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## Transcript of NCSET Conference Call Presentation

# High School Diplomas for Youth with Disabilities: Options and Alternate Routes

presented by:

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**Ms. Mack:** Thank you very much. Good afternoon and welcome to High School Diplomas for Youth with Disabilities: Options and Alternate Routes. I am Mary Mack and I am an Associate Director for the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition at the University of Minnesota and today we are pleased to have Dr. Martha Thurlow and Jane Krentz as our presenters.

Dr. Thurlow is the Director of the National Center on Educational Outcomes at the University of Minnesota and in this position she addresses the implications of contemporary U.S. policy and practice for students with disabilities, including national and statewide assessment policies, standard setting efforts, and graduation requirements. Dr. Thurlow has conducted research involving special education for the past 30 years in a number of areas including assessment, decision making, learning disabilities, early childhood education, dropout prevention, effective classroom instruction, and integration of students with disabilities into the classroom.

Jane Krentz is a Research Fellow with the National Center on Educational Outcomes. Most recently Jane's work has focused on the implementation of *No Child Left Behind*, the inclusion of children with disabilities in large-scale assessment and accountability systems, and the principles of Universal Design. Ms. Krentz was a Minnesota State Senator from 1993-2002. She served on the K-12 Education Budget Division for ten years, was Vice-Chair of the K-12 Education Committee for 4 years, and was Vice-Chair of the Education Finance Committee for 2 years. Jane has also been very active in education policy at the national level. She chaired the Education, Labor and Workforce Development Committee for the National Conference of State Legislatures in 2001-2002 and has done presentations for numerous policy organizations, including the Council of Chief State School Officers, the Council of State Governments,

the Center for Policy Alternatives, Women in Government, and the Education Commission for the States.

Today's call will have the following format: 45 minutes of presentation followed by a question and answer period. We ask that you hold your questions until after the presentation is completed. In order to make sure everyone can hear the presenters, we ask that you press the mute on your speakerphone when listening to the presenter. Now I will turn it over to Dr. Thurlow and Ms. Krentz and they will start the presentation.

**Dr. Thurlow:** I'm happy to be here to talk about the seemingly simple topic of diploma options, graduation tests, and alternative routes to standard diplomas. Within the 45 minutes that we are going to do this, we will cover materials that are on a PowerPoint. If we can, we will go a little more quickly than the allotted 45 minutes so that we have plenty of time for questions. There is a Web site that has the PowerPoint that accompanies our presentation; that Web site is...

**Ms. Mack:** [www.ncset.org](http://www.ncset.org) – and then go to Teleconferences and there will be a link to go directly into the PowerPoint presentation.

**Dr. Thurlow:** Okay. And with that we will jump right in to the topics. As I said, it sounds like it should be a simple topic, but it's a very complex topic – the topic of diploma options, graduation tests and whether there are any alternative routes to standard diplomas. We have been studying these topics for several years now and it hasn't gotten any more simple – it has become more complex, if anything.

I want to clarify that when we use the term "alternative route," we are not necessarily talking about Alternate Assessments. Alternate Assessments and Alternate Achievement Standards are topics that have been on lots of peoples' minds recently so there is a lot of confusion in terminology. But that's not the topic that we are

talking about right now. Maybe this will come up again in questions. But for now, we are really talking about graduation exams, graduation options, diploma options, and alternative routes to the standard diploma.

Okay, with that I am on **Slide 3** now. I just wanted to make the point once again that this is such a highly changing area that even as we do studies in this area about what is going on, the information is changing. So I am going to present some information and I think it's important to keep looking at snapshots of what's going on because it gives us an idea of what is occurring. But you have to realize that even as I present this information, it's probably changed somewhat. States are continually re-evaluating and adjusting their policies, their practices and their start dates related to these topics that we are talking about.

The information that we will be presenting today, which we hope to use as a springboard for discussion, is based on two studies. When we talk about the diploma options and the exit exams, this information is based on the study conducted in the year 2002 and there is a report that is very detailed that is on the Web site of the National Center on Educational Outcomes. It's Technical Report 36 and we will refer to that again. The alternative routes information that Jane Krentz will talk about is based on a study that we are wrapping up right now. So those are 2003-2004 data.

