



# LOUISIANA ASSOCIATION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION ADMINISTRATORS, INC.

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November 5, 2013

Superintendent John White  
Louisiana Department of Education  
P. O. Box 94064  
Baton Rouge, LA 70804-9064

Dear Superintendent White:

As a community of Special Education parents, advocates, and administrators dedicated to the success of all students with disabilities in the State of Louisiana, we, the undersigned, wholeheartedly support the goal of the Department of Education's plan for The Louisiana Diploma: Two Paths to Success. That goal is "to provide every graduate the opportunity to attain a productive career in Louisiana." We also support the Department's position that "Flexibility in this proposal allows regions to address the hardest to serve students" and that there will not be specific diplomas created for specific students, but different pathways to student success.

In this new vision for the success of all students, the Department is recognizing that "regional consortia of industry, higher education, and school systems are best positioned to design pathways that meet the needs of all students." In the past several years, the Department has embraced the philosophy that we must trust those closest to the student: the parents, the teachers, and the individual schools. This is particularly true for students with disabilities. Those closest to students with disabilities should be trusted to develop the most rigorous, effective plan to facilitate each child's reaching his/her potential. No one has a more intimate knowledge of the strengths, needs, dreams, and potential of a student with disabilities than that student's IEP Team, which is constituted and empowered under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. IEP Teams are unique to each student and are comprised of the student's parent(s), regular and special education teachers, other individuals as appropriate (e.g., Speech, Occupational and Physical Therapy, Nursing), a representative of the school system, and most importantly, the student. The recommendations we are submitting are grounded in the belief that the IEP team, as the group of knowledgeable individuals closest to the student, should be entrusted with the ability to design a pathway to success for each student with a disability.

We believe that all people should have an equal opportunity for employment. The dignity of work should be within the reach of all students in Louisiana. The ability to obtain a job, however,

often hinges on whether a student has a high school diploma. If the goal of The Louisiana Diploma "is to provide every *graduate* the opportunity to attain a productive career in Louisiana," then every student with a disability in Louisiana must have the opportunity to *graduate*, rather than only *exit*, high school.

No longer should parents of students with the most severe disabilities, with the most significant challenges looming before them, be told every year in an IEP meeting that their child will never be able to achieve a high school diploma. We believe that students with disabilities who achieve to their cognitive and social potentials should be valued as much as any student and recognized for their accomplishments in the form of a diploma. The goal for these teams of parents, students, teachers, and school staff must not be any less than that for students without disabilities: the ability to graduate with a diploma and attain a productive career. The push for excellence and opportunity in public education in Louisiana must extend to our students with disabilities. If our state is to be one of opportunity for all citizens, we must include our citizens with disabilities in this vision of expanded possibilities.

It is unacceptable for 71% of students with disabilities not to graduate from high school, thereby being denied access to employment, economic self-sufficiency, and the ability to escape a life supported by public funds. As the Department finalizes its vision for The Louisiana Diploma, we propose a better way forward for students with disabilities, a way that honors growth and fulfillment of potential, and gives access to the pathways to The Louisiana Diploma to all students.

While 71% of all students in Louisiana graduated with a high school diploma in 2011, 71% of Louisiana's students with disabilities did not. We must reverse that statistic, and give our students with disabilities access to a viable pathway to graduation. As we have looked to those states achieving the highest graduation rates in the country for students with disabilities (Arkansas with 75%, Texas with 77%, South Dakota with 84%, Pennsylvania with 71%, and Kansas with 73%), we have studied their strategies for success and have incorporated them in our recommendations.

We are asking that the following recommendations become part of Louisiana's pathways to The Louisiana Diploma for all students with disabilities:

1. The Individualized Education Program (IEP) team of a student receiving special education services shall determine promotion of that student to the next grade based on successful completion of the requirements of his or her IEP, including performance on any required state assessments. The IEP team shall determine if the student will be required to meet satisfactory performance on any state-required assessment for purposes of promotion to the next grade. The team shall consider the projected growth targets of the student and progress towards those targets in this decision.

