

POINT OF VIEW

The GED at a Crossroads: Time to Preserve Access and Expand Opportunities

The New York State Board of Regents recently approved two proposals that will potentially change GED policy and practice across the state. One is to start requiring a pre-screening test for all GED candidates. The second is to change the education law in order to begin charging a fee for the GED exam. Both changes threaten to limit access to the primary gateway to educational and career advancement for the 2.8 million adult New Yorkers without a high school diploma.

New York's GED testing system has gained considerable attention in recent years, both for its low test passage rate and as the target of reforms. New York State ranks last in the country for its GED passage rate of 54 percent, with the City below 50 percent. But the larger challenge that these passage rates hide is that less than seven percent of eligible New Yorkers receives any type of basic skills preparation, despite the fact that GED attainment represents a major net fiscal benefit for our city and state.

Prominent studies by Jacqueline Cook and the Community Service Society have unraveled the problems and offered practical solutions. New York City Council Speaker Christine Quinn has trumpeted the need for expanded access and better coordination of GED testing and preparation. The City Council has supported new initiatives, including a project that links job seekers without diplomas who come through the City's Workforce1 Career Centers to on-site GED practice tests and referrals to the best next step for educational gain. Individuals who do well on the practice test are quickly scheduled for the GED exam, and those who need more help are referred to free preparation classes. The NYC Department of Education is piloting a GED curriculum to prepare students for the new GED exam slated for 2014.

While there has been some exciting recent progress toward GED reform, particularly in New York City, public budget deficits and a misguided focus on passage rates over service levels have countered GED system improvement. Last summer, the New York State Education Department (NYSED) stopped funding GED testing sites for a couple of scary months, disrupting GED testing services and reducing the number of GEDs awarded. The effects still linger as test centers reset their capacity. City funding for adult literacy programs has also taken a hit in the latest rounds of budget cuts.

With help from the Campaign for Tomorrow's Workforce (CTW), adult education practitioners in New York City have come together to share their concerns about current policies and make recommendations based on their experience in the field. The CTW is an advocacy coalition – guided by Neighborhood Family Services Coalition, United Neighborhood Houses, and Community Service Society – with the goal of building support for policies to reconnect young adults to education and work. Since 2010, CTW has expanded its work to include a campaign for GED reform, as part of a larger agenda for youth and adults. Through discussions with over 40 agencies involved in literacy and adult education, the CTW has developed a set of shared policy priorities for improving GED testing.

Based on this body of work with adult literacy practitioners, the CTW opposes both of

the recently approved state proposals for GED testing. Restrictive screening for test readiness and charging new fees are policies that will close off opportunities to many students who are poised to earn an equivalency diploma and take the next step in their lives.

Maximize the number not the rate

The State's primary policy goal should be to increase the number of people earning GED diplomas. NYSED's justification for test readiness screening is the State's low GED test passage rate. While the CTW supports some efforts to increase the passage rate, it should be a secondary measure of success and should never justify any policies that will decrease the number of likely GED recipients. We need to balance access to the exam with greater support for test candidates so that more individuals obtain GED diplomas.

The CTW supports expanded use of an Official Practice Test (OPT) to help students and teachers identify specific academic skill gaps and gain practice and familiarity with the exam through a simulated experience. If screening for test readiness is to be effective, we need to find the optimal benchmark that allows for the largest number of people to pass the test. GED test center experience indicates that a significant number of test-takers who pass an OPT at a minimum level are able to pass the GED exam. Any proposals to require a higher OPT score should be studied closely to ensure that the system does not lock out people who could pass.

For system-wide screening to be effective, it would need to be implemented consistently for all test-takers, not just those who attend preparation classes. Currently, two thirds of GED test-takers have no preparation or demonstration of test readiness. Therefore, it would require substantial investment and capacity building to be able to offer practice tests to all members of the public who want to take the GED exam.

Continue state funding for GED testing without fees

The CTW opposes the state proposal to transfer the cost burden of GED testing to localities and GED test-takers. Working people and the organizations that engage with them are feeling the harsh effects of the economic recession and are being hit by multiple layers of cuts to public services. And as the need for GED services continues to soar, our state economic health depends on developing a higher-skilled workforce. Overhauling the financing mechanism for GED testing at a time when there are no resources for transitional costs could devastate the system and severely curb access to the GED test.

NYSED and the Regents should push on all levers to ensure the continuity of state funding for GED test centers in the next fiscal year. It is worth also exploring a new structure of GED testing contracts based on a grant system (instead of the current reimbursement policy) that would allow for more stability and flexibility for test center operations, and would remove the financial incentive to test as many individu-

als as possible regardless of their test readiness.

Incorporate field input

The CTW also recommends a new advisory council – made up of adult education stakeholders and practitioners – to help inform NYSED's policy decisions and better incorporate best practices. With new smart leadership at NYSED, including a Deputy Commissioner with a long track record in the field, it is a ripe moment to establish new structures for input from the ground up. Also, creating a mechanism for coordination at the city level could facilitate much-needed connections among NYC preparation programs and test centers.

The GED represents a valuable tool for hard-working people to achieve their educational and career goals and for New York's long-term economic sustainability. It is an important stepping stone on the path to postsecondary education and gainful employment. Individuals who attain a GED earn higher incomes, pay more taxes, depend less on public benefits, and have a better chance at a more satisfying life.

In the midst of the larger budget debate at all levels of government, it is crucial to bring the focus back to the consequences of policies on the lives of real people. New York's GED testing system is one more piece of the opportunity structure that is at risk of being dismantled as the default



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position aims budget cuts at the members of our community who are already struggling hardest against economic and social inequities. It is time to reflect deeply on the kind of society we want and base policy decisions on our long-term common interests.

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