Okay. **Slide 4**. There is a hierarchy of diplomas out there. The standard diploma has come up in *No Child Left Behind* as the kind of diploma that is viewed as the diploma that will count. There are diplomas above the standard diploma and that's fine. But we have also heard about special diplomas and, as shown in the slide, while the standard diploma and honors diploma are viewed as okay, we are not so sure about how to view special diplomas. *No Child Left Behind* is saying that they are not being counted within the graduation rate, and so there are questions about what actually falls within that standard diploma category. We will talk about the various names that have been attached to some of the diplomas out there. Does what some states have called an occupational diploma count as the standard diploma? There may be people on the line now that have raised this question with other departments – not the Department of Education necessarily – where they have received the answer that yes, the occupational diploma should count as a standard diploma. But if it counts for one department, such as the Department of Labor, does it still count as a standard diploma for the Department of Education? Thus, there are lots of questions that we have related to diploma options.

**Slide 5** shows a map of the U.S. The blacked out

states are states that do not have exit exams – or did not in 2002 when we did the survey. A couple of the states are white because they did not respond to our survey. We do know that they have exit exams but they didn't respond so we just left them white. And this attempt was to give a picture of whether states have a standard diploma only or whether they have several diploma options, and if they do, whether those options might include a special education diploma option. If you don't have the PowerPoint in front of you, what people are seeing is that there are 13 states that have the standard diploma only. These states do not have other options available. Now what we haven't talked about, and I hope that this will be part of the discussion, is whether this is a good thing or a bad thing. I mean, there are pros and cons to only having the standard diploma. Eight of those states that have only the standard diploma have exit exams or did at the time when we conducted the survey.

There are some states that have several diploma options, but it doesn't mean that they have diploma options that involve something that's only for students with disabilities. This is a conclusion you might jump to, too. For example, Delaware is a state that has had – this is debated again now – three options: basic, standard, and distinguished. Those are options available to all students, nothing designated specifically for students with disabilities. It's all very complex and underneath this, each state has debated whether we want to have one option, and if we have more than one option, what are our beliefs and values that underlie why we would have more than one option. So **Slide 6** shows some of those names that have been used: graduation certificates, high school certificates, pre-GED's skills option certificate, modified diploma – there are lots of names out there. Some of them are not very revealing about what the diploma option actually entails. In some states, they are revealing, such as the special education diploma.

**Slide 7** gives an indication about what was going on in terms of exit tests in the year 2002. At that time we had 26 states plus the District of Columbia that had exit exams that were either active or soon to be active. These exams have been in place and effective anywhere from 1983 to coming on board in 2008. How students with disabilities factor into the exit exam requirement and the nature of the diploma options is extremely variable and I think part of what we hope to have for discussion about it – what part of that variability plays into the options open for students with disabilities. We do know that the exit exam continues to change in terms of when they actually are active.

On **Slide 8** you see another kind of variability of fac-

tors, and that is whether the state has a requirement that students pass the test or whether there is a requirement that the district impose some kind of test. There are two states that have had that requirement – Wisconsin and Pennsylvania have required that the districts impose a test that students pass in order to get a standard diploma.

Are they active now? Are they soon to be active? Look at *Slide 9*, which gives a list of states where they are already doing this, have been doing it, or are just starting doing it. In the slide, we listed states that have their test active in 2003 or 2004 or they are going to be active in the future. We have put notes on the slide indicating the date something changed or will be changing. Also, standards have changed and this is part of the variability in terms of activity around testing and standards that underlies the graduation exams and the options that are out there for kids.

And moving on, one of the challenging things about these tests is not only that they are variable and they have different criteria in terms of how they include kids with disabilities, but there is a huge fear out there about the graduation exams and how terrible they are for kids. And not just those with disabilities but all kids. So because more and more data are reported publicly, I pulled some data from one state that has done a good job of publicly reporting its data. Massachusetts's data are presented in *Slide 11*. Massachusetts publicly reported the data in terms of the various ethnic groups, showing data in terms of the first time its students passed the test, and on retesting, each time you see the increases in percentages of students passing the test. On *Slide 12*, you see that Massachusetts has also disaggregated the data by subgroups of students with disabilities and students with Limited English Proficiency in comparison to their general education students. These data again show a significant increase in the percentage of students who pass the test after the retesting opportunity.

I highlighted Massachusetts because it is one of a number of states that have an alternative route available to students who are unable to demonstrate what they know and are able to do on the regular state test. *Slide 13* opens up our presentation to that discussion of alternative routes to standard diplomas. At the National Center on Educational Outcomes we have talked about the importance of having – for students with disabilities and perhaps all students – a way that students have access to other ways to demonstrate they have mastered the knowledge and skills that are assessed by exit exams. We've also talked about the importance of having better designed tests – universally designed tests – and the importance of making sure that you have policies that

are carried down to the implementation phase. But in addition to those, it is important to think through approaches for alternative routes to the standard diploma. It is something that we think is really important to do and so I am going to turn the presentation over to Jane Krentz to talk about the information that we have been collecting on alternative routes to the standard diploma.

