



Waisman Center

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October 17, 2011

To: Senator Olsen
Members, Senate Committee on Education

Representative Kestell
Members, Assembly Committee on Education

From: Wisconsin's Disability Policy Partnership

Re: **Special Session Assembly and Senate Bill 18** - Vocational Diploma Options

Wisconsin's Disability Policy Partnership, which includes the Wisconsin Board for People with Developmental Disabilities, Disability Rights Wisconsin and the Waisman Center UCEDD, University of Wisconsin-Madison, looks forward to working alongside committee members to ensure that a variety of career options are available to all students, including those with disabilities, in order to equip youth with 21st century work skills that lead to gainful employment. **We see Special Session AB and SB 18 as having this good intent. However we also have concerns and recommendations for strengthening this legislation. It is our hope that key stakeholders can work together to develop a meaningful vocational diploma option in Wisconsin, which will improve Wisconsin's work force and benefit both students and employers. The Disability Policy Partnership welcomes the opportunity to work with the legislature and key stakeholders to accomplish this worthy goal.**

Importance to Students with Disabilities

Ensuring that any new diploma option properly supports and protects students with disabilities is critical to both employers and families. Students with disabilities currently are not participating in or receiving the high school experiences necessary for college and career readiness. Census data shows that 28% of people with disabilities have not earned a high school diploma, compared with 12% of the general population.¹ Likewise, 21% of people with disabilities who are working age are not in the labor force, compared with 70% of those in the general population.² Not unlike other students, leading factors contributing to a successful transition to career readiness for students with disabilities include 1) receipt of a high school diploma, and 2) reading skills.

¹ DeNavas-Walt, Carmen, Bernadette D. Proctor, and Jessica C. Smith, U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, P60-239, Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2010, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 2011.

² U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, September 2011.

Unfortunately, data shows students with disabilities often leave school with neither.³ A recent Wisconsin study found that students with disabilities do not currently access career development experiences in high school and that “additional efforts are needed to design high school experiences that meaningfully couple rigorous instruction with relevant learning experiences.”⁴

Review of the Impact of Alternative (including Vocational) Diplomas

A national review by the National Education Outcomes Center shows that alternative diploma options (such as vocational diplomas) in other states have resulted in some positive outcomes for some students including increased graduation rates, more local school flexibility, an increase in options that are viewed as motivating and engaging, and the ability to recognize students for high performance with these alternatives.⁵

Yet we also know that attempts to improve outcomes for students using alternative diplomas such as vocational options in other states have led to a series of **unintended consequences for students with disabilities** that can have significant negative outcomes.

A vocational diploma which lacks academic accountability cannot become an excuse for schools to not properly educate students with disabilities.

Wisconsin’s disability advocates share the following concerns:

- National data that shows students with disabilities who pursue alternative diplomas experience significant negative outcomes when they do not earn a standard high school diploma; employers report that they view alternative diplomas as sub-standard to regular diplomas (National Education Outcomes Center).
- Real or perceived “tracking” of students with disabilities, along with tracking of students perceived as performing at lower levels in academic content, into vocational diploma pathways, strengthening employer and general public perceptions that these diplomas are “sub-standard.”
- The possibility that schools make vocational programs a “dumping ground” for low-performing/special education students, including those with behavioral challenges.
- The possibility that a vocational option could take the pressure off schools to provide the necessary supports for a student to succeed in general education classes and aim for a standard diploma.
- Reduced access to necessary general education curriculum that would provide the advanced reading, math, and science skills necessary for an increasing number of 21st century careers.
- Lack of any accountability/data tracking system to assess which students this extended diploma is being used with, and what their outcomes are after high school. There is no

³ Halpern, A.S., Yovanoff, P., Doren, B., & Benz, M.R. (1995). Predicting participation in postsecondary education for school leavers with disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 62, 151-164.

⁴ Carter, Trainor, Cakiroglu, Swedeen, Owens; (2010). Availability of and Access to Career Development Activities for Transition-Age Youth With Disabilities.

⁵ Johnson, D. R., Thurlow, M. L., & Stout, K. E. (2007). *Revisiting graduation requirements and diploma options for youth with disabilities: A national study* (Technical Report 49). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes.

structure in place to provide evidence that vocational diplomas will accomplish their goal of getting students into career vocational fields.

- Reduced access to needed transition services for students with disabilities ages 18-21 who receive this diploma and are then pushed out of the educational system as “graduates” even when they need some level of ongoing support. (The state of Oregon was recently forced to revise their alternative diploma law to include statutory language saying that students who get this diploma are not giving up their right to school services upon receipt.)
- Many post-secondary institutions do not recognize vocational or alternative diplomas, eliminating opportunity for graduates to readily pursue post-secondary education.
- Confusion among families, students, employers and the general public on what the various diploma options require and mean.
- Lack of existing state-of-the-art vocational programs, technologies, equipment, and opportunities in existing high schools. The diploma will mean little if high schools do not have the infra-structure, curriculum, instructors, and equipment needed to provide the required experiences outlined in the diploma.

Wisconsin’s disability advocates share the following recommendations for moving forward with alternative/vocational diploma legislation:

- Assurance that the coursework and experiences required for the diploma would include the high-level academic content needed for post-secondary participation and/or 21st century job skills. This can be accomplished by maintaining Wisconsin’s minimum statewide standards currently in place for high school graduation and applying them to any vocational diploma, which should be viewed as providing additional skills rather than fewer skills than the statewide minimum standards.
- Inclusion of a tracking/accountability system that identifies outcomes of the program over time, including the number of students with disabilities accessing such a diploma.
- Assurance of access to transition services for students ages 18-21 with disabilities who complete the vocational diploma but whose IEP team determines they are still in need of transition services.
- Flexibility to access high-level academic classes while pursuing a vocational diploma, reducing the perceived/real “tracking” potential of a vocational diploma.
- Access to the full range of career guidance, planning, and counseling supports and services available to students pursuing a standard diploma.
- Availability of technology, curriculum, and equipment needed to pursue a meaningful vocational career path.
- Assurance that a vocational diploma would have the same standing as a standard diploma with the state-sponsored post-secondary system.

Conclusion

Wisconsin’s Disability Policy Partnership believes that any vocational diploma options created in Wisconsin should be value-added. They should put students in the position of becoming better prepared to obtain employment and Wisconsin employers should have faith that the

standards required by a Wisconsin vocational diploma will ensure that young adults with these diplomas will make better employees and help to improve Wisconsin's economy.

At this time, SS-AB and SB 18 do not have the necessary requirements to create such a value-added vocational diploma, so we encourage legislators to work with stakeholders to flesh this concept out and create a win-win for Wisconsin's students and employers.

We encourage the committee to consider both our concerns and recommendations and move forward with this legislation in a way that enhances future employment opportunities for youth with disabilities. Please reach out to us with any questions.

Wisconsin's Disability Policy Partnership

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(On behalf of the three partnership agencies listed below.)

Disability Rights Wisconsin (Lynn Breedlove, Executive Director)

Waisman Center UCEDD, University of Wisconsin-Madison (Daniel Bier, Associate Director)

Wisconsin Board for People with Developmental Disabilities (Beth Swedeen, Executive Director)