

Making the GED a Gateway to Opportunity

Through good times and bad, more than one million working-age New Yorkers without a high school degree or equivalent —nearly a quarter of the city’s working-age population — find themselves on the fringes of the labor market, stuck in low-wage jobs with little chance of advancement or out of work. The single biggest reason is their lack of basic skills.

Decades ago, it was possible for those with less than a high school education to find relatively secure jobs. But as the American economy has shifted from manufacturing of goods to service-related industries, such jobs have all but disappeared. To have any hope of success in today’s labor market, individuals must demonstrate an ability to read and perform math operations at a reasonably high level. Those who cannot are unlikely ever to enjoy job security, much less a middle class standard of living.

GED Pass Rates

This ought to be where the GED comes in. But results in the current GED system in both the city and the state are abysmal. Of the 1.1 million workers without a high school diploma, only about 3 percent took the test in 2006. Over half were 20 to 49 years of age and working full time. More than 60 percent were black and Latino New Yorkers. In New York City, only 47.5 percent passed the test in 2007, the latest figure for the city. And the relatively few city residents who do pass the exam and move on to college — the point at which they can truly enhance employability and earning power — have poor rates of retention and graduation.

Over the last several years, the Community Service Society has conducted in-depth research on the city’s GED system. The results of this research are captured in a recently issued report on the GED, “From Basic Skills to Better Futures: Generating Economic Dividends for New York City.”

As a signifier that an individual has mastered basic skills, the GED is a key resource for low-skilled New Yorkers looking to improve their employment prospects and earning power. Data shows that individuals without a high school degree or equivalent are far less likely than their better-educated counterparts to find work — and when they do, they typically work fewer hours for lower pay.

Earning Power

Individuals with at least a high school diploma earn more, work more, and are less vulnerable to layoffs. In fact, during the current recession, those with less than high school educations lost jobs at nearly twice the rate of high school graduates and more than ten times the rate of college graduates. Even before the recent downturn, during the current decade, jobs for those with less than a 12th-grade education had declined in number and relative pay.

Despite misperceptions to the contrary, the GED exam is not easy. In fact, by definition, anyone who passes the GED compares favorably to high school graduates. Also, very few individuals who enroll in coursework toward a GED say they left high school because it was too difficult for them. Rather, the reasons for leaving typically include fear for their physical safety at school or severe disruptions at home.

Insufficient resources, lack of oversight, and a complete absence of coordination contribute to our system's poor performance. The majority of programs that aim to support individuals in attaining a GED are funded at approximately \$1,000 per participant annually. Programs funded at this level simply cannot offer the necessary hours, retain good teachers, focus on transition to college or careers, or provide participants with the supportive services they need to succeed.

The underfunding of GED programs is matched by a near-complete lack of uniform standards and oversight. Individuals who wish to enter a program — a vital step for any young or returning New Yorker looking to get back on track to success after leaving high school — have no single resource to help them sort through all existing options to find the one that is right for them.

Despite the aggregate underperformance of our GED system, various programs and subsystems have shown promise and merit greater support and replication. Recent years have seen the launch of several promising efforts to build rigorous pathways for those with low literacy to earn a GED and move on to college. New program models for adults integrate the teaching of basic and career skills, so that participants can make strides toward earning a GED while receiving focused job and career training.

Improving Our Efforts

But much more can be done to make the GED a true gateway to opportunity. In order for GED programs to offer a bridge to higher education and successful careers, they must be adequately funded. New programs should be created and existing programs expanded for the many high school dropouts who are low-level learners. The quality of GED instruction must be improved. If GED instruction is seen as unimportant, it will not attract the level of instructors needed to make the program a success. The city should create and sustain a GED system that ensures easy access, including a comprehensive information and referral network. The city must also completely reform the testing system, so that it is simple to find out how to take the GED exam.

A successful GED preparation and testing system is vital for the future economic strength of the city. The skills acquired through a GED are essential to produce an educated workforce that will continue to attract businesses to locate in New York City and to improve the overall standard of living. But the city has allowed the GED to become a second-class education system, primarily serving low-income people of color who have been failed by the public school system. This situation must be reversed.

The report, "From Basic Skills to Better Futures: Generating Economic Dividends for New York City," is available online at www.cssny.org.

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