

**REPORT TO THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION**



**RESPONSE TO HOUSE RESOLUTION 209  
OF THE 2015 REGULAR LEGISLATIVE SESSION**

**FROM THE STATE BOARD OF ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION**

Prepared by the Louisiana Department of Education in collaboration  
with the Louisiana Developmental Disabilities Council

## OVERVIEW OF THE RESOLUTION

House Resolution 209 (HR 209) urges and requests the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE), in collaboration with the Louisiana Development Disabilities Council (LDDC), to study issues related to high school graduation rates for students with disabilities and submit a written report of study findings and recommendations to the House Committee on Education by no later than January 15, 2016. The resolution requests that the study include the following:

1. Causes leading to Louisiana's low graduation rate for students with disabilities;
2. Ways to improve the graduation rate for students with disabilities; and
3. Any policy or further legislation that may be necessary to address these issues.

## METHODOLOGY

Louisiana Department of Education (LDE) staff reviewed current and historical state data relative to graduation rates for students with disabilities. Recent changes in state laws, policies, and procedures related to the graduation pathways and opportunities for students with disabilities were also reviewed. The following national reports were reviewed: America's Promise Alliance, *Building a Grad Nation*, (2015); Thurlow, M. L., Albus, D. A., & Lazarus, S. S. (2015) *Graduation policies for students with disabilities who participate in states' general assessments* (Synthesis Report 98); and different resources available on the United States Department of Education (USDOE) website. LDE staff presented initial report considerations to the Louisiana Developmental Disabilities Council (LDDC) committee on Health, Education, and Employment (HEE) at its fall meeting on October 21, 2015. The HEE committee voted to develop a sub-committee to work with the LDE to develop this report.

## BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW OF GRADUATION RATES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

HR 209 includes the following information related to the graduation rates of students with disabilities in Louisiana as of 2013:

1. Only thirty-seven percent of the special education students enrolled in Louisiana public high schools graduated with a diploma – trailing regular education students by over thirty-five percent;
2. On average across the United States, special education students had a nineteen point graduation deficit compared to regular education students; and
3. Special education students in high school are increasingly expected to perform to high academic standards and to prepare for further education or training and a productive role in the workplace.

Furthermore, the resolution reported that in 2014, "...Act No. 833 was enacted by the legislature to provide alternative pathways for grade promotion and graduation for certain special education students who do not pass standardized tests; and...according to advocates for special education students and for this legislation, this law represented a major shift in policy and a monumental departure from being among the states with the most stringent and restrictive policies for grade promotion and graduation to joining many

states in recognizing the role a student’s Individualized Education Program should have in determining student outcomes.”

Graduation data examined for this report indicates there has been a continuous improvement in the rate of graduation among students with disabilities over the last four years. Furthermore, the gap between the rate of graduation for students with disabilities and those without continues to narrow.

The 2013-2014 graduation rate for students with disabilities in Louisiana is 43 percent. At the end of the 2013-2014 school year there was increase of 14 percent in students with disabilities who graduated high school with a diploma than there were at that end of the 2010-2011 school year.

Year	Students with Disabilities	Growth
2014	43%	+6%
2013	37%	+4%
2012	33%	+4%
2011	29%	

Louisiana **exceeded its projected graduation target** set for the 2013-2014 school year by three percent. 2013-2018 graduation target rates on the State Performance Plan/Annual Performance Report are as follows:

FFY	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
≥	38%	40%	42%	44%	46%	48%
Actual	37%	43%				

Over the past four years, **there has been a ten percent decrease in the gap** between the graduation rate of Louisiana students without disabilities and students with disabilities.

Year	Grad Rate: Students without Disabilities	Grad Rate: Students with Disabilities	Difference in grad rate: students without disabilities vs students with disabilities
2014	75%	43%	32%
2013	74%	37%	37%
2012	72%	33%	39%
2011	71%	29%	42%

## CAUSES LEADING TO LOUISIANA'S LOW GRADUATION RATES FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS

The following factors have been identified as potential causes leading to low graduation rates for students with disabilities:

- Comparison with other states: States' graduation rates are often compared using each state's Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR). As defined in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, ACGR is the number of students who graduate in four years with a regular high school diploma divided by the number of students who form the adjusted cohort for the graduating class. There are significant variations from state to state in how the ACGR is determined. Federal guidelines allow "states to set their own definitions for which students get counted as students with disabilities in ACGR. Some states define students with disabilities in their ACGR count as those beginning high school with an Individualized Education Program (IEP), while others count only those exiting with an IEP or only those who had an IEP throughout their four years of high school." (America's Promise Alliance , 2015). While states have the right to establish their own accountability and graduation policies, these variations create potential misconceptions when comparing state graduation rates. Variances across states include:

