

Frequently Asked Questions on Graduation Rate Coding for Students

This document provides an overview of how exit codes in the [Student Information System](#) (SIS) affect a school district's graduation rate calculation. ISBE has created additional guidance documents for [Illinois Graduation Requirements](#) and [Mandated Units of Study](#) that may be helpful in answering questions not covered in this document.

1. How does ISBE calculate graduation rate?

ISBE calculates two graduation rates, both federally mandated. The first is called an Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate and is required for federal accountability under the 2015 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), now known as Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The second graduation rate is for Indicator 1 of the Special Education State Performance Plan (SPP). The ESSA graduation rate uses an Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate calculation as described in Question 2. The calculations for Indicator 1 are described in Question 4. In both definitions, a student must have received a *“regular high school diploma”* to count as having graduated.

2. What is the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate and how is this calculated?

The Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate is the rate of graduates compared to the total number of students in their 4-year, 5-year, and 6-year cohort. ISBE calculates the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate for schools, districts, and the state.

The graduation rate is calculated based on [ESSA High School Graduation Rate guidance](#). Students are reported at their most recent home school. The cohort is based on the number of students who enter Grade 9 for the first time, adjusted by adding into the cohort any student who transfers in later during Grade 9 or during the next three years and subtracting any student from the cohort who transfers out, emigrates to another country, transfers to a prison or juvenile facility, or dies during that same period.

See [Illinois Report Card Business Rules](#) for further information.

This methodology for calculating Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate was introduced in 2008 to “ensure a uniform method of calculating secondary school graduation rates across states, districts, and schools that increases the comparability and accuracy of this measure throughout the country.” ([U.S. Department of Education](#))

3. Where is the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate used?

Per ESSA Section 1111.(c)(4)(B)(iii)(I-II) (20 USC Section 6311), the 4-year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (and at a state's discretion, the 5- and 6-year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate) is a required indicator in the state's ESSA accountability system. It also must be reported on the state's [Annual Report Card](#) and to the U.S. Department of Education (ED) via the [EDFacts collection](#).

4. What is State Performance Plan Indicator 1 – Graduation? How is this calculated?

The State Performance Plan (SPP) is developed as a six- year plan that is composed of Compliance Indicators that include Disproportionality, Early Childhood Transition, Secondary Transition, and General Supervision, as well as Results Indicators, including Graduation, Drop Out, Assessment, and Educational Environments. Each indicator incorporates a measurable and rigorous target for each year of the SPP cycle, and these targets are used as a basis for analyzing each district’s data for students with disabilities. Indicator 1 is a Results Indicator included in the federally required SPP that measures the percentage of youth with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) graduating from high school with a *regular high school diploma*.

Each state must report in its SPP a percentage using the number of youth with IEPs (ages 14-21) who exited special education due to graduating with a *regular high school diploma* in the numerator and the number of all youth with IEPs who left high school (ages 14-21) in the denominator (for a single year). The number of youth with IEPs who left high school is the total of students who graduated with a *regular high school diploma*, received a certificate of completion, reached the maximum age, and dropped out in that single year. Data for Indicator 1 is calculated from the IEP-Student Tracking and Reporting (I-Star) System exit data. SIS data is used for demographics only.

The reporting for Indicator 1 on the Report Card and LEA Determination letters lags one year. See table below.

School Year	LEA Determination Year
2020-21	2021-22
2021-22	2022-23
2022-23	2023-24
2023-24	2024-25
2024-25	2025-26

The [Graduation and Dropout Rate Calculator](#) from the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition can help districts ensure that their graduation rate calculations for Indicator 1 are accurate.

5. Where is the SPP Indicator 1 used?

State Performance Plan data is reported to the ED Office of Special Education Programs annually and also is available on the PDF version of the [State Report Card](#) for districts.