**Ms. Krentz:** Thank you, Martha. I want to first of all give a caveat that the next portion of our teleconference is based on a study that we are working on currently so these data are preliminary. We have received feedback in terms of confirmation and verification from several of the states, but not all of them yet. So I would just caution that the data are still considered preliminary.

We started with the 2003 Survey of Special Education Directors that NCEO did entitled *Marching On* and we looked at those data to see which states had some form of high-stakes tests and then we asked what happens if students don't pass the high-stakes test? We wanted to know if there are alternative routes to a standard diploma available for all students, or specifically are there alternative routes available just for students with disabilities? You can look at *Slide 15* with the map that shows preliminary information on which states currently have an alternative route and which states are in the process of planning an alternative route. Seven states responded to us that they do not have another option other than simply passing the exit exam. They may have numerous opportunities for retaking the exams, they may have extra tutoring or extra assistance, but the only way that the students can graduate is if they pass the exit exams. The states that responded that they didn't have an alternative method were Alabama, Louisiana, Maryland, Nevada, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Washington. Some states are planning to have high-stakes tests soon but haven't implemented them yet and haven't specifically posted information on their Web site as to whether they will have an alternative route or not. So we know some states that are going to have high stakes tests – but we don't know whether they will have an alternative process or not.

*Slide 16* shows what we found. First, it is important for you to know that we looked at the NCEO information and then we checked the state's Web site for further details. We printed up a little summary of what we found there and included that information and a table and then we sent these out to the various states for verification. We wanted to be sure that information was publicly available on the states' Web sites. Some states' information was very easy to find – we just went to the Web site and it was very evident, and it was available to anybody who is interested. Other states required quite a bit of sleuthing.

It was frustrating, because in some instances we would check back the following week and there would be nothing – the link that we had printed up was no longer available. So, as Martha made reference to before, this is a very changing field. For example, when the legislature is in session, in many states, things can change daily.

Now, getting back to slide 16, four states indicated that they have a process in place or one coming on line that would involve all students. Those were Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Jersey and we included Oregon – which has a little star next to it, because while Oregon does not exactly have a high-stakes test, it does have a certificate of initial mastery, which has a similar process in terms of the integrity and the value it holds. Since they do have an alternative route, we wanted to include them in the report as well.

Three states have a process only for students with disabilities: California, New Mexico, and North Carolina. California's test is not in place yet but is in the planning stages, and California has indicated online that the process will be only available for special education students. We found nine states that seem to have Web site information that indicated that they have more than one process: one process specifically for students with disabilities and another general alternative route to a standard diploma that would be available for all students. Those states, for those of you who don't have access to the PowerPoint presentation, are Alaska, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, and Virginia.

As we looked at the various processes that states had, we asked the question – How do students who fail the test become involved in this alternative process? Who can make the request to use an alternative route? What we found is shown in *Slide 17*. There was quite a wide variation in who can make the request for an alternate route. In four states the students can make that request themselves: those were Alaska, Georgia, Mississippi, and Oregon. A parent or guardian can make the request in seven states – Alaska, California, Georgia, Massachusetts, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Oregon. The student's teacher can make the request in 3 states – Indiana, Massachusetts, and North Carolina. School personnel in general are the sources of requests in New Jersey, and district personnel make the request in Mississippi. The IEP committee makes the request in Alaska and Virginia. Massachusetts, where anyone may make the request for an appeal, only the superintendent of schools or that person's designee may actually file the appeal. For six states we searched the Web site and there really wasn't any clear information to indicate how the process was initiated or by whom: Florida, Minnesota, New Mexico,

New York, Ohio, and Texas.

Moving on to *Slide 18*, which focuses on what happens once these requests are made and the alternative routes are proceeding. We asked the question, "Who actually makes the decision? Who approves the request for an alternative route?" You can see on slide 18 there is quite a variety – several states rely on State Board or State Superintendent input, and others utilize the local IEP team, or experts from another school. There were three that were unclear. Several states had very specific processes in place and they are very clearly delineated on their Web sites and other states' information just indicates there's an appeals process or a waiver process without spelling out exactly who is involved and how the process works.

Another question, moving on to *Slide 19*, that's very difficult to get our hands around is the rigor of the alternative route. It is difficult to tell if the alternative process requires the same level of rigor as the general process. We are beginning to get some indication that the routes for students with disabilities are frequently less rigorous than the alternative routes for general education students. Preliminary analyses on this topic are being attempted, but it is difficult to determine rigor based on the information provided on most state Web sites.

