

REPORT BY THE  
AUDITOR GENERAL  
OF CALIFORNIA

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**A REVIEW OF HIGH SCHOOL  
GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS FOR  
SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS  
IN NINE SCHOOL DISTRICTS**

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OFFICE OF THE AUDITOR GENERAL

P-627

A REVIEW OF HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION  
REQUIREMENTS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS  
IN NINE SCHOOL DISTRICTS

NOVEMBER 1986



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Thomas W. Hayes  
Auditor General

November 13, 1986

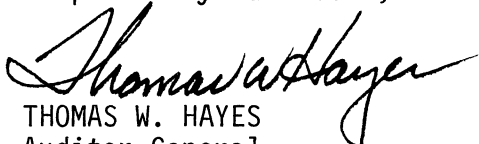
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Honorable Art Agnos, Chairman  
Members, Joint Legislative  
Audit Committee  
State Capitol, Room 3151  
Sacramento, California 95814

Dear Mr. Chairman and Members:

The Office of the Auditor General presents its report concerning the proficiency standards used by nine school districts for granting diplomas to high school students in special education programs. Although these standards vary among the districts, the districts have complied with the Education Code in adopting and applying proficiency standards for special education students.

Respectfully submitted,

  
THOMAS W. HAYES  
Auditor General

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## SUMMARY

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### RESULTS IN BRIEF

We reviewed the proficiency standards used by nine school districts for granting diplomas to high school students in special education programs. Although these standards vary among the districts, the districts have complied with the Education Code in adopting and applying proficiency standards for these students.

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### BACKGROUND

California's special education programs provide instruction and services to meet the needs of individuals with learning handicaps or physical disabilities. Sections 56360 through 56367 of the Education Code require that each school district, special education services region, or county office of education provide a full range of special education programs for these students.

During fiscal year 1985-86, total support for California's special education program was approximately \$1.5 billion, over three-fourths of which was provided by the State. In December 1985, approximately 364,000 students in kindergarten through twelfth grade were served by special education programs in public schools.

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### PRINCIPAL ISSUE

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The Standards Used by Nine  
School Districts for Awarding  
Diplomas to High School Students  
In Special Education Programs

The Education Code requires school districts to establish standards of proficiency in basic subjects for all high school students, including those in special education programs.

However, the Education Code allows each district to adopt its own standards. Of the 379 special education students in our sample who received diplomas in June 1986, 203 (54 percent) passed the same proficiency tests that other students must pass to graduate from high school. An additional 45 students (12 percent) passed their district's regular tests but under altered test conditions, such as being allowed additional time or being tested in small groups. Thirty-nine students (10 percent) passed district tests that were simplified. The remaining 92 students (24 percent) met the requirements in their individualized education program plans.

Because there are differences in the proficiency requirements among the school districts, students who earn a diploma in one district might not qualify for a diploma in another district. For example, a student in one district received a diploma by completing the district's course requirements and the proficiency standards established in his individualized education program plan, which required the student to make change for up to \$5, to write his name and address, and to read common road signs. In contrast, a student from another school district would receive only a plaque for achieving the same levels of proficiency.

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#### **AGENCY COMMENTS**

The State Department of Education concurs with the results of our review of high school graduation requirements for special education students in nine school districts.

## INTRODUCTION

California's special education programs provide instruction and services to meet the individual needs of students with learning handicaps or physical disabilities. These include students with a communications handicap such as deafness; students with a physical handicap such as blindness; students with a learning handicap caused by behavior disorders; and students with severe handicaps such as mental retardation or emotional disturbances. In December 1985, approximately 364,000 students in kindergarten through twelfth grade were served by special education programs in public schools.

Section 56000 of the Education Code requires that students in California public schools receive special education and related services through the Master Plan for Special Education. Under the master plan, school districts and county offices of education administer special education services through 109 regional organizations called special education local plan areas, which are responsible for developing and implementing a comprehensive plan for the appropriate education of individuals with special needs. Each school district is included in a special education local plan area.

Sections 56360 through 56367 of the Education Code require that each school district, special education services region, or county office of education provide a full range of special education programs. In addition, Sections 56340 and 56341 of the Education Code require

each school district to establish teams for developing, reviewing, and revising education programs for each student with exceptional needs. The individualized education program (IEP) teams are to include a qualified special education teacher, the student's classroom teacher, and one or both of the student's parents.

