

KJZZ: Why is there a category in the four year graduation section for special education when that is not a population that should necessarily be graduating in four years, according to FAPE and the IDEA?

ADE: The federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) regulation allows for children with disabilities between the ages of 3 and 21 to receive a free and appropriate public education until they have graduated from high school with a regular high school diploma or until they have reached the age of 22. Note that in Arizona, students with disabilities who reach the age of 22 during the regular school year can continue to receive special education services until the end of that school year.

The federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires that states establish student performance goals, hold schools accountable for student achievement, and include a broader measure of student performance in their accountability systems beyond test scores. The Arizona school letter grade requirement that students graduate in four years is part of the ESSA regulation and is not an IDEA requirement. Arizona has chosen to hold schools accountable for students who graduate in 4 years with their cohort and as students with disabilities are also general education students first, they are included in this measure.

KJZZ: What is the weight given to the four year graduation section when determining the school letter grades?

ADE: Graduation rates account for 20% of traditional 9-12 schools' letter grades and 10% of Alternative 9-12 schools' letter grades. The accountability models hold schools accountable to graduation outcomes for additional cohorts (beyond the 4-yr cohort), so those outcomes account for a portion of the overall points as well.

KJZZ: What is the reward schools receive for a high letter grade? Is there funding attached and what is it?

ADE: While there is a statutory provision for ‘A’ schools to earn Results-Based Funding, state budgets have included session law provisions directing Results-Based Funding per pupil allocations based on statewide assessment scores, rather than the letter grade designations specified in ARS 15-249.08

Here is a link to the FY 2023 Appropriations Report: (<https://www.azjlb.gov/23AR/ade.pdf>) The page numbered 158 has the details for results-based funding.

KJZZ: Moving past the letter grades:

Students in special education get additional funding based on their disability. But is it enough?

ADE: The funding levels currently provided in state formulas were reviewed thoroughly in the Special Education Cost Study commissioned during the last administration and completed in December 2022.

Funding is ultimately determined by legislators in the state and US Congress. Supt. Horne has consistently, both as a legislator and Superintendent, pushed for robust public school funding including this year when he publicly called for the waiver of the state aggregated expenditure limit. Advocating for funding will continue to be a priority of this administration.

KJZZ: Is that possibly an explanation for why schools are pushing graduation?

ADE: Students with disabilities are state funded until they graduate with a regular high school diploma. It does not seem likely that graduation decisions would be based on financial benefit. If someone believes their situation is being handled inappropriately, there are methods of dispute resolution and, if necessary, legal remedies available.

KJZZ: Does Superintendent Horne or your ESS [Exceptional Student Services] department intend to change any policies with regard to any of this? I'm told it's a poorly kept secret that has gone on for years -- obviously is not unique to this current administration.

ADE: ADE/Exceptional Student Services, the section that oversees the implementation of special education in Arizona, continues to maintain policy and provide guidance to LEAs that students with disabilities must work toward Arizona State Board of Education and local LEA graduation requirements while also providing secondary transition activities and all specially designed instruction and related services as required by the IDEA. Graduation decisions are not within the purview of ADE, these are local LEA decisions. Further, ESS maintains a Dispute Resolution process, as required by the IDEA, for parents and other parties to exercise their procedural safeguards and address concerns with the implementation of special education at their local LEA.

KJZZ: And I know the superintendent just took office again so I wouldn't expect him to have acted already -- but is there a plan to review and/or change these policies?

ADE: Policies in all areas of AZED are always subject to review to make sure the department is serving its constituents effectively. In those areas where we are bound by law, the department will advocate for changes to the law if necessary.