

What It Takes to Graduate for the Class of 2007

Editorial Projects in Education Research Center

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June 2007



What It Takes

In recent years, there has been a growing chorus of concern about the state of American high schools. Bill Gates has called them "obsolete." Governors across the nation have put high school reform on their policy agendas. Time Magazine ran an April 2006 cover story, entitled "Dropout Nation," discussing problems related to high school graduation rates. In its plan for reauthorizing the No Child Left Behind Act, the Bush administration calls for mandatory state testing in additional high school grades.

To provide context for understanding high school graduation rates and the high school reform debate more generally, the Editorial Projects in Education (EPE) Research Center collected data on 16 state-policy indicators in four categories related to graduation: coursetaking requirements for obtaining a standard diploma, state high school exit exams, high school completion credentials offered by each state, and the age at which students can legally leave school. This online brief updates data reported in the 2006 inaugural edition of *Diplomas Count*.

Indicators for all 50 states and the District of Columbia were obtained from the EPE Research Center's annual state policy survey, conducted in fall 2006, and from a number of other sources including the Denver-based Education Commission of the States (ECS), the Washington-based Center on Education Policy (CEP), and government agencies. The results indicate that policies related to graduation vary significantly from state to state and that, overall, policies have not changed dramatically since last year. However, given the strong momentum behind high school reform, further policy changes can be expected for future graduating classes.

Coursetaking Requirements

Earning a standard diploma demands different levels of performance in high school coursework across the states. From state to state, requirements vary both in the total number of courses students must complete to qualify for a standard diploma and in the distribution of those courses across academic disciplines. According to data collected by the ECS for the 2006-07 school year, students nationwide are expected to earn 20 total

credits, on average, to walk across the stage at graduation ceremonies with a standard diploma in hand, the same number as last year. State course-credit requirements range from a low of 13 total credits in California, Wisconsin, and Wyoming to a high of 24 credits in Alabama, Florida, South Carolina, and West Virginia. This brief focuses on minimum coursework requirements that apply to all students within a state. These results do not reflect additional credits that individual school districts may mandate on a local basis.

Six states – Colorado, Iowa, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, and Pennsylvania – leave most decisions about course-credit requirements up to local school districts. Two other states – Nebraska and North Dakota – specify the total number of course credits required, but do not spell out expectations for credits in particular subjects.

Nationally, subject-specific requirements call for the average student in the class of 2007 to earn four credits in English and roughly three credits in each of the other core academic subjects to obtain a standard diploma. Credit requirements are more uniform in English than in other subjects. Thirty-seven states mandate that students earn at least four credits in English to receive a standard diploma, the same number as a year ago.

High School Exit Exams

States implement exit exams for a variety of reasons. One commonly cited impetus for such exams is the desire to verify that students earning the standard diploma have mastered the knowledge and skills needed for life after high school. Twenty-two states require exit exams for the class of 2007 and three states – Maryland, Oklahoma, and Washington – plan to do so for future graduating classes. The number of states linking or aligning exit exams with standards for 10th grade or higher has increased from six in 2002 to 18 in 2007.

According to data collected through the EPE Research Center's annual state policy survey, half of the 22 states with exit exams require students to pass only English (including writing) and mathematics tests to obtain a standard diploma. Nine of the 11 other states with exit exams call for students to pass tests in each

of the four core subject areas: English, math, science, and social studies.

Students who fail to pass exit exams may still be able to earn a standard diploma in some states, either through an appeals process or an alternative route such as presenting a portfolio of academic work. Sixteen states offer at least one of those options for students in the class of 2007, one more than in 2006.

High School Completion Credentials

In attempting to meet the needs of a wide range of students and the demands of the modern economy, states offer a variety of high school completion credentials, including advanced diplomas and certificates of completion. Three states – Alabama, Georgia, and Nevada – offer more than one standard diploma option. In Georgia, for example, students are awarded either a college-preparatory or a career-preparatory diploma.

To encourage and reward students who exceed standard requirements, 24 states award advanced diplomas or some type of formal recognition for additional or more rigorous coursework and other accomplishments, the same total as last year.

A number of states provide some form of recognition for students who fail to meet all the requirements for a standard diploma. Twenty-eight states offer alternative credentials, often called "modified diplomas" or "certificates of completion," for students with disabilities or those who do not pass exit exams. Twenty-six states reported having such credentials in 2006.

