

Center for Special Education Advocacy

4600 Cox Road, Suite 205 • Glen Allen, Virginia 23060 • Phone: 804-967-2556

Diploma Options For Students With Disabilities In Virginia

This booklet is designed as a guide to help Virginia parents understand the requirements for each high school diploma option and determine a diploma track that is appropriate for your child. As you read, you should be aware that Virginia's graduation requirements change often. Therefore, you should contact someone from your local school division should you have questions or require additional information. Also, please note that the requirements for high school students transferring into Virginia's public school system from another state education system differ somewhat from the requirements of a high school student who has been in the Virginia public school system for some or all of his/her elementary/middle school years. This is particularly true for transfer students who will be entering the tenth grade.¹

If you are considering diploma options for your child, your first step should be to obtain a copy of *Regulations Establishing The Standards for Accrediting Public Schools in Virginia* ("Standards of Accreditation" or "SOA")² from the Virginia Department of Education. Before any student in Virginia is allowed to graduate from high school with an **Advanced Studies Diploma**, **Standard Diploma**, or **Modified Standard Diploma** he/she must meet the course level and/or subject area requirements outlined in that publication. A student with a disability also has the option of receiving a **Special Diploma** if he/she completes the requirements of his/her Individualized Education Program ("IEP"), but does not fulfill requirements of one of the other three diploma options.

The information that follows can be difficult to grasp, particularly if you are thinking about general graduation requirements while trying to relate them to your child and the courses he/she is preparing to take, or has taken. Therefore, we have included a Credit Count Sheet which may be used for each of the diploma options carrying standard and/or verified units of credit. We believe this sheet will assist you in understanding the general graduation requirements as they relate to the diploma your child is/will be pursuing. The Credit Count Sheet is on page 9 of this booklet.

Understanding Standard and Verified Units of Credit

To understand the various diploma options available to students in Virginia and the academic requirements for each diploma option, you must first understand the difference between a standard and a verified unit of credit. A **standard unit of credit** is awarded to a student upon completion of a minimum of 140 clock hours of instruction in any particular course and the successful completion of the requirements of that course. This means that the student must attend class as required and earn a passing final grade. However, please note that a local school division may develop a written policy, approved by the superintendent and local school

¹ Please contact your local school division or the Virginia Department of Education for information regarding the transfer of high school students into Virginia's public school system. You may also consult 8VAC 20-131-60 of the Regulations Establishing Standards for Accrediting Public Schools in Virginia, and the Guidelines for Management of the Student's Scholastic Records in Virginia.

² 8 VAC 20-131-10 et seq.

board, allowing it to award credit in non-core academic courses on a basis other than a standard unit of credit.³ You should contact your local school division to obtain any such policies.

A **verified unit of credit** is awarded to a student upon completion of 140 clock hours of instruction in any particular course, successful completion of that course’s requirements, and the passing of the end of course Standard of Learning (“SOL”) test or additional test described in the Standards of Accreditation. These additional tests include career and technical education certification and licensure examinations.⁴ The total number of standard and verified units of credit that a student must earn to obtain an Advanced Studies Diploma, Standard Diploma, or Modified Standard Diploma are listed below.⁵

<i>Diploma Option</i>	<i>Total Standard Units of Credit Required</i>	<i>Total Verified Units of Credit Required</i>
<i>Advanced Studies Diploma</i>	24	9
<i>Standard Diploma</i>	22	6
<i>Modified Standard Diploma</i>	20	0

In addition to requiring a specific total number of standard and verified units of credit, each diploma option specifies the number of standard and verified units of credit required *within* a particular subject area. Although the requirements for a Standard Diploma differ for those students entering 9th grade prior to the 2003-2004 school year, the requirements for the Advanced Studies Diploma and Modified Standard Diploma apply to those students who entered 9th grade in the 2000-2001 school year.

Diploma Options and Their Academic Requirements

As previously indicated, there are four diploma options available in Virginia: the Advanced Studies Diploma, the Standard Diploma, the Modified Standard Diploma, and the Special Diploma. A student receiving regular education services, or a student who receives accommodations under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, may work toward either the Advanced Studies Diploma or the Standard Diploma. However, a student with an IEP may work toward any of the four diploma options listed above. The determination of which diploma a student with an IEP will work toward is decided by his/her IEP team, and where appropriate, the student, at any point after the student’s 8th grade year. The parents and the student must consent to the diploma track, in writing, after a review of the student’s academic history, and after all options have been discussed by the school. A student with an IEP who pursues a Modified Standard Diploma may at any time during his/her high school career also decide to pursue either a Standard Diploma or Advanced Studies Diploma. The Board of Education has approved a number of courses to facilitate this diploma transition.⁶

³ 8 VAC 20-131-110(A)..