6. What is a regular high school diploma?

In accordance with federal regulation 34 CFR 300.102:

“As used in paragraphs (a)(3)(i) through (iii) of this section, the term regular high school diploma means the standard high school diploma awarded to the preponderance of students in the State that is fully aligned with State standards, or a higher diploma, except that a regular high school diploma shall not be aligned to the alternate academic achievement standards described in section 1111(b)(1)(E) of the ESEA. A regular high school diploma does not include a recognized equivalent of a diploma, such as a general equivalency diploma, certificate of completion, certificate of attendance, or similar lesser credential.”

7. Does Illinois offer an alternate high school diploma?

No, Illinois does not offer an alternate high school diploma. The possibility of developing a “state-defined alternate diploma” for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities was included in ESSA. This diploma would be intended only for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities who participate in a state’s alternate assessment based on alternate academic achievement standards. Several criteria, including that the diploma must be standards-based, aligned to state requirements for the *regular high school diploma*, and obtained within the time for which the state ensures the availability of a free appropriate public education (FAPE), must be met to count it in a graduation measure for accountability.

ESSA allows state-defined alternate diplomas, but it restricts the state-level participation of students in alternate assessment to 1.0 percent of the number of total tested students in a content area. The alternate diploma option is intended for students who participate in the alternate state assessment, so this 1 percent threshold has implications for the number of students who would qualify for an alternate diploma option. Therefore, ISBE has not pursued an alternate high school diploma option.

8. What is a certificate of completion and how is it different from a *regular high school diploma*?

Students with disabilities who have completed four years of high school may participate in the graduation ceremony and receive a certificate of completion per Brittany’s Law. (See Question 20.) Certificates of completion also can be used as an exit code in I-Star for when a student has exited high school through fulfillment of IEP requirements but has not met requirements and will not be returning for a *regular high school diploma*. (See Question 10.)

9. How does Public Act 102-1100, which changes the name of the Illinois High School Equivalency Certificate (i.e., GED) to the “State of Illinois High School Diploma” impact whether or not a student is considered “graduated” for either the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate or SPP Indicator 1?

It does not have an impact. An announcement of the change from the Illinois Community College Board states that “requirements to achieve the diploma remain the same as the certificate. Candidates must complete their high school equivalency through GED® or HiSET® testing, or through Alternative Methods of Credentialing.” The name of the equivalency recognition contains the term “diploma,” but general equivalency recognition itself does not meet the definition of *regular high school diploma* set forth in 34 CFR 300.102 and 20 USC 7801(43).

When a student leaves high school to transfer into an equivalency degree program, the enrollment should be exited with the SIS exit code “Transfer to GED program.” This code is to be used for “a student who has transferred to a GED program prior to the completion of his or her secondary education” and is counted as a dropout as the student will not earn a *regular high school diploma*.

10. Does ISBE have a “graduation code” for students?

No. ISBE uses exit codes for enrollments in SIS. These exit codes apply to all enrollments, regardless of grade. Each year, all enrollments must be exited before new enrollments for the next academic year can be entered. The most common exit codes are promotion to the next grade, transfer to another school district in Illinois or out of state, retention in the same grade or demotion to a lower grade, and “graduated with regular, advanced, International Baccalaureate, or other type of diploma.” For additional information on exit codes, see Question

17.

A student is counted as graduated when the SIS exit code “Graduated with regular, advanced, International Baccalaureate, or other type of diploma” -- is used for exiting a student enrollment. This exit code is defined as “A student who has received a *regular high school diploma* upon completion of state and local requirements for both coursework and assessment or a high school diploma from a program other than the regular school program.” This exit code can be used only once for any student. Once used, the student is no longer eligible for education services.