2. A student receiving special education services who successfully completes the requirements of his or her IEP, including performance on a state assessment required for graduation, shall receive a high school diploma. A student's IEP Team shall determine if the student will be required to meet satisfactory performance on any state-mandated assessment for purposes of graduation.

3. The continuation of testing students on the appropriate state assessments will serve to meet the requirements of the ESEA/ESEA Waiver, reinforce the goal of rigor and high expectations for all students, and allow the state to determine growth trajectories for each student.

4. The IEP Team shall also determine if a student is required to meet satisfactory performance on course assessments given to students during the Academic Start period of high school (Grades 9 and 10) before progressing to the next coursework. This will allow students with disabilities to complete the required period of Developing Fundamental Skills, as designed by their IEP Teams, and reach the years of Postsecondary Focus (Grades 11 and 12).

5. If the sequences of workplace experiences and career courses developed by the Jump Start regional consortia do not meet the needs of a student with a disability, the IEP Team shall develop the skill sets and employability standards, including independent living and social skills, needed to meet the student's employment goal as described in his/her IEP.

6. The student's IEP may serve as that student's Individual Graduation Plan. As such, the IEP must:

- A. Identify rigorous educational goals for the student;
- B. Include diagnostic information, appropriate monitoring and intervention, and other evaluation strategies;
- C. Include an intensive instructional program;
- D. Address participation of the student's parent or guardian, including consideration of the parent's or guardian's educational expectations for the student;
- E. Provide innovative methods to promote the student's advancement, including flexible scheduling, alternative learning environments, online instruction, and other interventions that are proven to accelerate the learning process and have been scientifically validated to improve learning and cognitive ability; and,
- F. Identify a course of study that promotes college and/or workforce readiness, career placement and advancement, and transition from secondary to postsecondary education or work placement.

7. For a student whose IEP Team determines that satisfactory performance on the required state assessments is not necessary for graduation, that student must successfully complete IEP goals and requirements, as well as meet one of the following conditions, consistent with the IEP:

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- A. Full-time employment, based on the student's abilities and local employment opportunities, in addition to sufficient self-help skills to enable the student to maintain the employment without direct and ongoing educational support of the District;
- B. Demonstrated mastery of specific employability skills and self-help skills that do not require direct ongoing educational support of the District; or,
- C. Access to services that are not within the legal responsibility of public education, or employment or educational options for which the student has been prepared by the academic program (e.g., Supported Employment programs).

Thank you in advance for your consideration of our recommendations. We look forward to discussing these proposals with you and your staff.

Respectfully submitted,

Laureen Mayfield, Ed.D., President, Louisiana Association of Special Education Administrators

Kay Marcel, Chairperson, Louisiana Developmental Disabilities Council

Cindy L. Arceneaux, Project Director, Louisiana Parent Training & Information Center

Jamie S. Tindle, Executive Director, Families Helping Families of Greater Baton Rouge, Inc.

Chanel Jackson, Executive Director, Families Helping Families Region VII, Inc.

Mauricia Ledet-Walters, Executive Director, Families Helping Families of Acadiana, Inc.

Aliscia L. Banks, Executive Director, Families Helping Families of Northeast Louisiana, Inc.

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Susan Benoit, Executive Director, Families Helping Families of Southwest Louisiana, Inc.

Jim Sprinkle, Executive Director, Families Helping Families at the Crossroads of LA., Inc.

Sue Ellen Stewart, Executive Director, Northshore Families Helping Families, Inc.

Mary Jacob, Executive Director, Families Helping Families of Jefferson, Inc.

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Pamela Allen, President, National Federation of the Blind of Louisiana

Eric Guillory, President, National Organization of Professionals in Blindness Education

Laura Bostick, President, Louisiana Organization of Parents of Blind Children

Edward Bell, Director, Professional Development and Research Institute on Blindness

Janice Moss, President, Autism Society Acadiana

Enclosure

# Graduation Flowchart for Students Receiving Special Education

