

Family Guide to the New CA Alternative Pathway to a High School Diploma for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities

WHAT IS THE NEW DIPLOMA PATHWAY?

The new pathway provides an alternative route to graduation for students with significant cognitive disabilities, where previously most students in this student group received a certificate of completion upon graduating or turning 22. Students meeting eligibility for this pathway can both earn a diploma and participate in all graduation-related activities. It is important to note this doesn't change the school's responsibility to provide a student with an individualized education tailored to their needs, and the students can continue receiving services until the age of 22.

WHO IS THE NEW PATHWAY FOR?

The new alternative pathway is for students/pupils with the most significant cognitive disabilities. "Pupils with the most significant cognitive disabilities" means students with a disability or disabilities that significantly impact(s) cognitive functioning and adaptive behavior and who require extensive, direct individualized instruction and substantial supports to achieve measurements on academic standards. Further defined as students who are eligible to take the California Alternative Assessment (CAA) in statewide testing. Students only need to be eligible to take the CAA to qualify and are not required to take statewide testing to be able to earn this diploma.

QUESTIONS TO ASK THE IEP TEAM

- ▶ How is my child able to demonstrate what they know, want and think? (i.e. AAC, AT, PECs)
- ▶ Are my child's IEP goals in line with what they're supposed to learn for their grade (grade-level standards)?
- ▶ How will my child have access to the general education classroom and curriculum?
- ▶ Is my child on track to be able to earn a diploma through either traditional or alternative pathways? If not, how can we help them get on track?
- ▶ What transition activities or programs are available to help my child explore different interests and prepare for the next steps in their education, employment, and life journey?

ALT PATHWAY ELIGIBILITY OVERVIEW

- 1 The student began grade 9 in the 22-23 School year or later.
- 2 The student is eligible to take the California Alternate Assessment.
- 3 The student is required to complete state standards-aligned coursework to meet statewide course requirements.



COURSE REQUIREMENTS FOR ALT-PATHWAY

- 3 Three courses in English
- 2 Two courses in mathematics, including one year of Algebra I (EC Section 51224.5)
- 2 Two courses in science, including biological and physical sciences
- 3 Three courses in social studies, including United States history and geography; world history, culture, and geography; a one-semester course in American government and civics, and a one-semester course in economics
- 1 One course in visual or performing arts, world language, or career technical education.
- 2 Two courses in physical education, unless the pupil has been exempted pursuant to the provisions of EC Section 51241
- 1 One semester of Ethnic Studies, commencing with pupils graduating in the 2029–30 school year (a course based on the model curriculum developed pursuant to EC Section 51226.7)

ANSWERS TO FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1 How is this diploma different from a certificate of completion?

This diploma signifies that the student has completed specific standards aligned course requirements for graduation. This can open doors for more job opportunities, higher earning potential, and further education. A certificate of completion signifies the end of high school and is based on IEP goals. The certificate of completion does not require any specific coursework and is not considered a diploma.

3 Are students who receive their diploma through the alt-pathway still eligible for services?

The student is still eligible to participate in public school until they are 22 years of age or until the IEP team determines they have completed their high school experience. Receiving a diploma on the alt-pathway does not end a student's eligibility for services under IDEA.

2 How many years will it take for my child to earn their high school diploma on the alt-pathway?

The intent of the alt-pathway is to allow students to complete their course of study in 4 years alongside their same-age peers, but IEP teams may identify a different timeline that can be adjusted to meet the individual needs of students.

4 Who determines if my student is eligible for the alt-pathway, and when is the decision made?

IEP teams determine eligibility, based on state guidance/criteria. Discussions should begin early to ensure expressive communication needs are meaningfully addressed, supporting students ability to access educational content and instruction, and express their knowledge and skills. This makes it possible to accurately evaluate their academic growth.

SOURCES

<https://casetext.com/statute/california-codes/california-education-code/title-2-elementary-and-secondary-education/division-4-instruction-and-services/part-28-general-instructional-programs/chapter-2-required-courses-of-study/article-3-courses-of-study-grades-7-to-12/section-5122531-exemption-of-individuals-with-exceptional-needs-for-graduation>

<https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/lr/om082523.asp>

<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/ca/documents/altassessmentdecision.pdf>

<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/gs/hs/hsgmin.asp>

<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/ca/altassessment.asp>

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1325428.pdf>