Minimum-Age Policies

Advocacy groups and policymakers have directed additional attention to the compulsory age for public school attendance in recent high school reform efforts. For example, Civic Enterprises, a Washington-based public-policy firm, has suggested that increasing the

compulsory attendance age from 16 or 17 to 18 could reduce dropout rates.

State policies on the compulsory age for public school attendance vary. Differences can be seen in both the age at which students can legally leave school and in the types of exemptions or waivers allowed in each state.

The EPE Research Center reviewed data from the U.S. Department of Labor to determine the compulsory attendance age applicable to most students in each state for the 2006-07 school year. Findings show that compulsory attendance ages range from 16 to 18, with almost half the states requiring students to remain in school only until they reach their 16th birthday.

Students in most states may, however, legally leave school before reaching the minimum age generally required. Twenty-eight states have exemptions allowing students to leave school prior to reaching the typical minimum age with parental consent, to engage in employment, or for other reasons.

Similarly, in 42 states, individuals must be at least 18 years old before taking a General Educational Development test, or GED. However, laws in all but one of those states also provide for exceptions allowing the test to be taken at a younger age (typically 16).

High school reform efforts will continue to be debated as governors and other policy leaders grapple with the economic challenges resulting from increasing globalization and a rapid pace of technological change. Developing a skilled workforce and increasing high school graduation rates, reported at just under 70 percent nationwide by the EPE Research Center based on an analysis of data for the 2003-04 school year, will continue to be key issues at both the state and the national levels. ■

Course-Taking Requirements for a Standard Diploma						Number of course credits required by state to earn a standard high school diploma
	Math	English/ Language Arts	Science	History/ Social Studies	Other credits	Total credits
Alabama	4	4	4	4	8	24
Alaska	2	4	2	3	10	21
Arizona	2	4	2	2.5	9.5	20
Arkansas	3	4	3	3	8	21
California	2	3	2	3	3	13
Colorado				0.5		Local decision
Connecticut	3	4	2	3	8	20
Delaware	3	4	3	3	9	22
District of Columbia	3	4	3	3.5	10	23.5
Florida	3	4	3	3	11	24
Georgia	4	4	3	3	8	22
Hawaii	3	4	3	4	8	22
Idaho	2	4.5	2	2.5	10	21
Illinois	2	3	1	2	8	16
Indiana	2	4	2	2	10	20
Iowa				1.5	1	
Kansas	2	4	2	3	10	21
Kentucky	3	4	3	3	9	22
Louisiana	3	4	3	3	10	23
Maine	2	4	2	2	6	16
Maryland	3	4	3	3	8	21
Massachusetts						Local decision
Michigan				0.5		Local decision
Minnesota						Local decision
Mississippi	3	4	3	3	7	20
Missouri	2	3	2	2	13	22
Montana	2	4	2	2	10	20
Nebraska						200 credit hours*
Nevada	3	4	2	2	11.5	22.5
New Hampshire	2	4	2	2.5	9.25	19.75
New Jersey	3	4	3	3	9	22
New Mexico	3	4	2	3	11	23
New York	3	4	3	4	8	22
North Carolina	4	4	3	3	6	20
North Dakota						21
Ohio	3	4	3	3	7	20
Oklahoma	3	4	3	3	10	23
Oregon	2	3	2	3	12	22
Pennsylvania						Local decision
Rhode Island	2	4	2	2	6	16
South Carolina	4	4	3	3	10	24
South Dakota	2.5	4	2.5	3	10	22
Tennessee	3	4	3	3	7	20
Texas	3	4	2	3	10	22
Utah	2	3	2	2.5	5.5	15
Vermont	3	4	3	3	7	20
Virginia	3	4	3	3	9	22
Washington	2	3	2	2.5	9.5	19
West Virginia	3	4	3	3	11	24
Wisconsin	2	4	2	3	2	13
Wyoming	3	4	3	3	0	13
U.S.	2.7	3.9	2.5	2.7	8.3	20.4**

NOTES:

* Credit hours for Nebraska are not expressed in Carnegie units.

** Subject-specific credits for states that do not have total course-credit requirements are not listed in the total credits column and are not reflected in the national average for total credit requirements.