According to Section 51215 of the Education Code, governing boards of the school districts are also responsible for developing proficiency standards for basic academic skills for all students, including students enrolled in special education programs. Proficiency standards are to be established for the basic skills of reading comprehension, writing, and mathematics and are included in each special education student's IEP plan. The students who complete course requirements and meet the standards of proficiency in basic skills established by the school districts may graduate from high school and be awarded high school diplomas.

During fiscal year 1985-86, total support for special education programs was approximately \$1.5 billion, over three-fourths of which was provided by the State. The federal government provided approximately \$82 million, and the remaining \$250 million came from local funds.



## SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this review was to gather information about students in special education programs who receive high school diplomas and to determine the standards school districts use for conferring diplomas on these students.

To determine the graduation requirements for students in special education programs, we reviewed applicable laws and regulations, and we interviewed officials within the State Department of Education's Division of Special Education. We also interviewed directors of special education local planning areas and the special education staff from school districts and high schools.

We reviewed the records of 475 twelfth grade students enrolled in special education programs at 42 high schools in the following nine school districts:

Alvord Unified in Riverside County  
Capistrano Unified in Orange County  
Fremont Unified in Alameda County  
Grossmont Union High in San Diego County  
Los Angeles Unified in Los Angeles County  
Marysville Joint Unified in Yuba County  
Modesto City High in Stanislaus County  
San Juan Unified in Sacramento County  
City of Santa Rosa High in Sonoma County

We limited our review to twelfth-grade students who were receiving special education instruction and services in public high schools; we did not review special education students in state schools for the deaf and blind and nonpublic, nonsectarian schools. Data showing the total number of special education students in California receiving diplomas is not available.

## ANALYSIS

### THE STANDARDS USED BY NINE SCHOOL DISTRICTS TO AWARD DIPLOMAS TO HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS

We reviewed the standards used by nine school districts for awarding high school diplomas to students in special education programs. We found that the districts have generally complied with the Education Code in establishing proficiency standards. Because there are differences in the proficiency standards among the school districts, students who earn diplomas in one district might not earn diplomas in another.

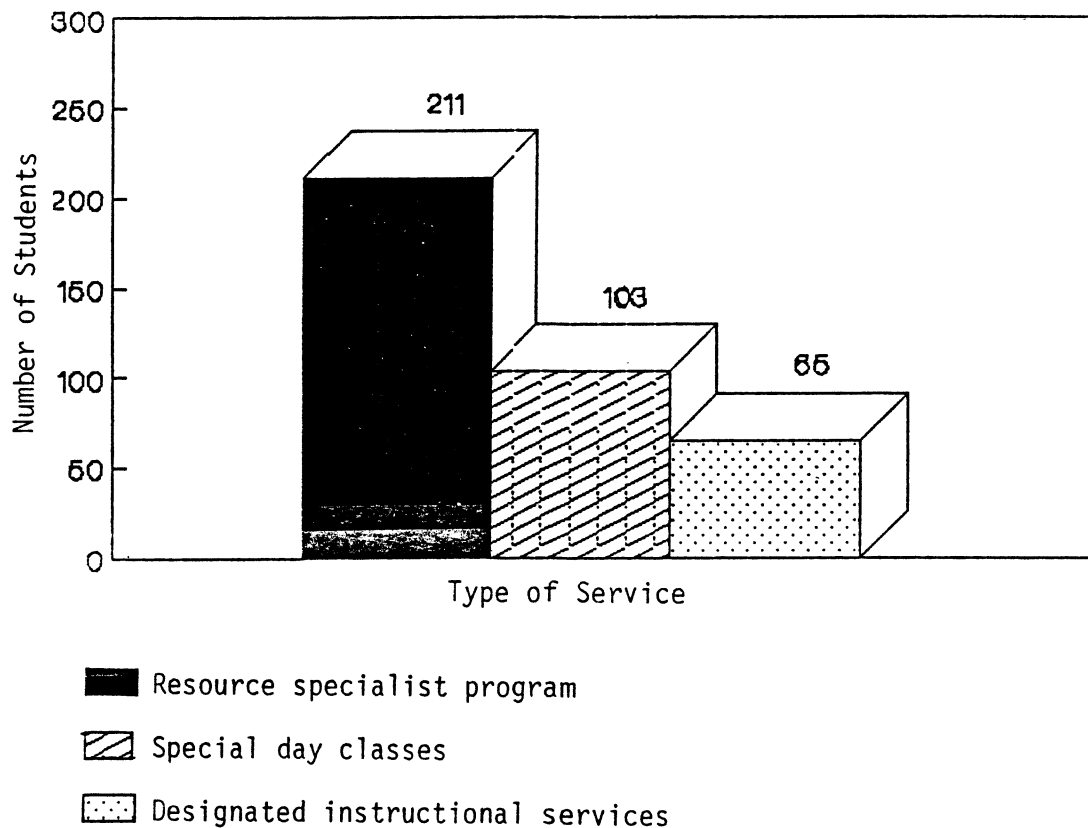
Special education services are provided to public school students in three ways: through special day classes or centers, through the resource specialist program, or through designated instruction and services. The special day classes are for students whose severe disabilities keep them from participating in regular classes. Students in the resource specialist program attend regular classes for most of the day but require special assistance in small groups or tutorials. Designated instruction and services, such as guidance counseling and speech therapy, provide students with special assistance that is not normally given in the regular classrooms.

