

The Alabama Occupational Diploma A Promising Program Option for Many

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In March, 1996, the Alabama State Board of Education approved the Alabama Occupational Diploma (AOD) as a graduation diploma option for students with disabilities as defined by IDEA. Since that time, the state has been phasing in the requirements of the diploma beginning with the 10th grade in the 1997-98 school year. The 1999-2000 school year was the first year of full statewide implementation with 850 AOD graduates. By the end of the 2001-2002 school year, over 9,000 students were reported to be participating in the AOD diploma option with more than 3,500 graduates. This high school diploma option is designed to prepare students with disabilities for competitive employment. As such, students may enter employment (or continue employment) directly upon leaving school, continue their education in technical training through many of our excellent technical postsecondary institutions, or enter selected military service. In any case, the ultimate goal is to prepare our students with disabilities for successful and productive lives as contributing citizens in our society.

Implementing the AOD diploma option requires commitment on the part of educators, both in the classroom and in administration. It requires differentiated instructional activities and additional commitment on the part of school systems. Some of these activities and commitment include (a) school- and community-based work training; (b) an academic and job placement portfolio; (c) job coaching; and (d) significant partnerships with career/technical education, the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services, the Alabama College System (our technical and two-year college institutions) and many others. It is quite surprising to school systems in other states that have contacted us with interest in this diploma option that, at the state level, we have been able to forge such partnerships. We are fortunate to have developed such extensive partnerships in Alabama. In that regard, our state can be considered a national forerunner in this effort.

Critical Best Practices for AOD

The Alabama Occupational Diploma offering embodies best practices in transition. Further, it is based on two decades of research on programming components that constitute effective instructional and transition practices in improving post-school outcomes of students with disabilities. There are certain practices that we must employ to make the Alabama Occupational Diploma a viable option for students with disabilities who choose this option. These practices are briefly highlighted below.

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Self Advocacy/Self Determination

We must teach our students to speak for themselves in order to be contributing members of *their* Individualized Education Plans and to lead us in finding the most appropriate post-school outcomes for them. We must do this early in their school careers.

Transitional Assessment and Planning

We must become much more focused in assessing our students, both through informal and formal measures. This should be done in order to ascertain areas of service needs for planning long-term goals, both in employment and community living areas. This assessment process should begin no later than the middle school level.

Consideration of Diploma Options

Now that we have an additional option for students with disabilities, we must carefully match the appropriate transition goals of our students to the appropriate graduation/exit option. For example, if a four-year university is the transition goal after leaving high school, then students should opt for the Alabama High School Diploma (general education or advanced diploma). If further technical training is their goal, then the Alabama Occupational Diploma or the Alabama High School Diploma may be the appropriate option. Whereas, the appropriate option may be the Graduation Certificate if supportive employment is the goal.

Partnership with Career/Technical Education

Since the post-school goal of the Alabama Occupational Diploma is competitive employment, our partnership with Career/Technical Education is imperative. We must begin this process through a deliberate effort in middle school by systematically assessing our students for career interests and aptitudes. This can be completed by a combination of informal measures (such as interviews with students and parents or observations of students in situational settings) and formal measures (such as one made available statewide through Career/Technical Education - *The Employability and Social Maturity Skills*).

Divergence of Current Roles

In this new effort, we must move from our previous role as primarily academic teachers to the more divergent role of academic/transition teachers. This role change may take us out of the classroom into the community to assist our students in this transition from school to adult life. For some of us, this is a welcomed change; yet for others, it is a real challenge.

Transition Coordination

To accomplish our goal of preparing our students with disabilities for successful and productive lives, a restructuring of personnel roles may be needed. Selected personnel in the school(s) must coordinate transition activities for *all* students with disabilities. All students with disabilities should

have transition goals and personnel in the school system must have the time, knowledge, and designation for coordinating these activities.

Job Coach

Although there are many variations of job coach definitions in the state, basically coaches have one or two roles. These roles are (a) assisting with school-based and/or community-based activities, and (b) job coaching duties during the 12th grade cooperative education requirement. It should be noted that the 12th grade job coaching must take precedence over the school-based/community-based experiences when job coach services are needed for designated students during the 12th grade year. As the need for the job coach increases for upcoming 12th graders, the transition teacher(s) may need to assume an increased role in school- and community-based activities. In the development of the Alabama Occupational Diploma, it was anticipated that teachers would need to take a leadership role in implementation of school-based and community-based requirements.

Community Transition Team

The community transition team serves as a catalyst for planning and implementing local cooperative services and procedures for students with disabilities. Activities of the team include (a) conducting a needs assessment of the local community to determine resources and barriers to the successful transition for students with disabilities; (b) developing a plan of action and time lines for addressing gaps in services and resources; and (c) making procedural decisions related to the transition process. Suggested participants include representatives from special education, career/technical education, the Department of Rehabilitation Services, the Department of Mental Health/Mental Retardation, parents, students, business and industry, postsecondary institutions, and others who represent adult services.

Employment Development Team

The employment development team is designed to share information about business, industry and jobs in the community. The team should meet monthly to report business contacts made during the previous month and develop a community resource database on employment opportunities in the community. Suggested participants include: (a) cooperative career/technical education teachers, (b) special education transition coordinators, (c) representatives from Jobs for Alabama's Graduates, (d) rehabilitation counselors, (e) employment development specialists, (f) job coaches, (g) employment service counselors, and (h) others who place students in jobs in the community.

Summary

Successful transition from school to work and community life for students with disabilities is the result of comprehensive planning at the local school and community level, as well as the individual student level. Although the rewards of the Alabama Occupational Diploma option may be great, work remains to be accomplished both in implementation at the local level and in improved perceptions of the quality of post-school outcomes for which the diploma prepares students. Access to postsecondary training options within the Alabama College System and selected military programs as well as acceptance by employers may do much to establish this diploma as a viable

graduation option across the state. The program is only as good, however, as local and state guided implementation provides. Proper attention to implementation is crucial to the success of this diploma option and to the successful inclusion of these students into the local workforce and their communities.