⁴ Please see 8 VAC 20-131-110(B) for a description of the criteria that additional tests must meet in order to be accepted as a test in which students may receive verified units of credit. For a listing of approved SOL substitute tests for verified credit, please see the document Substitute Tests for Verified Credit located on the Virginia Department of Education’s website at <http://www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/suptsmemos/2002/inf079a.pdf>. You may also wish to consult the Virginia Department of Education’s Office of Career and Technical Education Services at <http://www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/Instruction/CTE/>.

⁵ The charts included in this booklet, with the exception of the Credit Count Sheet available on page 9, have been adapted from the SOA.

⁶ The Board of Education approved a number of courses in February 1998 to facilitate transition from a Modified Standard Diploma to a Standard or Advanced Studies Diploma. These courses may be found on the Virginia Department of Education’s website at <http://www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/suptsmemos/2000/adm063a.pdf>.

Below is a description of the academic requirements for each diploma option. Please note that these are the state’s *minimum* requirements for obtaining a diploma. A local school board may prescribe additional requirements for a diploma provided the Virginia Board of Education approves such requirements. Proposals for additional requirements are strictly scrutinized by the state Board of Education.⁷ You should contact your local school division to obtain information about any additional requirements. Parents of children with disabilities should also note that references to “entering/entered 9th grade” will be based upon when your child is classified as a 9th grader according to his/her IEP.

Advanced Studies Diploma⁸

To obtain an Advanced Studies Diploma, a student must earn a total of twenty-four (24) standard units of credit, nine (9) of which must be verified by passing the required end of course SOL test. A specified number of standard units of credit must be earned in the following subject areas: English, Mathematics, Science, History/Social Science, Foreign Language, Health/Physical Education, Fine Art/Practical Arts, and Electives.⁹ To complete the verified credit requirement, a student must pass two end of year SOL tests in each of the following subjects: English, Mathematics, Science, and History/Social Science. Additionally, the student must pass one end of year SOL test of his/her choice. A student may fulfill this requirement by (1) passing an additional SOL test in one of the above subject areas, (2) passing an end of year SOL in an elective course that has been approved for verified credit,¹⁰ or (3) taking an assessment that meets the requirements set forth in the SOA.¹¹

<i>Subject Area</i>	<i>Standard Credit Units</i>	<i>Verified Credit Units</i>
<i>English</i>	4	2
<i>Mathematics</i>	4	2
<i>Science</i>	4	2
<i>History/Social Sciences</i>	4	2
<i>Foreign Language</i>	3	
<i>Health/Physical Education</i>	2	
<i>Fine Art/Practical Arts</i>	1	
<i>Electives</i>	2	
<i>Student Selected SOL</i>		1
<i>Total Credits for an Advanced Studies Diploma</i>	24	9

⁷ 8 VAC 20-131-50(A). Please see Superintendent’s Memo No. 97 (July 3, 1998) located on the Virginia Department of Education’s website at <http://www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/suptsmemos/1998/inf097.html> for information regarding requests from local school divisions for additional graduation requirements.

⁸ 8 VAC 20-131-50 (C) et seq.

⁹ For a list of the courses that satisfy the Mathematics, Science, History/Social Science, Foreign Language, and Student Selected Test requirements for an Advanced Studies Diploma, please see footnotes 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 of 8 VAC 20-131-50(C).

¹⁰ Division Superintendents may request that an elective course carry verified credit by submitting a written request to the Department of Education’s Division of Accountability. For additional information, please see Superintendent’s Memo No. 187 (October 6, 2000) located on the Virginia Department of Education’s website at <http://www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/suptsmemos/2000/inf187.html>.

¹¹ For a listing of approved student selected SOL substitute tests for verified credit, please see the document Substitute Tests for Verified Credit located on the Virginia Department of Education’s website at <http://www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/suptsmemos/2002/inf079a.pdf>.