  - The number of credits required for a standard high school diploma (e.g., 21 Carnegie credits required in Mississippi as opposed to 23 in Louisiana);
  - The course requirements for graduation for students with disabilities (e.g. Arkansas accepts the completion of IEP requirements as fulfillment of course requirements and other states allow for the IEP team to exempt students from the course requirements to receive a regular diploma (Thurlow, Albus, & Lazarus , 2015); and
  - The specific students that are included in the ACGR. (e.g. some states count all students with an IEP, others only count students that enter high school with an IEP (America's Promise Alliance , 2015)).
- Historical Policy Barriers: Prior to the 2014-2015 school year all students, including those with disabilities, were required to meet standard graduation requirements to receive a high school diploma. These graduation requirements include Carnegie Units and passing scores on End-of-Course assessments. The LDE considers these requirements to be crucial to retaining the academic validity of the high school diploma and maintaining accountability among local school systems for graduating students who are equipped with the knowledge and skills to function independently and achieve success beyond high school. As noted in HR 209, recent legislative and policy changes have created alternate pathways to meet these requirements for students with disabilities who meet certain eligibility criteria.
- Variances in Local Implementation: The delivery of services to students with disabilities is based on federal law – the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) – and is made possible largely through funding to state education agencies. State education agencies then adopt policies, offer guidelines, and allocate federal and state grants to local school systems to support their delivery of special education services. Each school system has different needs and priorities, and ultimately its effectiveness in serving the needs of students with disabilities impacts the state's overall graduation rate.

## WAYS TO IMPROVE LOUISIANA’S GRADUATION RATES FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS

As shown above, Louisiana has increased its graduation rate for students with disabilities each year. Continuing to implement the following strategies with fidelity will support both an increase in the graduation rate and an increase in the number of students prepared for meaningful post-secondary experiences. These strategies include:

1. State Policy
  - a. Career Diploma/Jump Start
    - i. The Jump Start career education program gives all students opportunities to pursue a meaningful career/technical education that leads to a high school diploma and an industry based certification.
  - b. Transitional 9<sup>th</sup> Grade
    - i. Transitional 9<sup>th</sup> grade provides opportunities for struggling 8<sup>th</sup> graders to move to high school campuses with their same age peers and receive additional supports before officially transitioning to the 9<sup>th</sup> grade.
  - c. Alternate Diploma Pathways
    - i. Act 833 of 2014 gives certain students with disabilities who have persistently struggled an alternative pathway to a high school diploma.
  - d. Pathway for Students Assessed on LAA 1
    - i. The pathway to a career diploma for students assessed on the LAA 1, Louisiana’s alternate assessment for students with significant cognitive disabilities, provides an opportunity for these students to earn a high school diploma through and alternate criteria.
2. Trainings
  - a. Teacher Leader and Supervisors Collaboratives
    - i. The LDE hosts regional trainings and collaborative meetings with local superintendents, special education administrators, and other local school leaders across the state on special education topics.
  - b. Louisiana Parent Training Information Center (LAPTIC)
    - i. The LDE partners with LAPTIC to host parent training sessions on special education topics.
  - c. Families Helping Families
    - i. The LDE partners with Families Helping Families to ensure staff members working with families are well informed about policies related to special education so the organization can appropriately inform and advise parents across the state.
3. Funding
  - a. In December 2015, BESE awarded four million dollars in opportunity grants to local school systems to create or enhance career preparation programs for students with disabilities.
4. Continuous Collaboration and Education
  - a. The LDE has partnered with ten high schools across the state to study successful strategies for working with struggling students. These strategies will be codified into a guidance document for statewide distribution.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

HR 209 reported that in 2014, “...Act No. 833 was enacted by the legislature to provide alternative pathways for grade promotion and graduation for certain special education students who do not pass standardized tests; and...according to advocates for special education students and for this legislation, **this law represented a major shift in policy and a monumental departure** from being among the states with the most stringent and

restrictive policies for grade promotion and graduation to joining many states in recognizing the role a student's Individualized Education Program should have in determining student outcomes.”

In light of the passage of Act 833 (2014), the U.S. Department of Education's approval of Louisiana's pathway to a diploma for students assessed on the LAA 1, and the implementation of Jump Start, the Board recommends that these efforts continue to be implemented with fidelity and offers no additional recommendations for legislative action at this time. The Board makes the following recommendations to the LDE:

1. To create a more accurate comparison of state-to-state graduation rates, the LDE should continue to request a clear definition from the U.S. Department of Education of the students included in the disabilities category of the ACGR used in all states. Possibilities may exist within the recently approved federal Elementary and Secondary Education reauthorization and should be studied further.
2. The LDE should continue to monitor and support districts with the full implementation of Jump Start and alternate pathways to high school diplomas. Student outcomes should be tracked and LDE should determine if additional policy changes and legislative recommendations are necessary.