On *Slide 20* there is a chart that summarizes alternative options for general education students. You can see Florida, Indiana, New Jersey, New York, and Texas have an alternative test on which students can demonstrate competency. *Slide 21* tells a little bit more about this. Florida is notated because the alternative test was only allowed by legislation for the year 2003. At the legislature this year, policymakers were debating whether or not Florida would again allow an alternative test. We currently don't know if that's been resolved or not, but as of when we conducted our online searches, this issue was still undetermined.

Two states have a portfolio assessment: Massachusetts and Ohio. Massachusetts also has an option for a comparison with the student's cohort. There is a waiver from the exam in Alaska and Georgia. Minnesota reported that the district can establish an alternative route, although it was not spelled out on the Web site, but this information was verified by the state. Mississippi had a process that allowed a substitute evaluation with supporting evidence. And then there is a little asterisk missing on the slide that should have indicated that Oregon uses juried assessment as their alternative method of acquiring a Certificate of Initial Mastery.

*Slide 22* shows the approaches specifically for students with disabilities. You can see that most of those fall in the waiver category. Two states, Minnesota and New

Jersey, have a different test to demonstrate competency. These are described further in *Slide 23*. Again Minnesota has a little asterisk because it's actually the same test as the general assessment, but the state allows it to be modified or the score lowered for students with disabilities. So it is using the same assessment tool but with different criteria. New Mexico and North Carolina have a different curriculum or occupational course of study. New Mexico has the Standard Pathway, Career Readiness Pathway, and the Ability Pathway.

Seven states have a waiver from the exam – Alaska, California, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Ohio, and Texas. There is an asterisk by Georgia because their waiver provision for students with disabilities is specifically for students with disabilities that have no means of written communication due to severe physical disabilities. So there were very specific criteria for Georgia's waiver.

*The final slide* on the PowerPoint presentation is information on how to reach us at the National Center on Educational Outcomes. There's our general phone number, our fax, and our Web site where you will find all this information as well as Martha's and my e-mail addresses.

**Ms. Mack:** So now we'll open it up to questions and discussion. If you would please state your name, and the state from which you are calling, before asking the question that would be helpful. So, with that, we will take the first question.

**Mr. Schoeck:** I will jump in. This is Tom Schoeck, New York State. This question is mainly for Martha, I think. We have been now for about six years working on our alternate assessment for students with severe disabilities – and so have many other states. As a matter of fact, the CCSSO collaborative on that topic went through several years focusing only on that topic. How come so few states are showing that they are using it? I thought we had a federal requirement to have such an assessment available.

**Dr. Thurlow:** Within the materials we were presenting today we were not looking at the alternate assessment for significant cognitive disabilities. So that's not what you saw in the slides that we have today.

**Mr. Schoeck:** So we're looking at different tiers of diplomas in your PowerPoint presentation?

**Dr. Thurlow:** Right. None of the maps that you saw shows alternate assessments for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Many states have not decided to connect a diploma through their alternate assessment for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Some states that have a standard diploma have that for all students. It doesn't matter what the severity of the disability is. So, that's one of the complexities that we have in the

standard diploma. In any of the maps that were in the PowerPoint, those were only about graduation exams or alternative routes to a standard diploma.

If you go into the NCEO website, you will find information on alternate assessments for students with significant cognitive disabilities, and when you look at that, most states now have those – I think all but three states and the three states that didn't have them were revising them.

**Mr. Schoeck:** Okay, thank you.

**Ms. Whetstone:** Mabrey Whetstone, Alabama.

Looking at the list that all the states received about the places of special education with the diploma – in the states that are at the top of this, for OSEP's purposes, in looking at diplomas. Is there a possibility of doing different tiers for the same diploma?

**Dr. Thurlow:** Give me a little more context.

**Ms. Whetstone:** Okay. Is the concept that OSEP is concerned with, is that all students receive the same document instrument, the same document, or is it just the content must be the same in all the routes coming to that document?

**Dr. Thurlow:** This is Martha and I probably cannot answer that question. It is probably a question that you need to ask of OSEP. I probably cannot answer questions that are about the requirements of any part of the Department of Education.

