



February 26, 2014

A Real Exit Option For All Students

Students with disabilities in Louisiana have poor educational outcomes that are directly related to success being defined solely on student-performance on standardized tests. Since the issue of how Louisiana's one-size-fits-all accountability system impacts students with disabilities was highlighted in the [October 4, 2013 edition of LaDDC News](#), advocates across the state have discussed the issue and agreed that Louisiana needs to change what success means. Changing the definition of success will require changes to how decisions are made regarding promotion from grade to grade and graduating (i.e., earning a diploma).

How bad are the outcomes for students with disabilities?

In 2012, more students with disabilities dropped out of school (39 percent) than graduated (32 percent), and another 27 percent of students exited with a certificate of achievement – considered by most to be a worthless document.

In Louisiana, about forty percent of dropouts never make it into high school and only about one in every three students with disabilities who enter high school graduate. In most other states the percentage of students with disabilities graduating is more than double what Louisiana produces. Nationally about 60 percent of students with disabilities graduate. Some parents who moved from other states raised concerns about the impact of Louisiana's use of standardized tests for making promotion and graduation decisions. This led a collaborative group of parents, special education directors and other advocates to research numerous other states' policies. It was discovered that Louisiana's grade promotion and graduation policies are a major reason for poor outcomes of Louisiana students with disabilities.

Since Louisiana's grade promotion and graduation policies use performance on standardized tests to retain students, students with disabilities often do not get into high school, much less have an opportunity to earn a diploma. Most students with disabilities in Louisiana (over 60 percent) do not score well enough to meet the criteria on the current tests required for promotion.

How will Common Core State Standards impact these outcomes?

Two major concerns have been raised regarding Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and corresponding tests worsening outcomes for students with disabilities. The first concern is with the CCSS themselves. In general some of the issues are the high standards of the CCSS and whether these standards are designed for college, not workforce, prep. But in regards to students with disabilities, some of the standards actually define deficits of specific students. For example, many of the CCSS require the student to take another's perspective – which is one of the defining characteristics of students with autism. The second major concern has been the lack of adequate support, training and technical assistance for teachers and parents of students with disabilities. While these concerns certainly deserve attention on their own, regardless of which standardized curriculum and assessments are used, students with disabilities and their parents and teachers face an

www.laddc.org





impossible task of meeting the student's individualized needs and outcomes in a system that only recognizes success based on whether the student passes a standardized test.

Does the Department of Education plan to change diploma pathways to offer a meaningful and attainable exit option for most students with disabilities?

The Louisiana Department of Education's (LDE) proposal to change diploma pathways/graduation is called JumpStart. Since JumpStart maintains a requirement that students pass ninth and tenth grade End-Of-Course tests, it is not a true pathway to graduation for most students with disabilities.

Students with disabilities will continue to face the two most popular exit options, a Certificate of Achievement or dropping out. A Certificate of Achievement does not communicate anything to potential employers about what someone can do. Employers tend to ask "Did you graduate?" and if the answer is no, the applicant typically is overlooked. It takes too long for applicants to convince a prospective employer of their worth. These applicants are at a disadvantage if they have nothing from the school they 'attended' that indicates their value and skills. Since all individuals have value and worth, every student deserves the opportunity to leave school with a document that demonstrates their skills and abilities.

Policies that link performance on standardized tests to promotion (or retention) and diplomas leave many educators, parents and students wondering what goal to strive toward. There is no evidence or research to suggest retention as an intervention; on this everyone seems to agree ([see the 2010 presentation by Kerry Laster, Chief of Literacy, Louisiana Department of Education](#)). Yet Louisiana laws require students to be retained in fourth and eighth grades if they do not achieve a certain score on standardized academic assessments.

Questions are being raised about the ability of a single test given at a single point in time to accurately reflect almost anything about a student. In Louisiana these scores are being used to make significant decisions about whether students will be retained or what value they are perceived as having to society and the workforce.

The Real Exit Option for ALL Students

The core of the idea developed by parents and other stakeholders was to change policies so students (and schools) are recognized for successful completion or significant progress toward academic, social, and vocational goals and objectives on their Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs). The goal is to have Louisiana's accountability system designed to maximize every student's potential and enable every student to have a pathway to a diploma. A diploma that provides employers with information about what the graduate can do, what skills they possess, and how valuable they are as potential employees.

The proposal for a Real Exit Option for All Students presented by these stakeholder groups seeks to provide ALL students, regardless of the severity of their disability, a pathway to a diploma by establishing individualized measures of success.



What advocates have proposed:

1. Testing of all students on standardized academic assessments will continue. However, the IEP team, those closest to the student, shall determine the performance levels on these tests and others related to the student's IEP that are necessary for each student to be promoted to the next grade and the ultimate promotion of earning a diploma (graduation). IEP teams will determine a rigorous, meaningful, individualized and attainable course of study for each student with a disability. Students must complete their individualized course of study to the IEP determined criteria to be promoted and eventually graduate. Monitoring should ensure that students' goals and objectives are rigorous and not watered down.
2. All students will have realistic, obtainable and meaningful pathways to graduate with a diploma. Diplomas will inform employers that the graduate is employable and possesses valued sets of skills sought by employers.
3. Schools and educators will have guidance and direction regarding goals and outcomes to work toward for every student.
4. Schools and educators will receive credit for the significant effort put into providing appropriate supports and services for students with disabilities. School performance scores will reflect delivery and outcomes of services enabling students with disabilities to reach their maximum potential by achieving their individualized goals and objectives.

What advocates do not want:

1. A special education diploma. This is not acceptable. An individualized course of study should be honored as an achievement.
2. Lower expectations. Safeguards should be put in place to guard against any lowering of expectations. Guidance and monitoring of outcomes and practices should focus on minimizing the lowering of expectations for any student.
3. Students with disabilities not taking standardized academic assessments. These assessments are necessary to determine where students perform and what gets tested, gets taught. Students with disabilities should continue to have access to the academic curriculum and high expectations to achieve. However, their performance standards should be based on their personal best, not an unobtainable set of standards that are norm referenced (i.e., established in such a way as to guarantee that most students with disabilities will fail).
4. Parents' rights afforded through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to be diminished. Parents should retain their rights. If a parent does not agree with the rest of the IEP team they will be able to use appropriate processes to address those differences.
5. Schools to be penalized for serving their fair share of students with disabilities – as is occurring now. Schools, and teachers, should receive credit and recognition for providing appropriate supports and services to students with disabilities.

This Real Exit Option for ALL Students proposal promises to shift Louisiana's accountability system to be more student-focused and redefine our vision of success. Failure is expecting everyone to meet the exact same performance standard. Success is everyone achieving to their maximum potential. It is time to align policies and practices to reflect this definition of success.