In June 1986, 15,343 students received diplomas from the 42 high schools in our sample of nine school districts. Of these

students, 379 (2.5 percent) were enrolled in special education programs. Figure 1 shows the types of special education services received by the 379 students graduating from public high schools in June 1986.

**FIGURE 1**

**TYPES OF SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES  
RECEIVED BY 379 STUDENTS WHO EARNED DIPLOMAS  
IN NINE SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN JUNE 1986**



Section 51225 of the Education Code requires that the governing boards of school districts adopt a course of study that students must complete to obtain high school diplomas. The code also requires the school districts to adopt standards of proficiency that

are directly related to the instructional programs. Proficiency standards must be established for, at a minimum, reading comprehension, writing, and mathematics.

While the purpose of proficiency standards is to ensure that every student who receives a diploma has mastered minimum basic skills, the Legislature recognized that a school district's regular proficiency standards might not be appropriate for all students. Therefore, the law requires the governing boards of school districts to establish proficiency standards for students with diagnosed learning handicaps or physical disabilities. For example, some school districts use their regular proficiency tests for these students but alter the testing methods: the tests may be printed in large type, the students may be allowed to use a magnifying glass to read the test, more time may be allowed to take the test, or the test may be given to students individually or in small groups. Some school districts use their regular proficiency tests for special education students but lower the passing score on the tests.

When students in special education programs cannot pass the district's regular proficiency tests, even with altered test conditions or lowered passing scores, the districts have adopted other proficiency standards for these students. Two of the nine school districts in our sample use simplified tests for some of their special education students, while the remaining seven districts rely on their individualized education program (IEP) teams to develop individualized

proficiency requirements for the special education students who cannot pass the district's regular proficiency tests.

The nine school districts in our sample use various standards for awarding diplomas to high school students in special education programs. For example, the Los Angeles Unified School District requires its special education students to meet the same proficiency standards that other students must meet to earn a high school diploma. However, when students are not able to pass the district's regular proficiency tests, the student can still qualify for a diploma by passing simplified tests that require skills similar to those required to pass regular proficiency tests. When the district's IEP teams determine that a student will not be able to pass either the regular proficiency tests or the simplified tests to earn a diploma, the team establishes requirements the students must meet to earn a letter of recommendation, which acknowledges that the student has completed a course of study at the high school. To earn a letter of recommendation, a student must either complete a prescribed course of study and accumulate 165 credits in grades 10 through 12 or obtain the approval of the school's principal. Students receiving a letter of recommendation may participate in the high school's graduation ceremony.

The Grossmont Union High School District in San Diego County also uses simplified proficiency tests for some of its students in special education programs. This district requires its special

education students to attempt to pass its regular proficiency tests. However, when the IEP team determines that a student cannot pass the district's regular proficiency tests, the student may meet one of three lower levels of proficiency in reading comprehension, writing, and mathematics. For example, a student may be required to pass the district's regular tests for mathematics, and one of the three lower level tests for English, civics, and reading. Only those special education students who pass the district's regular or simplified proficiency tests receive diplomas and participate in high school graduation ceremonies. Special education students who cannot meet the school district's proficiency standards may fulfill the requirements of an individualized education plan and may participate in a ceremony at which they are awarded a plaque instead of a diploma for completing their course of instruction.