**Ms. Ryder:** Martha?

**Dr. Thurlow:** Yes.

**Ms. Ryder:** This is Ruth.

**Dr. Thurlow:** Oh, hi Ruth – good.

**Ms. Ryder:** I don't know if you want me to respond or not.

**Dr. Thurlow:** Yes, yes please.

**Ms. Ryder:** I would be happy to try. Now this is Ruth Ryder from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Monitoring and State Improvement Planning Division, which assists with special education program monitoring. The information that Mabrey is referencing is the rank order work that we have been doing around our focused monitoring; this comes out of our division. And Mabrey, we actually attempted to do exactly what you are talking about for this year. We called it cohorting – we tried to cohort states by the type of requirements for graduation that they had, whether it was high stakes, whether kids had additional opportunities to take the exam if it was high stakes, whether there was a different exam. What ended up happening was we had so many breakdowns in the data – Martha worked with us on this to think about relevant breakdowns – that it almost became

meaningless. It was very difficult to figure out a way to do the cohorting – you know, in a responsible way. So I think, we will continue to look at it, because it is – it does make sense to do this, but it turned out to be more difficult than we thought it was going to be.

**Ms. Whetstone:** Thank you. I appreciate that. What I am really trying to get at is, of course, I am always concerned about where we are in listings and I am trying to figure out an appropriate way of ensuring that we have more students with a diploma. We have different diplomas, but as I understand and I see from some of the other states they have different diplomas too. But they are counting them all towards a diploma and we do not do that. And that's why I am trying to figure out how to make this work.

**Ms. Ryder:** Okay. I believe that the direction for the data tables that are going to be coming out for the 12/1/2004 correction are going to make it clearer what we are looking for in that regular diploma.

**Ms. Whetstone:** Thank you.

**Dr. Thurlow:** That is useful for us to know as well because in our study as we look at that, that kind of accomplishes what we are trying to get at in that rigor question in terms of the alternative routes – whether they have the same rigor.

**Ms. Balduf:** Hi, this is Lisa Balduf from Iowa. I was wondering if students are – I thought I heard a category about vocational – do people get graded on a work experience level? Or can they get a diploma through successful work experience?

**Dr. Thurlow:** What I know about, and Mabrey maybe you can speak up, because I know of two states that have a diploma that is related to something called “occupational.” One is Alabama. It has an occupational diploma. But I can't remember exactly the criteria for earning the occupational diploma.

**Mrs. Whetstone:** Our occupational diploma we do not count as though they are diplomas for general education and so that is not counted in our numbers. Generally the diploma that we count is the Alabama High School Diploma. But there are ways to acquire the occupational diploma and it's through career and technical education approved programs, co-opting others requirements or part of that. But we have not used that in our category for diploma. However, that is something that we are beginning to look at.

**Dr. Thurlow:** I believe North Carolina also has something similar to that and uses that as an alternative route to their standard diploma.

**Ms. Krentz:** It's called the occupational courses study including 22 subject credits, school-based voca-

tional training, work-based vocational training, competitive employment training, and a career portfolio started in 2001. No extra exam is required for students who are following the occupational courses study. Yes.

**Ms. Balduf:** Thank you. I also wondered if people who had alternate diplomas – are they also using alternate grading?

**Dr. Thurlow:** That is a very complex question. That's a whole other issue, whether there is some kind of alternative grading system in place. I think that right now we are looking at this in terms of whether there is an alternate diploma or not. This is a very important topic, but too complex to discuss here today and not really the focus of our study.

**Ms. Balduf:** Another day?

**Dr. Thurlow:** Yeah, I think so. I think that's a whole other issue. The grading issue and whether students end up in courses where they have alternative kinds of grading systems.

**Ms. Busenbark:** This is Lynn Busenbark, Arizona. This question is for Ruth. Are you prepared to give us what your thinking is with regard to what constitutes the standard diploma?

**Ms. Ryder:** Actually that work is coming out of research to practice, and I don't have the forms in front of me right now. They're still going through OMB clearance.

**Ms. Gronewold:** This is Sue Gronewold, New Mexico. We had some wrong information on New Mexico and maybe when you went to our Web site, that's when we were revising our TA document for the pathways to the diploma. So it's on our Web site now. If you have difficulty with that let me know and I'll send it to you.

**Dr. Thurlow:** All right we will do that. That would be wonderful. This is just in time.

**Ms. Gronewold:** One of the things we're trying to look at here is, you know we have three pathways to the standard diploma, the same diploma for all students. And the issue is the transcript more so than the diploma, and what that transcript's going to look like as far as showing the student's competencies in the career readiness area. And so that's something I think folks need to start thinking about as well. It's not just the diploma, but how we can better document a student's competencies that they acquire.

**Dr. Thurlow:** Right. So you have something to refer to. “Standard diploma” now means lots of things, but the transcript may reflect the actual knowledge and skills of various groups.