Standard Diploma¹²

To obtain a Standard Diploma, a student must earn a total of twenty-two (22) standard units of credit, six (6) of which must be verified by passing the required end of course SOL test. A specified number of standard units of credit must be earned in the following subject areas: English, Mathematics, Science, History/Social Science, Health/Physical Education, Fine Art/Practical Arts, and Electives.¹³ Beginning with the graduating class of 2003 (students entering 9th grade during the 1999-2000 school year), a student intending to pursue this diploma option must take two (2) sequential electives. *Sequential electives* means any series of elective courses “in which the content increases or expands in scope and sequence as students move through the various levels of the course.”¹⁴

How a student earns his/her verified units of credit depends upon the school year in which the student entered 9th grade. Specifically, students who entered the 9th grade in the 2000-2001, 2001-2002, and 2002-2003 school years, also known as the “transition years,” are allowed to select four (4) of the six (6) end of year SOL tests they will be required to take and pass. This means that a student may (1) take and pass an end of course SOL in the subject areas of Mathematics, Science, or History/Social Sciences, (2) take and pass an end of year SOL in an elective course that has been approved for verified credit,¹⁵ or (3) take and pass an assessment that meets the requirements set forth in the SOA. The remaining two (2) tests, both of which are English tests, are required.

Under certain circumstances, transition year students on this diploma track may petition their local school board for an award of local verified units of credit in the subject areas of Science and/or History/Social Science. The Science and History/Social Science end of course tests would be part of the four (4) student selected SOL tests. This option *does not apply* to English and Mathematics end of course tests. To be eligible for consideration of an award of a local verified unit of credit by the local school board the student must:

- ✓ Pass the high school course;
- ✓ Demonstrate a certain level of achievement by receiving a scale score within the designated range of 375-399 on any administration of the SOL test after taking the test at least twice;
- ✓ Demonstrate academic achievement through the appeal process administered at the local level; and
- ✓ Have earned fewer than the four (4) student-selected verified credits required.¹⁶

¹² 8 VAC 20-131-50 (B) et seq.

¹³ For a list of the courses that satisfy the Mathematics, Science, History/Social Science, Electives, and Student Selected Test requirements for a Standard Diploma, please see footnotes 1, 2, 3, and 4 of 8 VAC 20-131-50(B).

¹⁴ For additional information, please see the *Guidelines for Sequential Electives for the Standard or Modified Standard Diploma* (February 5, 2002) <http://www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/suptsmemos/2002/int001a.pdf>.

¹⁵ Division Superintendents may request that an elective course carry verified credit by submitting a written request to the Department of Education’s Division of Accountability. For additional information, please see Superintendent’s Memo No. 187 (October 6, 2000) located on the Virginia Department of Education’s website at <http://www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/suptsmemos/2000/inf187.html>.

¹⁶ For additional information, please see Superintendent’s Memo No. 52 (August 9, 2002) located on the Virginia Department of Education’s website at <http://www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/suptsmemos/2002/adm052.html> and *Guidelines for Local School Boards to Award Verified Credits for the Standard Diploma to Transition Students* adopted by the Board of Education on July 25, 2002, located on the Virginia Department of Education’s website at <http://www.pen.k12.va.us/vdoe/suptsmemos/2002/adm052a.pdf>.

Local School Boards are required to adopt policies and procedures that govern the local awarding of verified units of credit. If you think your child is eligible and would benefit from this flexibility, you should contact your school division to obtain information about its appeal process.

Beginning with the 2003-2004 school year, students entering 9th grade will be required to pass two (2) end of course English SOLs, but will be allowed to select only one (1) end of course SOL test. The remaining three (3) verified units of credit will be earned upon the student’s passing of one Mathematics, one Science, and one History/Social Science end of course SOL test.

