



State of New Jersey

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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May 25, 2005

TO: Chief School Administrator
Director of Special Education
Administrator of a State Facility
Administrator of a Charter School
Administrator of an Approved Private School
for the Disabled
Administrator of a College-Operated Program

FROM: Isaac Bryant, Assistant Commissioner
Division of Student Services

Barbara Gantwerk, Director
Office of Special Education Programs

SUBJECT: Participation of Students with Disabilities in Graduation Exercises

School districts across New Jersey, in recognition of the achievements of their students, will soon be conducting graduation ceremonies and awarding diplomas to students who have satisfied state and local requirements. Each year, with the onset of graduation ceremonies, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) receives inquiries as well as complaints, and requests for due process hearings because special education students are sometimes denied the opportunity of participating in the graduation ceremony or attending the prom with their classmates if they have not satisfied the graduation requirements and are continuing their education. The purpose of this memorandum is to provide clarification to school districts with respect to their responsibilities to students with disabilities as they pertain to participation in commencement exercises.

School districts in New Jersey have the authority to award diplomas to students meeting the graduation requirements established pursuant to *N.J.S.A. 18A:7C-1 et seq.* and *N.J.A.C. 6A:8-5.1 et seq.* However, participation in graduation ceremonies by students not meeting the graduation requirements and who are not receiving a diploma is a matter of local policy and discretion. Nothing in statute or regulation prohibits a school district from allowing a special education student who will not receive a diploma to participate in the graduation ceremony with his or her classmates.

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We are aware of districts that allow students with disabilities to participate in graduation ceremonies. Such policies enhance graduation ceremonies by including students with special needs who, by virtue of their disability, will continue their education beyond that of their classmates. This benefits the special education students and their parents by alleviating the stigma of not completing their education with their nondisabled peers, and allowing them to participate in a graduation ceremony with those students with whom the student entered and progressed through the school system. Requiring the student to participate in a graduation ceremony one or more years after their classmates have graduated, with students they may know little if at all, does not provide the same sense of achievement that participation with a student's classmates does.

In addition, allowing such participation could lessen disputes over when students will complete their educational career as decisions will not be guided, in part, by noneducational considerations such as a student's desire to participate in graduation with their classmates, rather than receiving the educational and transition services necessary to afford them a seamless conversion to the next phase of their lives. While we recognize that this is a local decision, we encourage districts to consider and adopt such inclusive policies, as they afford a benefit to all involved in the graduation ceremony and create no more than minor logistical difficulties for districts when organizing their graduation ceremonies and activities.

IB/BG/CK/JW/s:graduation.doc

c: Members, State Board of Education
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