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Statewide Change Gives Students with Disabilities Diploma Options

SALT LAKE CITY—An amended state education rule scheduled to go into effect in early February will allow students with disabilities additional options when attaining a diploma and gaining employment.

The Utah State Board of Education gave final approval to administrative rule [R277-705 Secondary School Completion Diploma](#) in December after a subcommittee of educators and advocates from around the state surveyed stakeholders and recommended the changes. As amended, the rule provides a standard for awarding what will be known as a “career development credential.”

The intent of the change is to increase opportunities for students with disabilities to meaningfully participate in their educational programs, while acquiring the necessary skills to gain employment post high school. The credential is intended to be earned in conjunction with a regular high school diploma or alternate diploma and does not replace either.

Board Member Linda Hansen, who represents District 3 and resides in West Valley City, led a subcommittee that advocated for the changes to the rule.

“It’s exciting for those of us in the special needs world. We’re raising expectations for our students with disabilities, and it’s a big systems change. Students with disabilities who have employment lead happier and more productive lives. This puts them in the pathway of getting jobs,” she said.

Students with an [Individual Education Program \(IEP\)](#) or [Section 504](#) plan may be awarded a career development credential if they meet requirements of a “career focused work experience” prior to leaving school.

The career experience must be consistent with state and federal law, the student’s IEP or Section 504 plan, and prior to receiving the credential, the student must earn credit in core academic content areas. Additionally, the credential will require 120 hours of community-based work experience, completion of a transition curriculum class or coursework, and 0.5 credits in an internship. Students who may struggle to find employment, including those in rural areas, have the option of working through a vocational rehabilitation counselor.

“The Board was really forward thinking when they created the career development credential to add onto a regular or alternate high school diploma,” said Leah Voorhies, assistant superintendent of student support. “This is such a great opportunity for students with disabilities to prepare while in school to be employed after high school.”

Utah is one of a handful of states to move in this direction, and its rule is unique in that it affords students the opportunity to earn credit for coursework related to career development, experience meaningful employment during high school and then earn a formal credential to add to their diploma regardless of the type or severity of their disability. When employers see the credential, they will know that students who earned it have consciously and intentionally prepared for the workforce.

For additional information on rule implementation at a local level, contact Rich Nye or Noelle Converse. Both served on the subcommittee that recommended the changes.

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