



Nevada Alternative Diploma Implementation Guidance



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What is the Nevada Alternative Diploma?

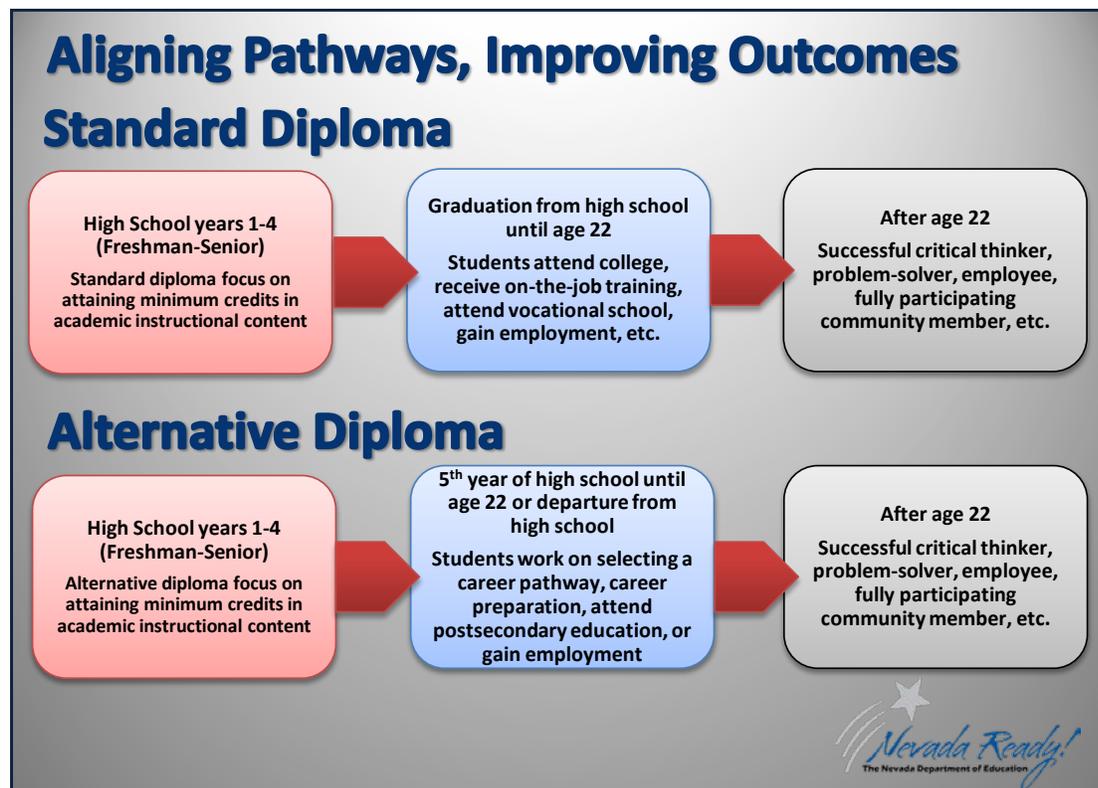
Effective July 1, 2017 the Alternative Diploma became Nevada's newest diploma option. Requirements for the Alternative Diploma passed the regulatory process on October 11, 2018. The Alternative Diploma is now available to Nevada's students with disabilities who are assessed on the Nevada Alternate Assessment. Nevada's requirements for the Alternative Diploma align to the academic coursework and the College and Career Readiness assessment (ACT) requirements for students working to achieve a standard diploma.

Why an Alternative Diploma?

As educational research has progressed for students with significant cognitive disabilities, the upper limits of what is considered academically achievable by these students have continued to rise. In fact, educational research continues to show that when provided with rigorous learning opportunities and evidence-based instructional methods and strategies, students with significant cognitive disabilities are able to learn academic concepts and procedures once thought to exceed their capacities. While the research base on the ability of students with significant cognitive disabilities to learn increasingly rigorous educational content continues to grow, the actual educational opportunity for them to do so has proven to be less robust. This lack of opportunity for students with significant cognitive disabilities to engage in rigorous educational programming leaves them unprepared for life after high school, and contributes to the high unemployment rates and low rates of meaningful community engagement in their postsecondary life.

