

The Difference Between a High School Diploma and a High School Certificate

Although laws vary by state, there are usually two ways someone can get credit for completing high school. One option is to receive a high school diploma. The other is to get a certificate.

Certificates can have different names depending on your state. Certificate of Completion and Certificate of Attendance are common ones. And some states offer more than one type of certificate.

You may also hear about alternate diplomas, which states are allowed to offer under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). But this diploma is intended for the 1 percent of children who have serious learning challenges.

It's important to know that certificates and high school diplomas are very different from each other. Each can impact your child's future in different ways. The table below compares them.

	High School Diploma	High School Certificate
What it means	A student has met all the requirements for graduation.	A student has completed high school, but didn't meet all the requirements for graduation.
What are the graduation requirements	To earn a diploma, a student typically must pass grade-level English, math, social studies, science and other classes. The number and type of class credits required vary by state. Some states also require a student to pass a high school exit exam to get a diploma.	It depends on the state and school. Unlike a diploma, the requirements are often flexible and can be tied to a student's IEP goals.
Accommodations allowed	Yes	Yes
Curriculum modifications allowed	Maybe. By changing what she learns, modifications can hurt a student's ability to earn a high school diploma.	Yes
Accepted by the military	Yes	No
Accepted by colleges	Yes	Maybe. It depends on the college.
Eligible for federal student aid for college	Yes	No
Accepted by employers	Yes	Maybe. It depends on the employer and the job qualifications.

	High School Diploma	High School Certificate
Similar high school credentials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GED certificate: This isn't the same as a high school diploma. However, a GED is usually accepted by the military, colleges and employers, in place of a high school diploma. • Vocational diploma: A diploma for a student who achieved the required technical skills for a certain job. • Honors diploma: A special high school diploma for a student who achieved a high academic level. This usually means earning a high grade-point average or passing advanced tests. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IEP or special education diploma: This kind of diploma is available for a student with an IEP (though many students with IEPs earn regular diplomas). It has the same impact on a student's future as a high school certificate. • Certificate of Attendance, Certificate of Completion or Certificate of Achievement: Different names for a certificate.

Knowing the difference between a high school diploma and a high school certificate of completion is important to your child's future. If your child has an IEP, think carefully before you agree to modifications. They may impact her ability to get a diploma.

See a chart that shows the difference between accommodations and modifications, and see common examples of each. Also, it may help to review your child's IEP goals to keep her on track for graduation. Read about IEP transition planning, too.

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