A student with an IEP who exits high school has a SIS exit code and a code that is added in the I-Star system to signify if the student exited with a *regular high school diploma*, aged out, or received a certificate of completion. In both SIS and I-Star:

- A student would receive an exit code of “graduated with high school diploma” if the student received a *regular high school diploma* that meets the definition in 34 CFR 300.102.
- A student would receive an exit code of “aged out” if the student reached the maximum age for special education before fulfilling their IEP requirement. The maximum age is inclusive of age 21, but a student who reaches the age of 22 during a regular school year may finish that year.
- A student would receive an exit code of “graduated from high school with/through certificate of completion/fulfillment of IEP requirements” if the student has not met requirements for a *regular high school diploma* but has fulfilled their IEP requirements.

11. If a student with an IEP is continuing to a “transition” type program after they have completed four years of high school, how should this be coded in SIS and I-Star to ensure the coding demonstrates the student is continuing with programming?

If a student is continuing to receive special education and related services after four years of high school, the student receives an enrollment code in SIS of “retained” each year that the student continues to receive such services until such time that the student exits high school. The student’s grade level is prepopulated into I-Star from what is entered in SIS and cannot be edited in I-Star. Grade 12 is the highest grade a student can be in, regardless of years spent at Grade 12.

I-Star does not have a separate Educational Environment Code for “transition programs.” Educational Environment Codes describe the student’s placement in the least restrictive environment as identified on the IEP.

12. How does a district determine when a student has “met all requirements to graduate”?

The [Illinois Graduation Requirements](#) document provides guidance on required courses and compulsory units of study in which students must earn credit for conferral of a high school diploma. Additional graduation requirements may be adopted by a local school board per [23 Ill. Admin. Code 1.440\(f\)](#).

Grade assignments and a student's eligibility for promotion and graduation are determined locally. [Per 105 ILCS 5/10-20.9a](#), teachers administer the district's approved marking system and maintain the sole responsibility and right to determine grades and other evaluations of students within those grading policies. School boards must adopt and enforce a policy on promotion as they deem necessary to ensure that students meet local goals and objectives and can perform at the expected grade level prior to promotion. Decisions to promote or retain

students in any classes must be based on successful completion of the curriculum, attendance, performance on state-required and other assessments, or any other criteria established by the school board. School districts may not promote students to the next higher grade level based upon age or any other social reasons not related to a student's academic performance.

13. Can a student who has “met all requirements to graduate,” as outlined in 105 ILCS 5/27-22, 27-22.05, and 27-22.10, continue special education programming through a transition program?

Yes, students eligible for special education may continue to receive special education and related services so long as they do not receive a *regular high school diploma* or reach the maximum age for eligibility.

Per 23 IAC 226.50 (c):

- 1) *“An eligible student who requires continued public school educational experience to facilitate that student's integration into society shall be eligible for such services through age 21. If the eligible student reaches the age of 22 during the school year, the student is eligible for such services through the end of the school year.*
- 2) *The provision of FAPE is not required with respect to a student with a disability who has graduated with a regular high school diploma.*
- 3) *A student with a disability who has fulfilled the minimum State graduation requirements set forth in Section 27-22 of the School Code [105 ILCS 5/27-22] shall be eligible for a regular high school diploma*
 - A) *If the student's individualized education program prescribes special education, transition planning, transition services, or related services beyond that point, issuance of that diploma shall be deferred so that the student will continue to be eligible for those services.*
 - B) *If the student is to receive a regular high school diploma, at least one year prior to the anticipated date of its issuance, both the parent and the student shall receive written notification in conformance with the requirements of 34 CFR 300.503 that eligibility for public school special education services ends following the granting of a diploma and that the parent (or the student, if Section 226.690 applies) may request an IEP meeting to review the recommendation that the student receive a regular diploma.*
- 4) *Students who have participated in a graduation ceremony but have not been awarded regular high school diplomas continue to be eligible to receive FAPE through age 21. If the student reaches the age of 22 during the school year, the student is eligible for such services through the end of the school year.”*

14. If a student with an IEP graduates high school and receives a regular diploma by completing all graduation requirements, as outlined in 105 ILCS 5/27-22, 27-22.05, and 27-22.10, can they continue special education programming through a transition program?

