Types of High School Diplomas

It is the culmination of typically twelve long years of studying and hard work. You put on your long robe and ridiculously square hat with tassel, and you walk across the stage to shake your principal?s hand and receive your diploma. Graduation is a celebration of a young person?s academic achievement until that point. It is also a jumping off point where students who have been treated largely the same for most of their lives will diverge onto dramatically different paths as they enter adulthood. While everyone?s diploma looks the same on graduation day, different students are likely to receive different types of high school diplomas. The quality and type of coursework you completed in high school can determine which kind of degree you will earn, and this may partially dictate where you will go upon leaving high school.

General Diploma

Each school has a set of requirements for receiving a diploma. This typically involves earning a specified number of course hours and completing certain general education requirements. The number of hours you need and the specific courses required of all students vary depending on state and sometimes even local school district. For instance, some states require that all high school students take four years of math and English, regardless of what kind of diploma they will receive. Some schools may require everyone to take a physical education class or a year of foreign language, while others may not. If you are unsure what classes are absolutely necessary for you to graduate, you should check your school handbook or ask your guidance counselor to make sure that you are on the right path.

International Baccalaureate Diploma

Some schools may offer the International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma program. This program acknowledges students as meeting global expectations for university readiness. IB is headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland. Students who participate in this program will write an extended research essay of at least 4000 words. They will work with a teacher on this process. Students are also required to take a Theory of Knowledge (TOK) course, which aims to provide a better understanding of how multiple disciplines interact. Finally, students must pass an oral presentation and a 1500 word essay to receive this addition to the high school diploma. Due to budgetary and political reasons, however, not all schools provide students the opportunity to participate in this program.

Honors Diploma

While you would still receive a regular degree, some students may also earn the distinction of an honors diploma. This type of degree is reserved for students with exceptional academic ability. The requirements for an honors diploma vary by school district. For instance, some school districts may require that honors diploma recipients meet a certain GPA expectation, take a determined number of honors classes, or meet a specified GPA ranking in comparison to their peers. Other possible determinants used for an honors diploma may include research projects, ACT or SAT scores, or participation in a special program, such as Governor?s School. To find out what the qualifications are for an honors diploma at your school, check your school handbook or speak to your school counselor.

College Preparation Diploma

Many schools require students to choose a diploma path early in their high school career. Each type of diploma, then, requires that students take certain classes. One of these categories is the college preparation or college prep diploma. Students who take this path must meet the minimum requirements for entrance into a university once they graduate. Therefore, they will not need to take any remedial courses at a community college before entering a four-year institution. Typically, this degree requires at least four years of English and three or four of math and science. However, college prep students must usually also take at least two years of a foreign language and some sort of art elective. The idea is that you are well-rounded and have a firm foundation that will help you be ready for the college curriculum. In this case, you will still be earning a general high school degree, but it will be designated college preparation on your applications.

Technical or Vocational Diploma

Some students know what they want to do when they graduate high school, and that plan does not involve a four-year college. Instead, those students are either ready to enter a career or want to do a minimal amount of technical schooling. These students may choose to take the technical or vocational route towards earning their diploma. In this case, these students would not take the college prep courses, such as a foreign language or art. Instead, they would take a series of career focused classes. These differ depending on your school, but they may include automotive, criminal justice, early childhood care, or culinary arts courses. Again, you would still earn a regular degree, but it would have a technical diploma designation. If you later decided that you wanted to go to college, you may have to enroll in a community college to earn a few credits first.

Dual or Combined Diploma

Students who are not sure what they want to do after graduation or who are just interested in a little bit of everything may opt for a dual diploma. This means that you are taking courses from both the college preparation and vocational paths. A student who chooses this path must be committed, however, because this usually means taking more classes to meet both requirements. Following the dual degree path may also leave less room for electives since you might be busy tackling both foreign language and automotive classes on top of math, English, and science. A student who earns this degree, however, has multiple opportunities upon graduation. He or she can hop directly into a career or head to college, perhaps even working part-time in their chosen career path to help pay college tuition.

Certificate of Completion

A certificate of completion is not technically a high school diploma. It is, though, usually awarded at the graduation ceremony along with all of the other diplomas. Students who have severe disabilities may not be capable of completing the general degree requirements. These students do, however, attend school regularly, work hard, and meet goals. These goals are outlined in an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). If a student meets the benchmarks outlined in his IEP but not general education requirements, he can receive a certificate of completion. This degree will not suffice for college admission, but it may help that student earn jobs that do not require a high school diploma.

General Education Development

Not everyone receives a high school diploma. For various reasons, some students do not finish high school. Perhaps an illness or pregnancy interfered with a student?s ability to complete her courses. Sometimes, a student comes to the country as an immigrant and is unable to earn a degree because he is too old to be part of the school system. Some students simply drop out due to a lack of support, resources, or motivation. The good news is that there is hope found in the general education development or GED. The GED is a group of tests in five subjects: language arts: writing, social studies, science, language arts: reading, and mathematics. These tests cover a minimum of what a high school student is expected to know upon graduation. If an individual chooses to take these tests and passes, then he can earn a GED. Most employers will accept the GED in place of a high school diploma; however, a distinction is usually noted.

There are multiple routes to finishing high school, and not everyone takes the same way. When deciding what kind of high school diploma you want to strive for, consider the kinds of courses you want to take, the amount of homework you are willing to do, and what your goals are for after college. While your parents, friends, and guidance counselors may all have opinions on this subject, there is no right answer. Only you can make this decision since you will be the one doing the work along the way and finally crossing the stage to take your diploma in hand.