

# The New York Times

October 13, 2009  
EDITORIAL

## How to Flunk Test-Giving

Millions of Americans are trapped at the margins of the economy because they lack the basic skills that come with a high-school education. This year, more than 600,000 of these people will try to improve their prospects by studying for the rigorous, seven-hour examination known as the General Educational Development test, or G.E.D., which should end in a credential that employers and colleges recognize as the equivalent of a diploma.

The most fortunate live in states — such as Delaware, Kansas and Iowa — that have well-managed programs in which 90 percent or more of the test-takers pass.

The least fortunate live in New York State, which has the lowest pass rate in the nation, just behind Mississippi. Worse off still are the G.E.D.-seekers of New York City, which has a shameful pass rate — lower than that of the educationally challenged District of Columbia. This bodes ill for the city, where at least one in five adult workers lacks a diploma, and the low-skill jobs that once allowed them to support their families are dwindling.

The scope of this problem is laid out in [an alarming new study](#) by the Community Service Society, a 160-year-old advocacy group that focuses on policies affecting the city's poor. Unless the state and city strengthen and better finance the G.E.D. programs, the authors say, a growing number of undereducated New Yorkers will be shut out of the labor force and will become a permanent burden to their fellow taxpayers.

The typical G.E.D.-seekers in New York City are black or Hispanic, aged 19 to 60, and have hit the advancement wall in the workplace because of the lack of a diploma. They learn right away that G.E.D. classes are difficult to find, thanks to poor programming by the city and state, which pay for them. The chaos in New York is regularly felt at the GED Testing Service in Washington. According to officials there, New York State accounts for about 10 percent of the testing activity nationally but about three-quarters of telephone calls from people who don't know how to access the G.E.D. system locally.

There is an excellent program run by the City University of New York's preparatory high school. But in general, the report notes, the G.E.D. here "has become a second-class education system serving low-income people of color who were failed by our K-12 school system."

The courses are often of questionable quality. The teachers are generally poorly paid and most often marginally qualified. And according to the report, the state and city spend about \$1,000 per student, less than a tenth of what's spent per student in the public school system.

According to the GED Testing Service in Washington, New Yorkers have so much trouble accessing the system and getting testing appointments that they often take the test in Georgia, which welcomes out-of-state test-takers for a modest fee.

New York drives up its failure rate on this costly test and wastes precious resources by allowing people to take it without first taking preparation courses. States with the highest success rates often require a diagnostic pretest, followed by instruction as needed and then an official practice test. That's the case in Iowa, where 99 percent of the test-takers passed the exam in 2008.

Iowa also has made the G.E.D. an integral part of its educational system. Those who do not pass the diagnostic test are funneled into literacy courses offered by community colleges at little or no cost.

To emulate this model, New York will need to invest a great deal more than it spends at the moment. But the costs of doing nothing clearly outweigh those of remaking a chaotic and ineffectual system.

Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company