**Ms. Krentz:** I have a clarification question. Are New Mexico's pathways just for students with disabilities? Is it available for any student or is it specifically for stu-

dents with disabilities?

**Ms. Gronewold:** Currently it's for with students with disabilities, but our state is looking at career pathways for all students, which is confusing in a sense because they named it the same thing. Ours is Pathways to the Diploma and there is Career Pathways, and how that's going to look – it's going to depend on what we do as a state since the leadership summit on the graduation high school reform issues. I thought maybe we would cover more of that because I think that's something that's going to help, but I know that we want to make sure that our students do have the high expectations – there are educators in this state who have high expectations for all students.

**Dr. Thurlow:** Good, this is very important because we had not gotten the verification from your state, so we will pursue that.

**Ms. Benderski:** I would like to ask a question. I'm in Alaska. Is anyone familiar with any states that are using an approach of issuing a diploma that may be tied to sort of a series of high stakes examinations, but that the diploma may indicate an endorsement in the area of proficiency. So, for instance, an endorsement in reading and writing, but not an endorsement in mathematics or an endorsement in employability.

**Ms. Gregorian:** I've heard that – I think New York has something like that.

**Ms. Benderski:** My name is Judith Benderski, I'm with the Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education. So in other words, there is one diploma whether a student passes the exit exam or the qualifying exam or not, but that it's maybe indicative of what areas the student passed and didn't pass.

**Dr. Thurlow:** Yes, I've heard that, but I don't know whether any state has actually enacted it yet. If any state is on the line that's doing this speak up please.

**Female Speaker:** I don't think so.

**Dr. Thurlow:** I know that there is some state talking about it. If we find anything we'll get back to you, if we can.

**Ms. Benderski:** Okay.

**Ms. Lewis:** Hi, this is Beth Lewis from Wisconsin and I have two questions. The first question is, what are you using to determine rigor, is that based on data or opinion or research?

**Dr. Thurlow:** Right now we're trying to figure out what we're going to use as our rubric or criteria for rigor. We have not determined that yet. But we're working on that right now. If you have suggestions, we will take them into consideration.

**Ms. Lewis:** My only concern in asking that question is that all too frequently we have people who offer opin-

ions that it may not be as rigorous if it is in an alternative program, or in special ed, when it may be exactly the same thing.

**Dr. Thurlow:** Right, right. Well, we would love any suggestions because we were concerned about similar issues. When we were preparing for the presentation, we had started to actually identify states that we thought were exactly the same rigor and others that were not, and then we pulled back because we have to define our criteria for different levels of rigor more specifically and we've got to get that rubric out there so that we've got agreements that different people look at them. So we're working on that right now, but we'd love suggestions that you have to get at rigor.

**Ms. Lewis:** Okay, good. Thank you. My second question is, in Wisconsin we are very much a local control state, where the statutory language says that what you must have to graduate is determined by each local school district, of which there are 426. Each district can decide what types of diplomas they're going to issue. What impact does that have on your study?

**Dr. Thurlow:** Uh-huh, it just adds to the wonderful variability and complexity of it.

**Ms. Lewis:** And also, Ruth, I'm a little concerned. We just finished issuing reporting data to our school districts based on your definitions of regular and alternative diplomas and now I understand you're going to make some more changes?

**Ms. Ryder:** I'm not sure what definitions you're talking about. You're talking about ones that came out of the department?

**Ms. Lewis:** Correct. In terms of what constituted a regular diploma, what constituted an alternative diploma, and what constituted a completer in terms of graduation data.

**Ms. Ryder:** Okay – these are changes that will be for the Section 618 data collection. And as I said, the forms right now are going through department clearance. So –

**Ms. Lewis:** Okay, I'll alert our people.

**Sandy:** Hi, this is Sandy from Montana. When you were talking about rigor and you wanted to have some suggestions for that, my question or concern is that you're trying to establish a standard, is that correct?

**Dr. Thurlow:** We're trying to decide if the alternative pathway requires the same effort, the same level of competency by all students, or if it's just a waiver and they don't have to demonstrate proficiency, and they still get the diploma. And some cases it's pretty clear that they have a very specific but alternative method to achieve the same high standard; in other instances it's clear that they don't and there's a whole bunch in the

middle, but we really can't tell. It may be stated that it's a similar – but we really can't tell this from looking on the Web. So that's actually why we didn't go forward with it.

**Sandy:** Yeah, because that's my concern if – you know, the students that are in special ed, that's why they have their individual plans and they do it in different ways because that's the way they need to do it and they can't just be all to the same rigor.