The seven remaining school districts in our sample--Alvord Unified, Capistrano Unified, Fremont Unified, Marysville Joint Unified, Modesto City High, San Juan Unified, and City of Santa Rosa High--require their special education students to pass regular proficiency tests unless the IEP team has established other proficiency requirements. The seven school districts do not use simplified proficiency tests as the Los Angeles Unified and Grossmont Union High districts do, but, instead, they rely on the IEP teams to determine individualized proficiency requirements for students who cannot pass the district's regular proficiency tests. Some of the proficiency requirements established by the IEP teams in districts we reviewed

included following a map to a specific destination, completing a specific text in class with 70 percent accuracy, and reading a novel and answering the teacher's questions with 90 percent accuracy. In these seven districts, no letters of recommendation or other certificates are granted to those special education students who do not earn diplomas.

Figure 2 shows the number of students in special education programs who received diplomas from high school in June 1986 and the types of proficiency requirements they met.



**FIGURE 2**

**PROFICIENCY REQUIREMENTS MET BY SPECIAL  
EDUCATION STUDENTS WHO EARNED DIPLOMAS  
IN NINE SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN JUNE 1986**

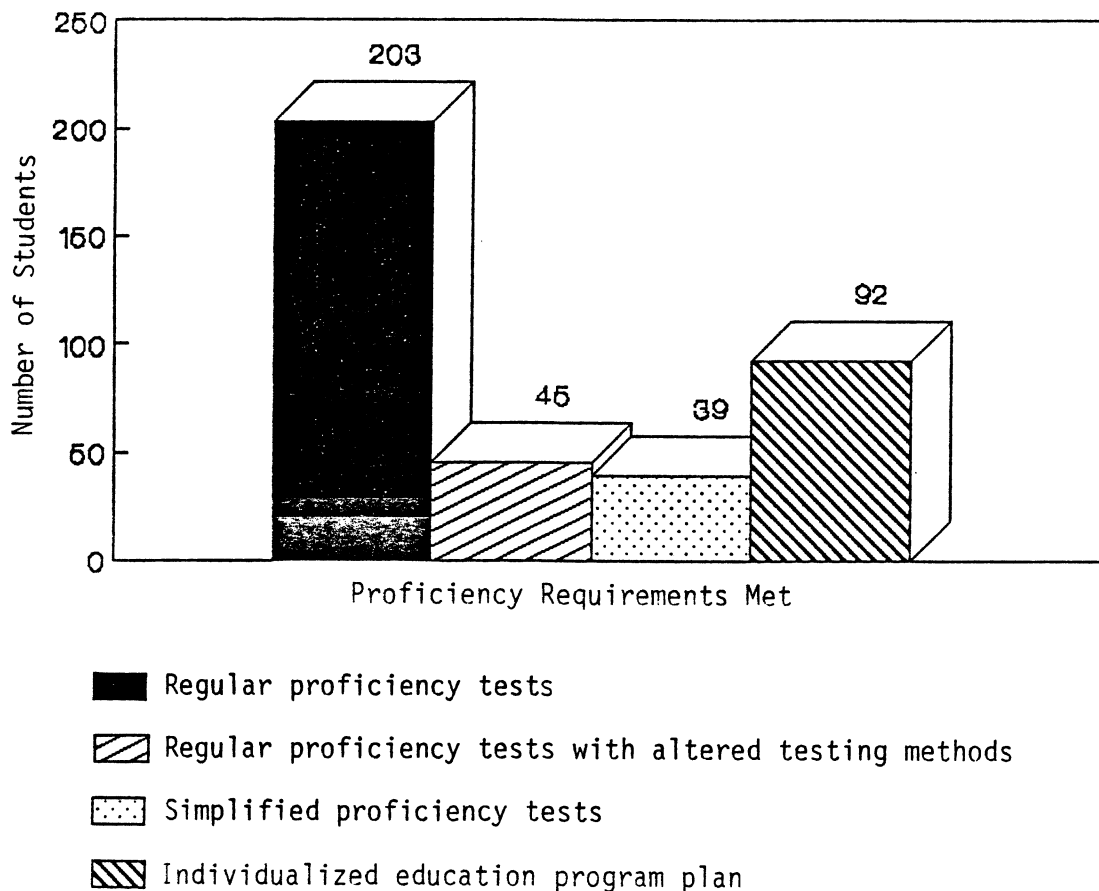


Figure 2 shows that 203 (54 percent) of the 379 special education students in our sample who received high school diplomas met the same proficiency standards that other students must meet to graduate from high school. An additional 45 students (12 percent) passed the regular proficiency tests with altered test conditions, such as being tested in small groups or being allowed additional time to take the tests. Furthermore, 39 students (10 percent) passed simplified versions of the districts' regular proficiency tests. The

remaining 92 students (24 percent) met the requirements established in their individualized education program plans.

