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A Good Investment in Tough Times

About 2.5 million residents of New York State, trapped at the margins of the economy, lack the basic skills that come with a high school education. To help these people — and strengthen the economy — the state must work with the cities to expand access to the relatively inexpensive programs that prepare people for the General Educational Development Test, which provides the equivalent of a high school diploma and gives low-skilled workers a leg up in the job market.

The City Council recently undertook a broad set of initiatives aimed at getting as many nongraduates as possible into preparation and testing programs. Earlier this month, for example, it began a \$1.25 million pilot program aimed at the thousands of job seekers who will turn up at city-run employment centers this year without high school diplomas. Under the new program, those people will be introduced to the G.E.D. and given an official practice test.

Those who pass the practice test will get the next available seat in the G.E.D. exam, bypassing what is often a lengthy waiting list. Those who need more preparation will be referred to free prep classes. The Council's new program deserves to be expanded, but for that to happen, the state must do its part.

Last year, the state brought G.E.D. testing nearly to a halt by withholding \$1.1 million intended to reimburse the not-for-profit groups that administer the tests. The reimbursement was catastrophically low to start: a mere \$20 for each test taker, which can be as little as a fifth of the provider's costs, depending on the services.

The state money was partially restored after community groups pushed back, but the disruption, which went on for several months, is still being felt in the testing network, where seats are more difficult to find than usual. Even in tough fiscal times like these, the Legislature must be able to find a few million dollars in the \$96 billion operating budget for struggling adult learners. It's a minuscule price to pay for helping vulnerable New Yorkers find a way into the economic mainstream.

The Legislature should proceed carefully on two new provisions recommended by the State Board of Regents. It is a good idea to require G.E.D. candidates to take the official practice test before taking the full seven-hour exam, but only if the state subsidizes the costs so that the tests are widely available. The provision that would require test takers to pay a fee must include a waiver for the poorest of the poor.

The last thing the state should want is for people who are qualified for the test to be barred by an inability to pay.