High School Exit Exams				Characteristics of state assessments required to earn a standard diploma	
	State has exit exam	Subjects tested	Exam type	Exam based on standards for 10th grade or higher	Appeals or alternative route to diploma
Alabama	Yes	EMSH	SB	Yes	
Alaska	Yes	EM	MC	Yes	Yes
Arizona	Yes	EM	SB	Yes	Yes
Arkansas					
California	Yes	EM	SB	Yes	Yes
Colorado					
Connecticut					
Delaware					
District of Columbia					
Florida	Yes	EM	SB	Yes	Yes
Georgia	Yes	EMSH	SB	Yes	Yes
Hawaii					
Idaho	Yes	EM	SB	Yes	Yes
Illinois					
Indiana	Yes	EM	SB		Yes
Iowa					
Kansas					
Kentucky					
Louisiana	Yes	EMSH	SB	Yes	Yes
Maine					
Maryland	Class of 2009				
Massachusetts	Yes	EM	SB	Yes	Yes
Michigan					
Minnesota	Yes	EM	MC		
Mississippi	Yes	EMSH	EOC	Yes	Yes
Missouri					
Montana					
Nebraska					
Nevada	Yes	EM	SB	Yes	
New Hampshire					
New Jersey	Yes	EM	SB	Yes	Yes
New Mexico	Yes	EMSH	MC		Yes
New York	Yes	EMSH	EOC	Yes	Yes
North Carolina	Yes	EMT	SB		Yes
North Dakota					
Ohio	Yes	EMSH	SB	Yes	Yes
Oklahoma	Class of 2012				
Oregon					
Pennsylvania					
Rhode Island					
South Carolina	Yes	EM	SB	Yes	
South Dakota					
Tennessee	Yes	EMS	EOC	Yes	
Texas	Yes	EMSH	SB	Yes	
Utah					
Vermont					
Virginia	Yes	EMSH	EOC	Yes	Yes
Washington	Class of 2008				
West Virginia					
Wisconsin					
Wyoming					
U.S.	22	—	—	18	16

NOTES:

A dash (—) in U.S. row indicates that a total was not appropriate.

Exit exam subjects tested: E= English (includes writing), M= Mathematics, S= Science, H= History/Social Studies, and T= Technology

Exit exam types: EOC= End-of-Course, MC= Minimum Competency, SB= Standards-Based

High School Completion Credentials			Minimum-Age Policies		
	State has multiple standard-diploma options	Advanced recognition for exceeding standard requirements	Alternative credential for not meeting all standard requirements	Compulsory age for public school attendance	Minimum age at which students can take the GED test
Alabama	Yes	Yes	Yes	16*	18*
Alaska			Yes	16	18*
Arizona		Yes		16*	18*
Arkansas				17	18*
California		Yes	Yes	18	17 yrs. 10 mon.*
Colorado				16*	17*
Connecticut				18*	17*
Delaware		Yes	Yes	16	18*
District of Columbia			Yes	18	18*
Florida		Yes	Yes	17*	18*
Georgia	Yes	Yes	Yes	16	18*
Hawaii		Yes	Yes	18*	16
Idaho				16	16
Illinois				17*	18
Indiana		Yes		18*	18*
Iowa				16	16
Kansas				18*	18*
Kentucky		Yes	Yes	16	19*
Louisiana		Yes	Yes	18*	19*
Maine				17*	18*
Maryland		Yes	Yes	16	16
Massachusetts			Yes	16*	18*
Michigan			Yes	16	18*
Minnesota				16	19*
Mississippi			Yes	17	18*
Missouri		Yes		16*	18*
Montana				16	17*
Nebraska				18*	18*
Nevada	Yes	Yes	Yes	17*	18*
New Hampshire		Yes	Yes	16	18*
New Jersey				16	18*
New Mexico			Yes	17	18*
New York		Yes	Yes	17	19*
North Carolina		Yes	Yes	16	16
North Dakota				16*	18*
Ohio		Yes		18*	19*
Oklahoma		Yes		18*	18*
Oregon		Yes	Yes	18*	18*
Pennsylvania		Yes		17*	18*
Rhode Island			Yes	18*	18*
South Carolina			Yes	17*	19*
South Dakota		Yes		16*	19*
Tennessee			Yes	18*	18*
Texas		Yes	Yes	18	18*
Utah			Yes	18*	18*
Vermont				16*	18*
Virginia		Yes	Yes	18*	18*
Washington				18*	19*
West Virginia			Yes	16	19*
Wisconsin				18	18.5*
Wyoming		Yes	Yes	16	18*
U.S.	3	24	28	17	18

NOTE:

An asterisk (*) indicates state has an exemption or waiver allowing students to leave school or take the GED test prior to reaching the standard minimum age.

