



Complex Child E-Magazine

www.ComplexChild.com

Graduating High School: Schools Forcing Out Teens with Special Needs

by Susan Agrawal

Under the Individuals with Education Act (IDEA) that governs special education in the United States, children with special needs are guaranteed to receive special education and services through the age of 21 (22 in some states). But what happens when a school decides a teen is ready to graduate with his class at the more typical age of 18?

For teenagers with minor disabilities or mild learning difficulties, it is perfectly acceptable--and even expected--for them to finish high school on time and receive a regular high school diploma. But for teens with more significant disabilities and challenges, they may not be ready to graduate at age 18.

Forcing Out Students in Special Education Programs: Multiple Scenarios

Here's the first scenario: a school forces out an 18-year-old who is succeeding in a vocational program. Instead of allowing the teen to meet regular graduation requirements with an extra three years of work, the school decides that he has fulfilled his IEP requirements, completed his vocational training, and is ready to graduate. This teen will receive a certificate or what is often called an "IEP Diploma" in most states, a useless piece of paper that signals he has completed a high school program.

It won't get him into college. It won't help him get a job that requires a high school diploma. It won't even get him into the military or a technical school. It's a nice shiny piece of paper that means nothing.

It's a piece of paper that means he will not have three more years to work toward a real high school diploma for one reason and one reason only: his school does not think he is worth the money it costs to provide him with three more years of education and services. They've decided that giving him a vocational education, providing him with life skills, and giving him just enough education to live and maybe work independently is enough. So what if he only reads at a fifth grade level?

Teens are sweet-talked by their school districts with manipulative language: "Don't you want to graduate with all your classmates?" Or flattery: "You've made so much progress and done so well!"

What they are really saying is, "You cost too much to educate for three more years."

A second scenario is the teen who has mastered nothing, learned nothing, and is still advanced to the next grade, all the way until graduation. Many schools, in order to meet No Child Left Behind requirements, are allowing teens with significant challenges to squeak through, using inflated grades and modified promotion criteria. These students may be designated as meeting all high school graduation requirements, even if they cannot read or complete a simple math problem. Some are graduated and given a regular high school diploma, even though they clearly lack the knowledge and skills that such a diploma represents. These students should be provided with those three extra years of education and the opportunity to truly earn their diplomas by meeting standards appropriately.

The most heinous scenario is the teen who is profoundly disabled or challenged and still forced out the door. In some cases, schools decide that she has met her goals at 18, for the simple fact that the school does not expect her to get much further in three more years. Perhaps schools don't think that a year spent mastering counting change or learning to read a map is enough of a justification for keeping a child in school. But those of us who know how important every little bit of knowledge can be, and how important every new skill is, recognize that these small achievements may mean the difference between getting a job or spending the rest of one's life dependent on public benefits.

An Illegal Practice

Forcing teens out of school early has been the subject of several judicial cases, as well as numerous due process hearings. In *Stock v. Massachusetts Hospital School* (1984), the opinion gets right down to the source of the problem and clearly designates the practice as illegal: "The result would be all the more insidious if graduation proceedings were employed as a device to circumvent the Federal mandate by prematurely terminating special education services."

Moreover, this opinion specifically addresses the situation of a student unlikely to meet regular graduation requirements by the age of 21. Discussing a teen who was forced out of school early, it states, "It is sufficient that...[this student] would be incapable of attaining, by age twenty-two, sufficient learning and skills to merit the award of a high school diploma under existing standards. From this it follows inescapably that conferring a diploma upon the plaintiff at the age of eighteen was substantively inappropriate." This language means that any teen who cannot be expected to obtain a regular high school diploma by the age of 21 (22 in some states), should definitely be provided with continued services until age 21, regardless of whether he meets or is expected to meet IEP graduation goals, or obtains enough skills to be employable.

IDEA was written the way it was for a reason: many teens need those extra three years to master the skills and knowledge required to be successful and independent in life.

Schools need to follow the law and provide an appropriate education for all teens with special needs until they are 21.

Failing to provide the three extra years is failing to provide an appropriate education for teens with special needs.