By specifying standards-based alignment, Nevada seeks to ensure that students with significant cognitive disabilities are educated on a similar trajectory as their typically developing peers who are earning a standard diploma (Figure 1). Nevada's high school students with significant cognitive disabilities who achieve the Alternative Diploma will have progressed through a standards-based academic curriculum that will set them on a path to post-secondary success.

Figure 1.



Shifting Perspectives

In a 2015 article titled *Raising the Bar: Significant Advances and Future Needs for Promoting Learning for Students with Severe Disabilities* from the journal Remedial and Special Education, Professors Fred Spooner and Diane M. Browder reflect on what they describe as the three major advances in the “how” and “what” of learning for students with significant disabilities. They identify three areas of focus that have proven critical toward shifting perspectives regarding the capacities of students with significant disabilities. These three areas include: the application of systematic instructional techniques rooted in applied behavior analysis (ABA), teaching of functional skills, and the promotion of academic content (Spooner & Browder, 2015). Along with advances in the “how” and “what” of learning have come concomitant changes to the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) placements of students with significant disabilities. In the span of 30 years, students with significant disabilities have seen the “where” of their education gradually moved away from segregated classrooms and facilities and toward more inclusive environments among their typically developing peers. Nevada’s Alternative Diploma is a progressive step in the

direction of providing its most vulnerable students with a full range of educational opportunity that includes rigorous academic instruction.

An emerging body of research in secondary special education programming for students with significant cognitive disabilities is concerned with instruction aligned to grade level academic standards. Recent research has shown that when systematic instructional methods (those rooted in ABA) and other evidence-based strategies (e.g., use of visual adaptations) are implemented with students with significant cognitive disabilities, they are able to learn abstract educational concepts once thought to be unattainable. For instance, recent mathematics research has shown students with significant disabilities have the capacity to learn skills necessary to solve for “x” (Baker, Rivera, Morgan & Reese, 2015; Jimenez, Browder, & Courtade, 2008), to use the Pythagorean Theorem to solve problems (Creech-Galloway, Collins, Knight, & Bausch, 2013); and to solve an algebraic equation (Spriggs, Knight, & Sherrow, 2015). The recognition that students with significant disabilities can learn more advanced academic concepts is at the heart of the intent in providing the Alternative Diploma option to Nevada’s students.

Nevada must be a state that believes all of its students should receive a full educational opportunity. In addition to academic content knowledge, rigorous academic instruction provides students of all abilities with critical thinking and problem solving skills that they will need throughout their lifespan. Students with significant cognitive disabilities should not be provided with an either/or choice between academics and functional skill instruction. All students should receive a comprehensive educational experience that prepares them for a successful career and community life. The evolution of the modern world is occurring at a rapid pace. Nevada’s students will require skills that allow them to adapt to continued change in order to lead successful lives, and Nevada’s students with significant cognitive disabilities are not an exception. As educators we must ask ourselves: What quality of life are we preparing students with significant cognitive disabilities for if their instruction consists solely of life skills related content? Students with significant cognitive disabilities should leave Nevada’s educational system prepared for a lifetime of learning and knowledge acquisition. Unless our schools provide students with significant cognitive disabilities a full educational opportunity it is unlikely that they will graduate with the critical thinking and problem solving skills necessary to succeed in their communities. The Alternative Diploma will provide meaningful recognition of the academic achievement of Nevada’s students with significant cognitive disabilities as they disprove previously held biases related to their abilities to achieve academically at high levels.

How is the Alternative Diploma Different from the Standard and Adjusted Diploma?

The Alternative Diploma does not replace any of Nevada's existing diploma options, as both the Standard Diploma and the Adjusted Diploma options remain available to Nevada's students (see Table 1 for a comparison Nevada's diploma options). However, the Alternative Diploma does differ from the Standard and Adjusted Diploma in significant ways. High school students who pursue the Alternative Diploma must complete a required series of credited, standards-aligned courses. This alignment parallels the requirements of the Standard Diploma. However, whereas achievement of the Standard Diploma will terminate a student with a disability's guarantee to a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) provided through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004, achievement of the Alternative Diploma will not terminate a student's FAPE. Students with significant cognitive disabilities who achieve an Alternative Diploma will be able to remain in school until their 22nd birthday and those who choose to do so will continue to receive services under IDEA.