Notes and Sources

Course-taking Requirements for a Standard Diploma

Course requirements are expressed in Carnegie units unless otherwise specified. One Carnegie unit is equivalent to one year of coursework. Credits reflect the minimum course requirements mandated by the state for a standard high school diploma.

This brief reports the total number of credits required by the state to earn a standard diploma for the high school class of 2007. Credit requirements are also disaggregated for mathematics, English/language arts, science, history/social studies, and all other subject areas. The latter category includes state-mandated coursework in specific areas other than the four core academic disciplines as well as credits where subject content is locally determined.

Information for course-requirement indicators was obtained from the Education Commission of the States, "Standard High School Graduation Requirements (50-state)," 2007. Some figures were adjusted upon further review by the EPE Research Center.

State Exit Exams

State has exit exam: State requires that students pass a high school exit exam in order to graduate with a standard diploma. EPE Research Center annual state policy survey, 2006.

Subjects tested on state exit exam: EPE Research Center annual state policy survey, 2006.

State exit exam type: State exit exams are grouped into three categories based on states' descriptions of their tests – minimum competency exams, standards-based exams, and end-of-course exams. Minimum competency exams typically assess students on material below the high school level. Standards-based exams test students on state standards and are based on high school level standards. End-of-course exams assess students' knowledge of material in particular courses they have completed. The Center on Education Policy, "State High School Exit Exams, A Challenging Year," 2006.

Exam based on standards for 10th grade or higher: Exit exam is aligned to state standards at the 10th grade level or higher in at least one academic subject. This includes exams that cover standards from the 9th to 11th grades and end-of-course exams for courses that are typically taken in the 10th grade or above. EPE Research Center annual state policy survey, 2006.

State has appeals process or alternative route for students who fail exit exam: State allows students to appeal after failing an exit exam or has an alternative route students can take to earn a standard diploma. EPE Research Center annual state policy survey, 2006.

High School Completion Credentials

State has multiple standard diploma options: State has more than one standard diploma option, such as an academic or career-technical endorsement. EPE Research Center annual state policy survey, 2006.

Advanced recognition for exceeding standard requirements: State offers an advanced diploma or other form of recognition for students who exceed the requirements of a standard diploma, by completing additional coursework, achieving a high grade-point average (GPA), or other accomplishments. EPE Research Center annual state policy survey, 2006.

Alternative credential for not meeting all standard requirements: State offers a credential, such as a certificate of attendance, for students not meeting the criteria for a standard diploma. EPE Research Center annual state policy survey, 2006.

Minimum-Age Policies

Compulsory age for public school attendance: Age at which school attendance is no longer required. This brief reports the minimum age rules that apply to most students in each state. U.S. Department of Labor, "Employment Related Provisions in State Compulsory School Attendance Laws," 2007.

Minimum age at which students can take the GED test: General Educational Development Testing Service of the American Council on Education, unpublished data, June 2007.

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Editorial Projects in Education (EPE) is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization based in Bethesda, Md. Our primary mission is to help raise the level of awareness and understanding among professionals and the public of important issues in American education. We cover local, state, national, and international news and issues from preschool through the 12th grade. Editorial Projects in Education Inc. publishes *Education Week*, America's newspaper of record for precollegiate education, edweek.org, and the Agent K-12 employment resource. We also produce periodic special reports on issues ranging from technology to textbooks, as well as books of special interest to educators.

The *EPE Research Center* conducts annual policy surveys, collects data, and performs analyses that appear in the *Quality Counts*, *Technology Counts*, and *Diplomas Count* annual reports. The center also produces independent research reports and contributes original data and analysis to special coverage in *Education Week* and edweek.org.

This brief is a special supplement to

Diplomas Count 2007

Ready for What? Preparing Students for College, Careers, and Life After High School

This June 2007 report, produced with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, explores what it means to ensure that high school students graduate prepared for both higher education and the workplace. An original analysis drawing on two national databases shines a spotlight on "jobs with a future" nationally and for each state. *Diplomas Count* also examines state policies for college and work readiness and provides an updated analysis of graduation rates for the nation, states, and 50 largest school districts.

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