ADVOCATES FOR CHILDREN
Helping children succeed in school

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Rebecca H. Cort, Ed.D
Deputy Commissioner
Office of Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities
New York State Education Department
One Commerce Plaza, Room 1606
Albany, New York 12234

June 27, 2007

Dear Deputy Commissioner Cort:

We write to you as a coalition to urge you to change the name of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) diploma to IEP Certificate. This name change will clarify that an IEP diploma is a certificate of completion, and not a regular high school diploma.

In our experience, students and their families do not fully understand the implications of receiving an IEP diploma and assume it will afford them the same benefits (e.g., the ability to attend college or enter the military) as a regular high school diploma. Indeed, many school personnel do not understand the difference between an IEP diploma and a regular high school diploma. This confusion has devastating results for students with disabilities and contributes to the large number of these students who leave school without a regular high school diploma.

Students and parents of students designated to receive IEP diplomas are often not adequately and timely informed of the difference between diploma options and transition services and goals. Accordingly, they are unprepared to ask questions about these aspects of an IEP when they participate in IEP reviews. Furthermore, students and parents may not understand that students who receive IEP diplomas have the right to remain in school until age 21 to obtain a regular high school diploma.

The consequences of allowing students and parents to believe that an IEP diploma is a regular high school diploma are acutely illustrated by the following examples of students who came to Advocates for Children of New York for assistance:

- David attended high school for three and half years. Although he had average intelligence, he had been tracked since ninth grade to receive an IEP diploma. No one explained to David or his mother the limited value of an IEP diploma. In his fourth year of high school, David learned from a teacher about the limitations of an IEP diploma, and at age 20 he decided that he had no viable option other than to leave school and attempt to obtain his GED.

- Tyler had been receiving special education services for 10 years and was on track to graduate with a regular high school diploma. However, during an IEP review meeting in his junior year his diploma objective was changed to an IEP diploma. Neither Tyler nor his mom understood the implications of this change and were never told that an IEP diploma would not allow him to realize his goals of attending a 4-year college to become an architect.

- Unbeknownst to her mother, Maria was placed on an IEP diploma track when she entered the ninth grade. Three years later her mother was informed at an IEP meeting that she had been on an IEP diploma track and had been earning half credits instead of regular credits; thus, she had only enough credits to be considered a sophomore when she entered her fourth year of high school. Although Maria's mother attended every IEP meeting during those three years, no one explained the limitations of an IEP diploma or an IEP diploma track. It was not until she was entering her fourth year of high school that she was provided with accurate information. At that point, Maria was 19 years old.

If the students and parents just described had known about the limitations of the IEP diploma, they could have sought assistance and appropriate adjustment of services and programs so that their children could have had the opportunity to earn a regular high school diploma. Creating a more accurate name for the IEP diploma is a small change but would make a substantial difference in providing vital information to students and parents and might prevent similar situations from occurring in the future.

We recognize that it is the goal of the state to provide all students with a quality education. It is a disservice to special education students, who expect to be awarded a diploma that will allow them to access the same benefits as their non-disabled peers, to instead receive an empty promise. While we realize that not all students with disabilities will have the ability to obtain a regular high school diploma, it is critical that all students are informed of the benefits and limitations of the type of certificate or diploma they are expected to receive upon completion of high school. IEP diplomas are not considered to be regular high school diplomas by the government and institutions of higher education. This fact should be reflected in the name of the certificate awarded to students who have completed the goals on their IEPs.

We look forward to working with you to immediately correct this problem. Please contact Christie Love at Advocates for Children of New York at 212.822.9536 or clove@advocatesforchildren.org to discuss this matter further. Thank you for your consideration of this important issue.

Sincerely,

Advocates for Children of New York, Inc.

Bronx Mental Retardation and Developmental Disability Council

Bronx Children's Committee of
BX Mental Retardation and Developmental Disability Council

Bronx Family Support Committee of
BX Mental Retardation and Developmental Disability Council

Brooklyn Center for the Independence of the Disabled

Center for Independence of the Disabled of New York

Citizens Advice Bureau

David Bloomfield, President, Citywide Council on High Schools

Directions for Our Youth

Fedcap Career Design School

Imani House, Inc.

Lawyers for Children, Inc.

Learning Disabilities Association of New York State

National Center for Schools and Communities Fordham University

New Visions for Public Schools

New York Branch International Dyslexia Association, Inc.

New York Lawyers for the Public Interest

Norm Fruchter, Director, Community Involvement Program,
Annenberg Institute for School Reform

Resources for Children with Special Needs, Inc.

Teachers Unite

The Collective of Researchers on Educational Disappointment and Desire (CREDD)

The John F. Kennedy, Jr. Institute at CUNY

The Learning Disabilities Association of New York City

The New York Immigration Coalition (NYIC)

Turning Point

United Neighborhood Houses

cc: Patricia Geary, Coordinator, Special Education Policy and Program Development