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (20 U.S.C. 1412(a)(1)).

Neither the existing occupational diploma nor the special education diploma met these requirements, and therefore, a new diploma was added to the policy.

3. Does the alternate academic diploma count in the school/district graduation rate?

Yes, the AAD will count toward the school/district graduation rate as long as it is earned within the extended cohort timeframe of four years plus one summer. A student may continue to work toward, and earn, a diploma outside this timeframe; however, it will not be included in the graduation rate once it exceeds the allotted cohort time.

4. Who is eligible to earn the alternate academic diploma?

In order to earn the AAD, a student **must have**:

1. participated in the high school alternate assessments;
2. earned the prescribed 22 credit minimum;
3. received special education services or supports and made satisfactory progress on an individualized education program (IEP);
4. satisfactory records of attendance and conduct; and

5. completed a transition assessment(s) that measures, at a minimum, postsecondary education and training, employment, independent living, and community involvement.

5. How does this policy help a student on the alternate assessment path earn the required 22 credits?

The required credits may be earned through the state-approved standards or through AAD modified course requirements approved by the State Board of Education. The alternate academic course requirements can be found [here](#). The course requirements, based on the [Tennessee Academic Standards](#), outline the expectations for a student working toward the AAD. There will be specific course codes for each of the AAD course requirements available in August 2018 for schools to track a student's progress towards completing the required 22 credits.

6. My student's least restrictive environment is a combination of time within general education and special education. Would their IEP need to be changed for them to earn the alternate academic diploma credits?

No, the alternate academic course requirements are directly aligned to the [Tennessee Academic Standards](#) and therefore are aligned with the content instruction in any educational setting that is determined to be the least restrictive environment for that student. Any change of placement on the IEP should be based on the student's current levels of performance and needs, not on their diploma choice.

7. Can a teacher's class be a mix of students earning the alternate academic diploma and those earning the regular diploma?

Yes, a teacher may have both the regular content course code and an alternate academic course code listed for the same time of day. The alternate academic course requirements are directly aligned to [Tennessee Academic Standards](#), and therefore, this would not alter the instruction beyond the differentiation, accommodations, and modifications already required to meet the needs of the students.

8. Does the uniform grading policy apply to students earning the alternate academic diploma?

No. The uniform grading policy specifically relates to the regular education diploma, HOPE scholarship, and traditional college admission. Therefore, it does not apply to the special education diplomas, including the alternate academic diploma. When determining the grading policy for the alternate academic diploma courses, the district should refer to their local grading policy for guidance and determine a single, district-wide plan for grading in these courses.

9. Can a student earn both the alternate academic diploma and the occupational diploma?

Yes, the two diplomas support the student's learning in two different ways, and providing the instruction and experiences needed to earn them will better prepare the student for postsecondary success. One possible way for a student to accomplish this is to follow a similar trajectory as their peers who do not have disabilities. The first four years of high school, the student will participate in traditional academic, standards-based instruction. Then, as a part of the transition assessment requirement, the student's team may choose to use the [Skills, Knowledge, and Experience Mastery Assessment \(SKEMA\)](#) in order to begin planning for the occupational diploma. After earning the alternate academic diploma, the student's instruction will focus on career readiness, including completing two years of work experience,

in order to obtain the occupational diploma.

10. Is the alternate academic diploma available at all Tennessee public high schools?

Yes, beginning in August 2018, the AAD is one of four diploma options in Tennessee public school as outlined within the [high school policy 2.103](#).

11. How will earning the alternate academic diploma benefit my student?

All students should be engaging in rigorous, meaningful academic instruction daily in order to become critical thinkers and problem solvers. Critical thinking and problem solving strategies are essential for continued learning of new skills including, learning a job, accessing technology, requesting help, participating in social activities, learning independent living skills, accessing books and media related to hobbies, contacting friends and family, self-advocacy, managing money, and making daily decisions.

Students assessed on the alternate assessment should not be given a choice of academics or instruction, but rather, a comprehensive, integrated educational experience that includes academics **and** life skills. The course requirements for the AAD blend the academic standards, alternate assessment targets, and the skills for successful postsecondary outcomes, including life skills.

Most importantly, the student deserves the recognition for his/her hard work, academic accomplishments, and success.

12. After earning the alternate academic diploma, may the student continue in the public school system?

Yes, earning an AAD does not end, or terminate, the student's right to special education services as outlined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The student may continue to receive services through the end of the school year in which they turn 22 years old.

13. Where can I learn more about the alternate academic diploma?

More information is available on the department's [special education secondary transition webpage](#) under "Graduation Options" and in an overview webinar ([here](#)).