No. Students with an IEP who have graduated high school with a regular diploma cannot continue to receive special education services in a transition program following graduation. In accordance with 34 CFR 300.102:

“The obligation to make FAPE available to all children with disabilities does not apply with respect to the following:

- (i) Children with disabilities who have graduated from high school with a regular high school diploma.”*

15. When does a student “count” as having graduated under ESSA?

For the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate, a student is counted as graduated when the SIS exit code “Graduated with regular, advanced, International Baccalaureate, or other type of diploma” is used for exiting a student enrollment. This exit code is defined as “A student who has received a *regular high school diploma* upon completion of state and local requirements for both coursework and assessment or a high school diploma from a program other than the regular school program.”

See the [ISBE Data Elements and Validations webpage](#) regarding exit enrollment data for further information.

16. How does the accountability system ensure schools with strong transition programs are not “penalized” in the system?

The accountability system is a multi-measure weighted composite index of school performance. It currently includes eight indicators, each with a different weight. The Graduation Rate Indicator counts for 50 percent of the overall index score for high schools.

Schools earn points for this indicator based on a composite of their 4-year, 5-year and 6-year graduation rates. The 4-year graduation rate is 60 percent of the composite, the 5-year graduation rate is 30 percent of the composite, and the 6-year graduation rate is 10 percent of the composite. A school’s composite graduation rate must be equal to or greater than 93 percent for it to earn the full points possible for this indicator. In other words, **up to 7 percent of a school’s total population can stay past six years** and it can still earn a perfect score on this indicator. While a school’s overall percentage of students with IEPs may exceed 7 percent, the percentage of students with IEPs who required an additional four years of transition services would be expected to track more closely to the percentage of students taking the state-approved alternate assessment.

17. What does the code of “retained” mean?

The SIS exit code “Retained in same grade or demoted to a lower grade” for exiting a student enrollment is defined as “The practice of not promoting a student to the next grade level at the end of the regular school session or of demoting a student to a lower grade. This code can be used for students with IEPs who are remaining in school to receive needed secondary transition service.”

See the [ISBE Data Elements and Validations webpage](#) for a list of all exit codes.

18. When are SIS exit code data considered final for reporting purposes for the previous academic year?

All data regarding “SIS - Exit Student Enrollment” are due July 31 every year. These data are considered final after this date and are used for various ISBE reporting, including reporting graduation rate metrics on the Illinois Report Card.

See the [ISBE Data Collections Key Dates webpage](#) for further information.

19. Can a student who was exited as “graduated” be reenrolled in any capacity?

No. If a student is exited in SIS with “graduated with a high school diploma,” then the student cannot be re-enrolled. For students with disabilities, the receipt of a *regular high school diploma* means that a student is no

longer eligible for education services paid for by federal, IDEA, or state Evidence-Based Funding dollars.

See Question 13 about deferring the conferment of a student's diploma if the student's IEP prescribes special education, transition planning, transitional services, or related services beyond when they have met state graduation requirements.

20. What is Brittany's Law and what impact does it have on the calculation of graduation rates?

Public Act 93-1079, as codified in 105 ILCS 5/14-16, is referred to as "Brittany's Law." Brittany's Law addresses a student's right to participate in a graduation ceremony with their cohort of peers. It reaffirms the difference between a *regular high school diploma* and any other type of recognition, and thus does not impact the existing Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate or SPP Indicator 1 graduation rate calculations.

Brittany's Law requires each school district that operates a high school to have a policy and procedures that allow a child with a disability who will have completed four years of high school at the end of the school year to participate in the graduation ceremony of the student's high school graduating class and receive a certificate of completion if the IEP prescribes special education, transiting planning, transition services, or related services beyond the student's four years of high school. Children with disabilities and their parents and guardians must be provided written notice about the school district's policy and procedures in a timely and meaningful way. Brittany's Law also reiterates that the awarding of a high school diploma terminates a students' eligibility for special education and related services.