<i>Subject Area</i>	<i>Standard Credit Units</i>	<i>Verified Credit Units (Beginning 2000-2001)</i>	<i>Verified Credit Units (Beginning 2003-2004)</i>
<i>English</i>	4	2	2
<i>Mathematics</i>	3		1
<i>Science</i>	3		1
<i>History/Social Sciences</i>	3		1
<i>Health/Physical Education</i>	2		
<i>Fine Art/Practical Arts</i>	1		
<i>Electives</i>	6		
<i>Student Selected SOL</i>		4	1
<i>Total Credits for a Standard Diploma</i>	22	6	6

Modified Standard Diploma¹⁷

The Modified Standard Diploma option was authorized by the Board of Education during revisions to the SOA in 2000. This diploma option is intended for students with disabilities receiving services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) who are unlikely to meet the standard and verified credit requirements of the Advanced Studies Diploma or Standard Diploma. A student wishing to pursue a Modified Standard Diploma is required to meet certain literacy and numeracy standards which, beginning with the 9th grade class of the 2000-2001 school year, are met by passing the 8th grade English and Mathematics end of course SOL tests. Passing requires that the student achieve a scale score of 400. However, the Board of Education has adopted adjusted cut scores allowing students achieving a scale score of 299 on the 8th grade English Reading end of course test, and a scale score of 360 on the 8th grade Mathematics end of course test to be considered to have met the literacy and numeracy requirements necessary to pursue this diploma option.¹⁸

The Modified Standard Diploma does not require a student to earn verified units of credit. However, he/she must earn a total of twenty (20) standard units of credit within the following subject areas: English, Mathematics, Science, History/Social Science, Health/Physical Education, Fine Art/Practical Arts, and Electives.¹⁹ A specific number of standard credits are required for each subject area. Additionally, like a

¹⁷ 8 VAC 20-131-50 (D) et seq.

¹⁸ These adjusted cut scores were adopted by the Virginia Board of Education at its March 24, 2004 meeting.

¹⁹ For a list of the courses that satisfy the Mathematics, Science, History/Social Science, and Elective requirements for a Modified Standard Diploma, please see footnotes 1, 2, 3, and 4 of 8 VAC 20-131-50(D). Additional courses that satisfy the Mathematics, Science, and History/Social Science requirements were approved by the Board of Education on November 30, 2000. This list is available on the Virginia Department of Education’s website at <http://www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/suptsmemos/2000/adm063a.pdf>.

student who intends to graduate with a Standard Diploma, a student who intends to graduate with a Modified Standard Diploma must take two (2) sequential electives.

<i>Subject Area</i>	<i>Standard Credit Units</i>
<i>English</i>	4
<i>Mathematics</i>	3
<i>Science</i>	2
<i>History/Social Sciences</i>	2
<i>Health/Physical Education</i>	2
<i>Fine Art/Practical Arts</i>	1
<i>Electives</i>	6
<i>Total Credits for a Modified Standard Diploma</i>	20

A student with an IEP who is pursuing a Modified Standard Diploma must **take** the end of course SOL test, if such a test is required for any course in which he/she is enrolled if the student intends to earn a standard unit of credit. A student who is auditing the course or who is receiving instruction in only part of the course’s content, does not need to take the end of course SOL test. If a student is required to **take** the end of course SOL test, any accommodations outlined in the student’s IEP must be provided during testing. Because the Modified Standard Diploma does not require a student to earn verified units of credit to fulfill the requirements of the diploma, the student does not have to **pass** the end of course SOL test to earn the standard credit. However, if the student passes the end of course SOL test, he/she has earned a verified unit credit which may be counted toward the requirements of the Standard Diploma. *Remember, there is flexibility in moving from the Modified Standard Diploma track to the Standard Diploma track.*

How acceptable is the Modified Standard Diploma to colleges and universities? *Virginia’s College Guide for Students with Disabilities*, which was developed by the Virginia Department of Education, states that students with IEPs intending to attend a college or university should “plan to graduate with a Standard or Advanced Studies Diploma and plan [his/her] course of study accordingly.”²⁰ This seemingly indicates that the Modified Standard Diploma is not the *recommended* diploma track for students with IEPs who have their sights on a post-secondary education. However, few, if any, college applications require a student to identify the type of high school diploma he/she has received. What colleges and universities do require is that students applying for admission complete a minimum number of credit units within the subject areas of English, Mathematics, Science, Social Science, and elective courses -- often highly recommending that at least two units of credit be earned in a foreign language. Additionally, the courses a student takes in the core academic subjects should indicate to an admissions officer that he/she has been exposed to a certain level of academic material. For example, a college or university may require applicants to have earned three credit units in Mathematics, including the courses of Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II.