**Dr. Thurlow:** Right. And this is not the alternative assessment now, with the 1%. We're not talking about that, which makes it very confusing when we say alternate/alternative, whatever we decide to call it. This is not just the very seriously, severely disabled. We're talking about any student or other students with disabilities who aren't in the 1%, but have a different pathway to accomplish the graduation requirement.

We think it's really an important and critical question to somehow get at it, but we also recognize the real importance of being very careful in how we define that rigor, because we believe very much in the importance of having those alternative pathways. But we also want to not be communicating that sense that the students with disabilities can't do it, and so they need a lower standard because then we're back in the same route and problem where we have been before that we have low expectations that they really can't do it and we know that they can do it, so that's part of what we are struggling with.

**Sandy:** This is still Sandy. I am wondering if you know the way of getting to that. I agree they can't do it, but a lot of times the reason that they are in special education, they are receiving special services is because they do it a different way and so I don't want them to have an alternative diploma saying you don't have the real diploma, you have a different diploma.

**Dr. Thurlow:** Right, we agree, and want to recognize that they get a standard diploma and that they are able to get that by doing things in a different way. We think there are some really good models out there, where they may stand before a panel that includes, for example, a principal or a higher education person, and the state department person, and students are not responding on a paper-and-pencil test, but they are demonstrating that they have met the standard – that's the rigor that we are looking for. Massachusetts is an example, I think, where the students must meet high expectations. Oregon is a good example. There are some other states we could cite that allow students with disabilities to essentially be excused from taking the test. So those are some of the extremes. We now have to focus on the ones in the middle where we need the criteria to help us sort through. Does this represent the same rigor or not?

**Ms. Krentz:** And this does not only have to do with special education students. Some states just have an alternative test and allow students to take the SAT, ACT, AP, or IB tests, and we would assume that they would be similar rigor.

**Sandy:** Okay, thank you.

**Dr. Jones:** This is Bonnie Jones at the Office of Special Ed Programs in Washington, DC. I will just take this break and the question to thank the exiting community for planning today's teleconference in collaboration with the National Center on Educational Outcomes and the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition and I wanted to announce the next teleconference that the exiting community is sponsoring. That is on May 25th at the same time, whichever time zone you are in, and Nancy Reder of the National Association of State Directors of Special Education will be discussing from that organization's perspective, the IDEA re-authorization.

**Ms. Balduf:** This is Lisa Balduf from Iowa. I was wondering about students who have more severe cognitive disabilities and their diplomas and if they are – you know, talking to employers they say they just want to know if the potential worker can complete their goals so couldn't they be graded and receive diplomas based upon our IEP goals? I don't think a certificate of attendance really gets it.

**Dr. Thurlow:** Yes, it would be good to have exit documents that communicated a list of goals achieved and accomplishments, and perhaps that highlighted those areas that are workplace relevant in which the student has succeeded by the end of the student's career. All of this would probably be more useful than a piece of paper called a diploma. This would be beneficial for all students, but we should probably definitely do it for students with significant cognitive disabilities. It would be very beneficial for future employers.

**Ms. Bell:** This is Pam Bell calling from Indiana. What is your best solution for a student who takes all the qualifying courses for a diploma, and they pass all those courses, but they cannot pass our graduation qualifying exam and they don't make it for the waiver for one reason or another. Yet they are a higher than a certificate of attendance or certificate of completion. What would be your ideal situation for exiting that way?

**Dr. Thurlow:** Remind me of what the waiver looks like in Indiana.

**Ms. Bell:** They have five criteria. One, you have to have a 95% attendance rate.

**Ms. Krentz:** You are right. It's a very specific criteria.

**Ms. Bell:** Yes. C average, take remediation every time it's offered. Take the test every time it's offered. And the teacher must sign off that they have 9<sup>th</sup> grade skills.

And that is usually the part that they don't have. They are usually coming up without 7<sup>th</sup> grade skills or 6<sup>th</sup> grade skills, but still they passing all the courses. They are working their butts off to get an "A".

**Dr. Thurlow:** Yeah, so there are a couple of considerations there. One is to have a more flexible alternative route. That kind of alternative route is pretty inflexible. I would say we haven't thought of doing that, grading the flexibility of routes. But we are hoping we will have this document out within the next month. We are having each state verify their information, and we will indicate which states did not verify. So we will have each state verify a description of their alternative routes and you will see the variation in kind of what the routes are like. Some are much more flexible in sort of the criteria for getting into the route but for some other routes, it's almost impossible for a student to have an opportunity to demonstrate the knowledge and skill because they can't even get into the alternative routes to begin with.