High school students who achieve an Alternative Diploma will also be counted in their local education agency's (LEA) and the state education agency's (SEA) adjusted cohort graduation rates as a successful graduation. In this way, the Alternative Diploma differs from the Adjusted Diploma in that students who receive an Adjusted Diploma are considered "completer non-graduates". By aligning the course requirements of the Alternative Diploma to academic content standards, the Alternative Diploma further differs from the Adjusted Diploma which requires students to meet their annual IEP goals. While the Adjusted Diploma remains as one of Nevada's three diploma options accessible to students with disabilities, this diploma option should **only** be accessed by students who cannot meet the requirements of either the Standard Diploma or the Alternative Diploma. Nevada's adoption of the Alternative Diploma as a graduation option is meant to increase access to rigorous and standards-aligned academic content for students with significant disabilities.

Table 1.

Nevada’s Diploma Options

Comparison of Nevada’s Diploma Options					
Diploma	Who is Eligible?	Terminates FAPE (Yes or No)	Included in Graduation Rate	Coursework Requirements	Testing Requirements
Standard Diploma or Higher	Students with or without a disability	Yes - terminates FAPE	Yes	Students complete required course credits	Participate in EOC, Statewide Assessments, and College and Career Ready Assessment
Alternative Diploma	<i>Students with a disability assessed on the Nevada Alternate Assessment</i>	<i>No - student is still eligible for IDEA services until their 22nd birthday</i>	Yes	<i>Students complete required course credits aligned to NVACS Connectors</i>	<i>Participate in the Nevada Alternate Assessment</i>
Adjusted Diploma	Students with a disability unable to earn a Standard or Alternative Diploma	No - student is still eligible for IDEA services until their 22 nd birthday	No	Meet IEP goals	Participate in EOC and Statewide Assessments as indicated in IEP

Who is eligible to earn Nevada’s Alternative Diploma?

In order to earn the Nevada Alternate Diploma, a student must:

1. Be a student with a disability
2. Participate in the Nevada Alternate Assessment;
3. Earn the prescribed credit minimum for the student’s graduating cohort (Table 2)

Table 2.

Credit Minimums for Graduating Cohorts 2019, 2020, and 2021

Required Course	Minimum Number of Units
Social Studies	2.0
Arts and Humanities, Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (Level III or Level IV) or Career and Technical Education	1.0
English Language Arts	4.0
Health Education	0.5
Mathematics	3.0
Physical Education	2.0
Use of Computers	0.5
Science	2.0
Electives	7.5
TOTAL	22.5

Table 3.

Credit Minimums for Graduating Cohorts 2022 and After

Required Course	Minimum Number of Units
Social Studies	2.0
Arts and Humanities, Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (Level III or Level IV) or Career and Technical Education	1.0
College and Career Ready Flex Credit (see notes below for details)	2.0
English Language Arts	4.0
Health Education	0.5
Mathematics	3.0
Physical Education	2.0
Use of Computers	0.5
Science	2.0
Electives	6.0
TOTAL	23

**Note.* College and Career Flex Credit must include:

- (a) Level II or Level III course of study in a program area prescribed pursuant to NAC 389.803;
- (b) Fourth year of mathematics
- (c) Third year of social studies; or
- (d) Third year of science.

What are the Implications for Nevada High Schools?

Nevada high schools will need to create and schedule credited courses that align with standards-based academic content for any student with a significant cognitive disability whose IEP team has determined that the student will pursue an Alternative Diploma and will participate in the Nevada Alternate Assessment. Standards-based curriculum alignment of the content provided within courses for students pursuing the Alternative Diploma is specified in the Nevada Revised Statutes (NRS). The relevant revision to the NRS reads:

Academic content for the courses required by subsection 1 or 2, as applicable, must be based on grade-level content standards that are aligned with the alternate assessment prescribed by the State Board pursuant to subparagraph (2) of paragraph (b) of subsection 4 of NRS 390.600.