The levels of proficiency established for students in special education programs are generally related to the severity of the students' handicaps. For example, 92 percent of the students receiving designated instruction services, the program for the least handicapped students, passed the districts' standard proficiency tests, while 54 percent of the more severely handicapped students in the special day class program were required to meet only the goals set in their individual education program plans.

Because there are differences in the proficiency requirements among the school districts, students who earn a diploma in one district might not qualify for a diploma in another district. For example, within the Alvord Unified School District in Riverside County, four of the ten special education students who earned diplomas passed the district's standard proficiency tests. The remaining six students also received diplomas but did so by meeting the requirements established by their IEP teams. One of these students, who was enrolled in the district's special day class program, was required to demonstrate proficiency in reading comprehension, writing, and mathematics by reading common road signs and identifying safety signs; writing his name, address, phone number, and birthdate; and making change for up to \$5. In contrast, a student from the Grossmont Union High School District in San Diego County would receive a plaque instead of a diploma for meeting these requirements.

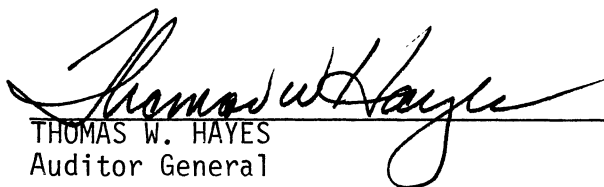
In the San Juan Unified School District in Sacramento County, 35 of the 39 special education students who received diplomas passed the district's regular proficiency tests, including 5 students who passed the tests with altered test conditions. The remaining 4 students, who were in special day classes, met the requirements in their IEP plans and were awarded diplomas. To earn a diploma, one of the 4 students was required to read a shopping list of ten items and to find the items in a store with 70 percent accuracy, to prepare a grocery list of 25 items with 90 percent accuracy, and to count a combination of coins and bills up to \$20 with 90 percent accuracy.

#### CONCLUSION

We reviewed the proficiency standards used by nine school districts for granting diplomas to high school students in special education programs. We found that these districts comply with the Education Code in adopting and applying proficiency standards for these students. However, the proficiency standards vary among school districts.

We conducted this review under the authority vested in the Auditor General by Section 10500 et seq. of the California Government Code and according to generally accepted governmental auditing standards. We limited our review to those areas specified in the audit scope section of this report.

Respectfully submitted,

  
THOMAS W. HAYES  
Auditor General

Date: November 10, 1986

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**CALIFORNIA STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**

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**Bill Honig**

Superintendent

of Public Instruction

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October 31, 1986

Thomas W. Hayes  
Auditor General  
660 J Street, Suite 300  
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Mr. Hayes:

My staff and I have reviewed the draft copy of your report entitled "A Review of High School Graduation Requirements for Special Education Students in Nine School Districts" which you forwarded to us for comment.

Your summary finding from your survey that "... districts have complied with the Education Code in adopting and applying proficiency standards for students in special education programs" should provide valuable information for the Legislature as this issue is pursued.

We appreciate your staff sharing the initial findings with the Special Education Division and the opportunity of reviewing the written report before it is finalized.

If further contact with our office regarding this report is necessary, Elizabeth Richland will be available to assist you and may be reached at 323-4753.

Sincerely,

William D. Dawson  
Executive Deputy Superintendent

WDD:erl

cc: Robert LaLiberte  
Bart Aspling  
Sandra McHaney

cc: Members of the Legislature  
Office of the Governor  
Office of the Lieutenant Governor  
State Controller  
Legislative Analyst  
Assembly Office of Research  
Senate Office of Research  
Assembly Majority/Minority Consultants  
Senate Majority/Minority Consultants  
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