

Frequently Asked Questions

Occupational Diploma

NOTE: These are the state requirements for graduation. Districts may wish to provide additional guidance.

1. Why did the state add the occupational diploma option?

The occupational diploma initiative was brought to the state legislature by a family seeking a different diploma for their child with a disability. They desired a diploma that would lead to a successful adult life, defined by meaningful, integrated employment as well as other life qualities. The legislature agreed and the initiative moved to the Tennessee Department of Education's division special populations and student support. A task force of over 40 members was created, and they defined the rules and created the Skills, Knowledge, and Experience Mastery Assessment (SKEMA) ([here](#)).

In July 2014, the State School Board approved the occupational diploma, rules, and the SKEMA tool. During the 2014-15 school year, eight districts piloted the SKEMA, and in May 2015, the first recipients of an occupational diploma graduated.

2. Who is eligible for the occupational diploma?

A student with an IEP who has completed their tenth grade year, or is within two years of their expected graduation rate, is eligible for the occupational diploma. They must:

- complete their IEP;
- attend school regularly; and
- meet the following SKEMA requirements:
 - a performance level of "3" or higher on all four Required skills,
 - a performance level of "3" or higher on 8 of 10 Critical skills, and
 - two years of **Work Experience**, paid or unpaid, (although for the 2015-16 school year, one year of experience is sufficient as this is a new initiative)

3. Does the occupational diploma count in the school's graduation rate?

The only diploma option that is calculated in graduation rate is the general education diploma.

4. *Is there a course code for occupational diploma or the work experience portion of the SKEMA?*

The occupational diploma provides the opportunity to accurately reflect that a student has valuable skills for potential employers. Those skills can be learned in a large variety of settings and experiences designed by the student's IEP team. It is not intended that something new is created but rather that the SKEMA provides documentation of those rich experiences that the student can then take with them to potential employers.

5. *How many hours are required for the "Work Experience"?*

We realize that in some locations, it is difficult for anyone to find work, let alone a student or a student with a disability. It is critical that a student is not penalized for the economy in the area in which they live. Therefore, the task force agreed that the IEP team can determine what level of work experience they require from that student in order to be eligible for the occupational diploma. Additionally, a student may participate in paid, unpaid, or a combination of work in order to meet the two year requirement. The setting for the work can be within the school, off-campus, or a combination as determined by the IEP team for that student. Effort should be made to secure the richest experience possible for the student. A strong indicator of post-school successful employment is paid employment while in high school.

6. *Why would I want to pursue the occupational diploma?*

Students with disabilities who graduate with a general education diploma are 1.67 times more likely to be employed after leaving high school and five times more likely to attend college (Wagner, M. M., Newman, L. A., & Javitz, H. S., 2014). Additionally, it is at work and school that students meet social peers, learn new things, and develop life-long friendships. For an individual with a disability, a life without meaningful work and/or school becomes very isolating and unrewarding. For students with disabilities, successful, integrated employment is not always an easy goal to reach, but it is possible. The occupational diploma offers a path to successful employment through the direct monitoring and instruction of the skills that are essential to employment success.

Students with disabilities often struggle during interviews. The SKEMA is a great tool to assist potential employers in matching the student to the right position within their business so everyone will benefit from their employment. ARC Tennessee brought together business leaders throughout the state to preview the SKEMA to ensure this tool will support future employment. The business leaders strongly favored the skills in the "Required" and "Critical" portions of the SKEMA, and many stated that those are the skills they want all students to master because they are critical to employment success.

7. What do I do if the student does not meet the required and critical skills?

The student will graduate with the special education diploma and continue to work on the skills within the SKEMA during the years between high school graduation and their twenty-second birthday. The SKEMA can also assist outside agencies or wrap-around service providers in focusing the job coaching and training to enable the student to learn the required and critical skills for future successful integrated employment.

8. From where do I order the diploma?

The diploma is available through the state by contacting Grace Jones at grace.jones@tn.gov.

9. Do students earning the occupational diploma still need to take the required courses for a general education diploma?

It is not required; however, it may still be appropriate to enroll in at least a few credit-bearing courses each year. This decision depends on the individual student.

For each student, the courses selected should be an IEP team decision after careful consideration of the student's measureable post-secondary goals, recommended course of study, least restrictive environment, and intervention.

10. If we decide the occupational diploma is the appropriate option for a student, do they still have to take TNReady or MSAA?

Yes, here are two different policies in place and both must be followed, one is related to choosing a diploma, the other is related to accountability.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires all students to be assessed for accountability. In Tennessee, these assessments are the MSAA (Alternate) and TNReady. Students must meet the accountability requirements regardless of diploma option they are pursuing. Passing is not required, but participation in the assessment is required.

11. For college, trade schools, or jobs that require a diploma, does the occupational diploma count?

The general education diploma is the only option considered as a "diploma" for university, trade schools, or jobs asking the question "have you received a high school diploma?" The guidelines for the general education diploma are outlined at:

<https://www.tn.gov/education/topic/graduation-requirements>.