The Nevada Academic Content Standard (NVACS) Connectors are in alignment with the Nevada Alternate Assessment and can be located on the Nevada Department of Education's website.

http://www.doe.nv.gov/Assessments/Naa/NVACS_Connectors/

The NVACS Connectors provide teachers with grade level connections that align to the general education standards in English Language Arts (ELA), Mathematics, and Science. These standards provide students with significant cognitive disabilities deeper and more enduring exposure to the academic content in preparation for transitional opportunities beyond their K-12 experience. Using the NVACS Connectors, it is the expectation of the Nevada Department of Education that teachers will begin to align their instruction, and that LEAs will begin to align course content, with the Nevada Alternate Assessment for students with significant cognitive disabilities.

High school course codes for credited classes whose contents meet the NVACS Connectors or that contain modified content will need to be added to each LEA's scheduling and grading systems and be differentiated to such an extent that they will be identifiable from their aligned, general education counterpart. LEAs should create local course codes for these courses that will ultimately attach to School Codes for the Exchange of Data (SCED) *(to be created by the Nevada Department of Education)*. It is important that courses are not labeled in such a way that students are identified as being in special education.

Courses in Subjects Other than Mathematics, English Language Arts, and Science

The requirements for the receipt of the Alternative Diploma stipulate the completion of standards aligned academic courses, such as American Government and Economics, which do not have associated NVACS Connectors. LEAs are advised to use the current NVACS for these subject areas and begin to determine ways in which those standards can be modified to provide content access to students with significant cognitive disabilities.

Least Restrictive Environment Decisions

Students may receive the content of credited courses aligned to the Alternative Diploma in either a general education or special education setting. As per IDEA 2004, decisions regarding a student's LRE remain at the discretion of the IEP team. However, it will likely be difficult for a special educator to deliver some of the content required for a student to receive an Alternative Diploma alone in a self-contained environment. For instance, high school students pursuing an Alternative Diploma are required to receive one full credit in the Arts and Humanities, Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (Level III or Level IV) or Career and Technical Education. It will be rare for a special educator to have the qualifications and content knowledge to teach a full credit course in one of these areas, even at a modified level. Therefore, instruction necessary to receive an Arts and Humanities, Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (Level III or Level IV) or Career and Technical Education credit will most likely need to occur in the general education setting with provided modifications and accommodations that allow the student access to the curriculum. Again, LRE decisions remain at the discretion of the IEP team; however, LRE determinations should now consider when and how the delivery of aligned, standards-based curriculum will occur, even for students with significant cognitive disabilities.

From a logistical and fiscal standpoint, including students with significant cognitive disabilities in general education courses and modifying the curriculum may be the best options for LEAs. This will be particularly true during the early implementation period when many special educators will not have the curricular resources to meet the required standards in a self-contained special education environment. For teachers who currently deliver instruction to students with significant cognitive disabilities in a separate special education classroom, and for LEAs that desire for the delivery of the standards-aligned academic content required for the Alternative Diploma to occur in environments other than general education, careful planning will be required. Teachers of high school students whose LRE is determined by the IEP team to be a separate special education classroom, and who are pursuing an Alternative Diploma, will need to plan simultaneous, multi grade-level instruction that is standards-based (see Figure 2 below for an example planning map for courses in a special education setting).

Figure 2.

Course Planning Map – Special Education Environment

Example Planning Map for Academic Course Implementation in a Special Education Classroom				
	<i>Courses Taught During a Class Period.</i>			
	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
Class 1	ELA I ELA II ELA III ELA IV	ELA I ELA II ELA III ELA IV	ELA I ELA II ELA III ELA IV	ELA I ELA II ELA III ELA IV
Class 2	Pre-Algebra Algebra I Math for Daily Life (Flex Credit)	Geometry	Pre-Algebra Algebra I Math for Daily Life (Flex Credit)	Geometry
Class 3	Physical Science	Biology	Physical Science	Biology
Class 4	American Government (1/2 Year) Economics (1/2 Year) Geography (Flex Credit)	American History	American Government (1/2 Year) Economics (1/2 Year) Geography (Flex Credit)	American History
Class 5	Health Education (1/2 Year) Use of Computers (1/2 Year)		Health Education (1/2 Year) Use of Computers (1/2 Year)	
Class 6				

**Note.* The above example assumes a six period daily schedule. Schools on block schedules or other non-traditional schedules would need to plan instruction accordingly.