**Ms. Bell:** When you say alternate routes, you mean that so you think they should get a diploma?

**Dr. Thurlow:** I am not saying necessarily that. It goes back to what's the meaning of your diploma. So if you are saying a student has 7<sup>th</sup> grade skills, now that's – you know, maybe questionable. You are saying they are mastering and they are passing all their coursework. Is completing all their coursework meeting the criteria in your state for what the meaning of a diploma is? There are still some hard issues that you have got to be addressing within your state. So I can't say yes or no, that student should get a diploma. And I think still there are some tough issues to address. But I think underlying it, there are also some issues about whether or not your alternative route is flexible and generous enough to kids. Is it easy enough for kids to get into that route to demonstrate their knowledge and skills? Is just having a standard diploma enough? Should there be options that are available to all kids, and not just the kids with disabilities? For example, the options like Delaware has – though I know they are controversial in Delaware – are available to all kids. Basic means that you have met all of your coursework requirements, and you get a basic diploma. It's a standard diploma and it means that you passed your coursework, but you haven't passed the test. The next is comprehensive, and it means that you have passed the test and done your coursework, and in addition that you have reached a certain level on the test.

**Ms. Amudson:** This is Judith Amudson from Iowa, and I'm just wondering what on earth you are finding here (in Iowa) or if we are just a blank?

**Dr. Thurlow:** You didn't have a graduation high

stakes exam or structure, so you were not included in the Alternate Route because you didn't have a requirement in the first place according to what we found. And so if you go to the NCEO's Web site and look at Technical Report 36, you will be represented there in terms of graduation requirements. What we focused on today were those states that had graduation and exit exams. What we really wanted to look at were those states that had exit exams, and whether or not there were alternative routes for kids to get a standard diploma.

**Ms. Amudson:** Okay, thanks.

**Ms. Davis:** This is Gillian. I am in Nevada. I am with the Parent Training and Information Center. Could you give us some recommendations as far as how do we educate those that are making the decisions of what tests our kids are going to be taking? The content, so that they have a clear understanding of the population – when they determine that this test will have such and such content as well as will it represent whether or not a child actually gets a diploma.

**Dr. Thurlow:** You mean, decision makers like IEP teams. How do they know what content the kids need to have?

**Ms. Davis:** I am actually talking on the state level if you look at the exit exams, what I have often seen is that individuals who may not have the broad-based knowledge to make the unilateral decisions are the ones who are making the decisions for all kids, and so "all kids" tends to leave out some of our students with the most significant disabilities or those that need more of the resources. So I guess my question was, how do we get to them to understand so that when decisions are made, we could be looking at more alternatives?

**Ms. Mack:** I'm going to jump in here and see if I can pull an answer out of our former state senator. I think what you are trying to get at is that the whole issue of accountability is very, very complex and the policymakers are having difficulty understanding that scope of the student population in order to make those policy decisions that really, appropriately address the needs of all students – is that sort of where you are coming from with the question?

**Ms. Davis:** Yeah.

**Ms. Krentz:** I think that's true and as someone who was in the legislature while working at NCEO, I would try to bring research-based information to the discussion, and they want to respond with sound bites and what's popular...to stick your finger in the air and see which way the wind is blowing, and make decisions that way. I think we do need better communication. To the extent that you personally know your own policymak-

ers and can offer to be a resource for them. But we need to have communication at all levels of policymaking, whether it's elected policymakers or whether it's communicating with persons in the state department, in the school districts, in the classroom, with parents. We all need to work together if we are going to do this right. That's probably a topic for another conference call in the future, but it's an excellent question.

**Ms. Mack:** And I will give my 30 seconds to the extent that all of us can work particularly within our state on developing a more common message that state legislatures are going to give national policymakers. They are hearing 40,000 different things from us, and it's hard for them to sort it through and so to the extent that we can work together to provide more common messages, I think that would be helpful. With that, I am going to turn it over to Martha to give us NCEO's Web site address so that you can access the Web site and get in touch with Jane and Martha and ask more questions.

**Dr. Thurlow:** Great. This is good discussion. I am glad we had plenty of time for the discussion. The NCEO website is <http://education.umn.edu/nceo/> or you can go to any search engine and put in the letters "NCEO" and you will find the National Center on Educational Outcomes.

**Ms. Krentz:** It's also the final slide in our PowerPoint.

**Ms. Mack:** And thank you very much for your participation. We look forward to talking to you next month. Thank you.

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