

## **Read it and weep: New York State is worst in U.S. in awarding GEDs**

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Tuesday, November 10th 2009

New York has the nation's worst GED pass rate, falling below even Alabama and Mississippi - and it's the city that's dragging the state down.

Although 1.6 million city residents older than 16 are not in school and lack a high school diploma, only 28,000 took the high school equivalency test last year to get a General Equivalency Diploma. Just half of the test-takers passed.

Statewide, just 60% test-takers passed - making New York's pass rate dead last, the American Council on Education says.

Critics blame the disappointing showing on the city's underfunded and confusing mishmash of GED prep programs.

"There is no coordinated GED prep effort here in the city," said Lazar Treschan, co-author of a report by the Community Services Society. "There are thousands of people who need quality prep programs who can't get them."

After two years at South Shore High School in Brooklyn, Andre Fuller had just 4-1/2 credits. "They said if you want to sign out, no problem," said Fuller, 20, who dropped out in 2007.

That fall, he was turned away from a prep program because he was wrongly told that he needed a state ID. He then got into a program that lost its funding three weeks later and was discontinued.

It wasn't until Fuller became homeless and was referred to the social service agency The Door that he got help. After extensive counseling, he enrolled in a six-week course and passed.

"I cried when I got my test," the aspiring college student said. "I was so happy."

The Community Services Society report found that there is no single phone number or Web site to find a program or test site, no citywide data that track which programs work and no link between funding and success.

"There are really no standards for the prep courses," said David Jason Fischer, co-writer of the society report. "Even somebody who couldn't pass the GED themselves could be an instructor."

Since statistics show that more than 65% of students in prep programs read below an eighth-grade level, advocates say students often need more than a few weeks of preparation. Many programs, though, are funded at about only \$1,000 per student.

A spokesman for the state Education Department said the GED is an "important tool" and that "the Regents intend to carefully analyze our state's approach to the GED."

A city Department of Education spokeswoman said that since 2006 the city has made "considerable progress" in improving GED programs and making them more accessible - and officials plan to do more.

Christina Williams dropped out of Norman Thomas High School in 2006 when her mother got lung cancer.

"Every time I would go to school, I would get a call and have to leave," said Williams, 22.

After her mother died, the East Harlem resident tried to get back on track, but the city's Manhattan GED referral center had a two-month wait. She got into a Brooklyn program but left after a teacher and a student had a fistfight during class.

Three more programs were over capacity, but she got into a fourth. Williams has failed the test twice, but she's not giving up. "My mother always said without an education you can't get anywhere," she said.

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