As the example in Figure 2 shows, teachers who deliver coursework for the Alternative Diploma in a separate special education environment will need to plan a rotation of content to ensure standards-based alignment. They will also need to take into consideration that the Nevada Alternate Assessment is given to students during the spring semester of their 11th grade year, and therefore standards aligned content will need to be covered prior to students taking the assessment. An approach to implementation that occurs within a special education classroom will require instructional grouping and differentiation based on student ability and grade-level. While this approach to implementation is possible and available to LEAs, it will likely be much more challenging for teachers to accomplish as opposed to an implementation strategy that occurs primarily within general education classes.

Credit Issuance

Credit for completed courses for the Alternative Diploma can be issued by either a special educator who delivers standards aligned curriculum or a general educator who delivers standards aligned curriculum. If a student is receiving the academic content necessary to achieve the Alternative Diploma in a self-contained or other special education setting, then it will likely be the special educator teaching within that setting who issues the credit for completed coursework. If a student is receiving the content necessary to achieve the Alternative Diploma in a general education setting, then the credit may be issued by the general educator or by the special educator. Within an inclusive general education environment, students with significant cognitive disabilities will likely require substantial modifications and accommodations to access standards aligned curriculum. These adaptations will necessitate active team planning and collaboration between the special educator, general educator, and possibly a paraeducator. Because both the special educator and general educator will take an active and significant role in the delivery of the required curriculum in an inclusive setting, either may issue the credit for the completed coursework.

Locating Standards-Aligned Curriculum

LEAs and their teachers should begin the process of locating curriculum materials that align with the NVACS Connectors and that meet the learning needs of students with significant cognitive disabilities. These curriculum materials will likely come from a variety of sources that include those designed specifically for students with disabilities, alternative formats of general education curriculum materials (e.g., graphic novels of literary classics), and modified/adapted general education curriculum materials (e.g., general education readings adapted with picture symbols). It remains at the discretion of the LEAs to determine appropriate curriculum that will allow students with significant cognitive disabilities access to standards-aligned content. The Nevada Department of Education is currently in contact with various curriculum developers to determine where curriculum exists that aligns with the NVACS Connectors. Future professional development trainings offered by the Nevada Department of Education will focus on suggested course content and curriculum materials that LEAs can use to provide students access to standards-based content.

Implications for Nevada Intermediate and Elementary Schools

While the most immediate and profound impact in terms of educational systems changes for students with significant disabilities will occur at the high school level due to the need to establish a credited course sequence, the Alternative Diploma option has significant implications for Nevada's elementary and intermediate schools as well. Elementary and intermediate schools will need to begin educating students with significant disabilities in such a way that the Alternative Diploma is an achievable long-term goal for their students. This means that elementary and intermediate school teachers must begin to align instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities with the NVACS Connectors appropriate to the grade level that they teach. Failure to ensure students with significant cognitive disabilities acquire standards-aligned content in early grades could lead to significant academic deficits when they reach high school, and may preclude their ability to earn the Alternative Diploma.

Early literacy skill development should be viewed as a critical skill development area for students with significant cognitive disabilities, as it is for all of Nevada's other students. Implicit biases regarding the abilities of students with significant cognitive disabilities have historically prohibited this group from receiving reading and writing instruction in lieu of instruction in functional life skills. In reality, there are likely no skills more important to an individual's ability to "function" in life than his or her ability to read and write. Teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities who rely on unfounded assumptions that lead them to denying access to literacy instruction for these students are potentially inflicting irreparable damage to their future economic and general well-being (Browder, Wakeman, Spooner, Ahlgrim-Delzell, & Algozzine, 2006). Students with significant cognitive disabilities require intensive instruction in literacy to learn how to read (Browder, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Courtade-Little, & Snell, 2006). Nevada's schools therefore must make intensive literacy instruction a high priority for these students throughout their educational careers using adapted and modified materials that give these students access to grade-level content. Future professional development opportunities will focus on literacy instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities.

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