

## What is a “regular high school diploma”?

A “regular high school diploma” is a diploma that school districts award to students when they have met all graduation requirements. This kind of diploma aligns with the state learning standards, which are called the “Curriculum Frameworks” in Massachusetts.

## How can students with IEPs earn a regular high school diploma in Massachusetts?

For a student with an IEP to graduate with a regular high school diploma, all three of these conditions must occur:

#1 Student meets local requirements – Each school district sets its own standards for graduation. A local district might require a student to successfully complete a certain number of credits, keep their grades up, or take certain classes. Because requirements are different for each district, parents and students should read their local high school handbook.

#2 Student earns the competency determination (CD) – Massachusetts sets a state standard for graduation, too. The state requires all students to pass the MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System). Passing the MCAS means a student has earned the “Competency Determination (CD).” Students can earn the CD if they meet or exceed the Proficient score on the English Language Arts, Mathematics, and Science and Technology/Engineering grade 10 MCAS. (If students don’t earn the Proficient score, they still have some options. See the inside panel of this brochure.)

#3 Student receives FAPE - Under federal special education law, a student with an IEP who has met local and state requirements for graduation must also receive a “free appropriate public education” (FAPE). In order for a student to graduate, their IEP Team – which includes the student and their parents – must agree at the final IEP meeting that the student has received FAPE. (See the inside of this brochure for what to do if there is a disagreement.)

## Resources

The LINK Center, a transition project of the Federation for Children with Special Needs  
[www.fcsn.org/linkcenter](http://www.fcsn.org/linkcenter)

MA DESE Special Education Secondary Transition Website  
[www.doe.mass.edu/sped/secondary-transition](http://www.doe.mass.edu/sped/secondary-transition)

Administrative Advisory SPED 2018-2: Secondary Transition Services and Graduation with a High School Diploma  
<http://www.doe.mass.edu/sped/advisories/2018-2.html>



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FEDERATION FOR CHILDREN  
WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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## TIPS: Transition Information for Parents and Students with IEPs

(Ages 14-22)



## Graduation and Students with IEPs

A series of brochures produced by  
The LINK Center - a project of the  
Federation for Children with Special Needs,  
and the Massachusetts Department of  
Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE)

## Graduation and Students with IEPs: What you need to know....

### TIP 1: To receive a high school diploma, all students with IEPs need to:

- Meet the local school district's graduation requirements (varies by district).
- Earn the "competency determination" (CD) based on MCAS scores.
- Receive a Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE).

### TIP 2: Talk about graduation at the IEP meeting every year, starting when the student is 14 (or earlier) and document the expected graduation date in the IEP.

- At each annual IEP meeting, the Team should discuss whether the student will earn a regular high school diploma. In the IEP, write down the expected graduation date (or the expected date of exit, if the student will not earn a diploma).
- In the student's final year of high school, the district will plan to graduate the student with a regular diploma if all three requirements have been met.
- Disagreements between families and schools will be rare if the IEP Team talks about graduation and special education services every year.
- After students graduate with a regular diploma, they cannot receive any more special education services.
- Occasionally the IEP Team may agree that a student needs more special education services to receive FAPE, even though the student has earned the CD and met the district's graduation requirements. If this happens, the Team writes a new IEP, including needed services and new expected graduation date.
- Very rarely, the district and the family disagree at the final IEP meeting about whether the student received FAPE. If that happens, the parent (or student, if making their own decisions) can reject the final IEP. The family and district can try to reach agreement through mediation or formal dispute resolution under IDEA. This may include filing a

complaint and asking for a hearing with the Bureau of Special Education Appeals (BSEA).

- If the family has rejected the IEP and is using dispute resolution, the student can stay in the current placement until the disagreement is resolved (called "stay put" rights). The district does not issue a diploma to the student until the dispute is resolved.

### TIP 3: Talk about secondary transition services at the IEP Team meeting each year from at least age 13 onwards, to ensure services start when the student is 14.

- Start planning early! Once the student graduates, special education services end, so make sure the student has received the services they need by the time they finish high school.
- Secondary transition services are a coordinated set of activities that help the student to develop skills for education/training after high school, a job, and living in the community. Receiving transition services is part of receiving FAPE.
- Use the Transition Planning Form (TPF) as a brainstorming guide to help the Team write the IEP.
- Write the annual IEP goals so they help the student build academic and functional skills (e.g. social skills) to prepare for adult life.
- Use assessments to make sure the student is making the progress the IEP Team expects. If not, the Team can discuss adjusting goals and services.

*Each year the IEP Team must make an individualized decision about the date they expect the student to graduate, and then document that date in the IEP.*



## Information on the MCAS

- All Massachusetts students enrolled in a public school take the MCAS, even if they are placed out-of-district. For students with IEPs, the IEP Team decides how the student will take it by discussing the MCAS at each annual IEP meeting.
  - A student with disabilities can participate in MCAS testing with or without accommodations.
  - A student with a significant disability may take the standard MCAS that most students take, or may take the MCAS-Alt.
- Students with IEPs who want to earn a regular high school diploma have these MCAS options, as decided by the IEP Team:
  - The student takes the standard MCAS, with or without accommodations. The student achieves the minimum required score on the standard MCAS subject test. [www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/graduation.html](http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/graduation.html)
  - The student completes an MCAS-Alt "competency portfolio" that documents the student's knowledge and skills of the high school level standards: [www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/alt/cd-reqs/](http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/alt/cd-reqs/)
- If the student's MCAS scores are not high enough to earn a competency determination, the school district may submit an MCAS Performance Appeal on behalf of the student (with the parent's consent). The appeal would show through coursework that the student meets or exceeds the required performance level on the MCAS: [www.doe.mass.edu/mcasappeals/filing/guide.docx](http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcasappeals/filing/guide.docx).
- If unable to pass the MCAS by age 22, a student can:
  - Continue to re-take the exam as often as desired at the local high school or adult education center, or
  - Earn a high school equivalency credential by taking the HiSET or GED exam: [www.doe.mass.edu/hse/](http://www.doe.mass.edu/hse/).

Most students with IEPs will receive their high school diploma on the date the IEP Team writes in the final IEP.