Special Diploma²¹

The Special Diploma is intended for a student with a disability who completes the program requirements of his/her IEP but who does not fulfill the standard and verified credit requirements associated with the Advanced Studies, Standard, or Modified Standard Diploma options. Additionally, a student working toward

²⁰Virginia Department of Education, *Virginia’s College Guide for Students with Disabilities*, (January 2003) 13. <http://www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/studentsrvcs/collegeguide-disabledstu.pdf>.

²¹ 8 VAC 20-131-50(E).

this diploma option is not required to participate in the Standards of Learning assessments. However, federal and state regulations require that students with disabilities be included in Virginia’s accountability system where appropriate. Therefore, students with disabilities (1) who are working toward educational goals other than those prescribed for the Advanced Studies, Standard, or Modified Standard Diploma, (2) who demonstrate “impairments that prevent completion of curriculum based on the Standards of Learning (SOL) even with program and testing accommodations,” (3) whose present level of educational performance indicates a need for “extensive, direct instruction and/or intervention in a life skills curriculum,” and (4) who “require intensive, frequent, and individualized instruction in a variety of settings to show progress and acquire, maintain, or generalize life and/or functional academic skills” are eligible to participate in the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program.²²

Conclusion

This booklet has provided information to help you understand the requirements your child must meet in order to graduate with an Advanced Studies Diploma, Standard Diploma, Modified Standard Diploma, or Special Diploma. Before participating in an IEP meeting to determine the diploma option your child will be working toward, you should:

- ✓ Review this booklet and the documents referenced in its footnotes. For your convenience, the Center for Special Education Advocacy has linked all of the referenced documents to its website at www.spedadvocacy.org.
- ✓ Review your child’s educational record.
- ✓ Establish the graduation requirements your child must meet in order to obtain the diploma chosen and determine whether it is an appropriate option for your child. Remember, these requirements are based upon the year in which your child entered (or will be entering) the ninth grade.
- ✓ Review your school system’s Program of Studies and obtain information about courses that carry standard units of credit and verified units of credit.
- ✓ Review the Guidelines for Participation of Students with Disabilities in the Assessment Component of Virginia’s Accountability System.²³
- ✓ Understand the accommodations/modifications needed by your child to access the curriculum and demonstrate achievement.

In addition to the diploma options discussed in this booklet, a local school division may award a Certificate of Program Completion to those students who complete a prescribed program of study, but do not qualify for diplomas. A student may also obtain a General Education Development Certificate (“GED”) upon taking and passing the high school equivalency exam.²⁴ Please contact your local school division or the Virginia Department of Education for additional information about these non-diploma options.

²² *Guidelines for Participation of Students with Disabilities in the Assessment Component of Virginia’s Accountability System*, adopted by the Board of Education September 26, 2002, located on the Virginia Department of Education’s website at <http://www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/suptsmemos/2002/inf140a.pdf>.

²³ These Guidelines were adopted by the Virginia Board of Education on September 26, 2002, and are located on the Department of Education’s website at <http://www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/suptsmemos/2002/inf140a.pdf>.

²⁴ 8 VAC 20-131-50(F) and 8 VAC 20-131-50(G).

Credit Count Sheet

If Standard Diploma -
Year Entered 9th Grade: _____

Diploma Option: _____

Subject Area	Advanced Studies Diploma		Standard Diploma			Modified Standard Diploma	
	SCU*	VCU*	SCU	VCU	VCU	SCU	VCU
				Beginning 00-01	Beginning 03-04		
<i>English</i>	4	2	4	2	2	4	
<i>Mathematics</i>	4	2	3		1	3	
<i>Science</i>	4	2	3		1	2	
<i>History/Social Sciences</i>	4	2	3		1	2	
<i>Foreign Language</i>	3		-----			-----	
<i>Health/Physical Education</i>	2		2			2	
<i>Fine Art/Practical Arts</i>	1		1			1	
<i>Electives</i>	2		6			6	
<i>Student Selected SOL</i>		1		4	1	6	-----
Total Credits	24	9	22	6	6	20	-----

** SCU = Standard Credit Units; VCU = Verified Credit Units

	9 th grade	10 th grade	11 th grade	12 th grade	Standard Credits Needed	Standard Credits Earned	Verified Credits Needed	Verified Credits Earned
English								
Math								
Science								
History/ Social Science								
Foreign Language								
Health/ PE								
Fine/ Practical Arts								
Electives								
Electives								
Total Credits								