



Education Law Center

*Making sure that all of Pennsylvania's children  
have access to quality public schools*

## **GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES**

**IMPORTANT:** ELC's publications are intended to give you a general idea of the law. However, each situation is different. If, after reading our publications, you have questions about how the law applies to your particular situation, contact us for a referral or contact an attorney of your choice.

### **ARE CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES ENTITLED TO GRADUATE WITH A REGULAR HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA?**

*Yes.* A child with a disability in Pennsylvania who is receiving special education services is entitled to graduate with a regular high school diploma if (1) she completes the same graduation requirements as a regular education child or (2) the child's IEP Team determines that the child has satisfied the IEP goals to the extent necessary for graduation. Pennsylvania does not award children with disabilities "certificates of attendance" as is done in some other states.

### **DO CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES HAVE TO PARTICIPATE IN A STATE STANDARDIZED ASSESSMENT TEST?**

Children with disabilities must participate in the state achievement test that most children take (called the Pennsylvania's System of School Assessment or PSSA), or must take the Pennsylvania's Alternate System of Assessment (PASA), which is designed for children with particularly severe disabilities who are taught to alternate learning standards. Although a child's IEP Team cannot exempt a child with a disability from participating in either the PSSA or the PASA, the Team must determine what, if any, accommodations or modifications in how the test is given are necessary for the child to participate effectively.

## **DO CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES HAVE TO ACHIEVE A CERTAIN SCORE IN A STATE OR LOCAL ACHIEVEMENT TEST IN ORDER TO GRADUATE?**

To graduate, Pennsylvania children are expected to score at the proficient level or better in reading, writing and mathematics in the PSSA, the PASA, or in a district-wide assessment that is aligned with the state's academic standards. However, children with disabilities who take the PSSA or the local test, but who cannot perform at the proficient level or better due to their disabilities, can still graduate and receive a regular high school diploma if they have met their IEP goals.

## **HOW LONG CAN CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES REMAIN IN SCHOOL?**

Children with disabilities have the right to stay in school until they complete the school term in which they turn 21 or until they graduate—whichever comes first. If a child accepts a high school diploma prior to age 21, the child cannot continue to receive free special education services.

## **MUST THE PARENTS OF A CHILD WITH A DISABILITY BE NOTIFIED THAT THEIR CHILD WILL GRADUATE?**

*Yes.* Graduation from high school is a "change in placement" for a special education child. Therefore, a school district must provide written notice to the parents of its intent to graduate a child. If a parent does not agree with a district's decision to graduate her child, the parent can object in writing and can ask for mediation or a special education hearing before an impartial Hearing Officer. For more information on these options, see ELC's fact sheet, *How to Resolve Special Education Disputes*, at [www.elc-pa.org](http://www.elc-pa.org).

## **MUST A SCHOOL RE-EVALUATE A SPECIAL EDUCATION CHILD BEFORE RECOMMENDING GRADUATION?**

*No.* A school does not have to re-evaluate a child before recommending graduation. However, nothing prevents parents from requesting a re-evaluation to help them decide whether the child has met her IEP goals and is ready to graduate. When a child's right to further services ends because the child has graduated or reached the maximum age, the school district must provide the child

with a summary of her academic achievement and functional performance, including recommendations on helping the child to meet postsecondary goals.

**MUST A CHILD WITH A DISABILITY BE PERMITTED TO PARTICIPATE IN A GRADUATION CEREMONY WITH HER CLASS IF THE CHILD IS NOT RECEIVING A DIPLOMA?**

*Yes.* A child with a disability who has completed four years of high school, but is not graduating and is continuing to receive special education and related services from the school district, must be permitted to participate in the graduation ceremony with her classmates. The child is entitled to a certificate of completion as part of the graduation ceremony, but must receive a regular high school diploma when formal schooling ends.

**MUST THE SCHOOL DISTRICT TAKE STEPS TO MAKE SURE THAT A CHILD WITH A DISABILITY CAN PARTICIPATE FULLY IN HER GRADUATION CEREMONY?**

*Yes.* A school district must make reasonable accommodations to enable children with disabilities, including children with physical or cognitive impairments, to participate fully and on equal terms in graduation ceremonies. Such accommodations must be provided according to a child's individual needs.

**Funding for this brochure was provided by:**

**Disability Rights Network of Pennsylvania (DRN), pursuant to the Developmentally Disabled Assistance and Bill of Rights Act, P.L. 101-496, and the P&A for Mentally Ill Individuals Act, P.L. 99-319. DRN is located at 1414 N. Cameron Street, Suite C, Harrisburg, PA 17103. Telephone: 800-692-7443 or 717-236-8110. Website: [www.drnpa.org](http://www.drnpa.org).**

**Pennsylvania Interest on Lawyers Trust Account Board (PA IOLTA)**

*Prepared by:* Education Law Center (Rev 4/09)  
(215) 238-6970 (Philadelphia)  
(412) 258-2120 (Pittsburgh)  
[www.elc-pa.org](http://www.elc-pa.org)