



Getting Serious About the GED:

*How New York Can
Build a Bridge from
High School Dropout
to Postsecondary
Success*

November 2009

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Executive Summary

Despite our best efforts, a certain number of young people will continue to fail to earn a high school diploma. For these young adults, there must be an effective alternative to proceeding through life without a high school degree. The GED (General Educational Development) is a series of tests—reading, writing, mathematics, science and social studies—that should be that alternative.

The New York State Education Department’s (NYSED) Adult Education and Workforce Development (AEWD) team’s purpose is that “all undereducated New Yorkers without a high school credential...will access high quality instruction that addresses their needs and educational goals.” Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, what we still have in New York State is an educational funnel—an upside-down pyramid, so to speak, with a large group at the top who lack a diploma, a smaller group who seek a GED, an even smaller group who attain a GED and go on to college, and a miniscule number who complete college and leave with an advanced degree. This process, which basically filters out a few young adults and gives them a shot at a career and true financial security, is unacceptable.

This report will elaborate on this process by first answering the following questions:

1. Why are GED pass rates in New York State so poor?
2. Why do GED holders fail to achieve postsecondary success—primarily by not enrolling and succeeding in college?

Next it will recommend strategies for increasing both pass rates and successful transition to higher education and training, reiterating the recommendations put forth in the Community Service Society’s (CCS) recent publication, *From Basic Skills to Better Futures: Generating Economic Dividends for New York City*. Both that report and this one contend that the educational funnel can be widened significantly. This report will articulate an Action Agenda for the state to do just that. Recommendations include:

- **Develop a statewide intake function.**
- **Institutionalize test preparation.**
- **Expand the work of the Governor’s Summit on Dropout Prevention and Student Engagement to include work on GED.**
- **Create a NYSED task force on the needs of GED-holding students and charge that task force with identifying strategies to improve graduation rates.**
- **Allow needy college students who attend part time to receive proportional Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) benefits without restriction, and abolish the so-called “independent schedule.”**
- **Establish a fee for GED test-takers.**

Chapter 1:

School Dropout and the GED Alternative

The racial disparities in graduation rates are staggering. While 79% of white and 76% of Asian students graduated in 2006, only 47% of black, 46% of Hispanic, and 40% of Native American students graduated.³

According to NYSED, 32,602 students failed to graduate from New York State’s high schools in 2007-2008. Lost lifetime earnings for those dropouts is over \$21 billion. The state could also have saved \$1.5 billion in lifetime health care costs had those dropouts graduated. In addition, the state’s economy could see crime-related savings and additional revenue totaling \$457 million if male high school graduation alone increased a mere 5%.¹

According to the U.S. Census, dropouts earned less than \$20,000 a year, compared to an annual salary of almost \$50,000 for someone with a bachelor’s degree and close to \$80,000 for someone with an advanced degree. President Obama acknowledged this fact when he addressed a crowd at Hudson Valley Community College in Troy, New York in September 2009 and said, “In the coming years, jobs requiring at least an associate degree are expected to grow twice as fast as those without.”

Dropouts are also more likely to rely on public assistance to make ends meet. Dropouts are even estimated to die a decade earlier than graduates, who have better rates of exercise and smaller rates of smoking.² New York State and the nation cannot allow dropout rates to increase.

For financial and health reasons alone, dropping out is not the best alternative, but there are many reasons why it happens. Many young people who drop out are over-age and under-credited, having fallen behind earlier in their education; have personal pressures and responsibilities outside school such as ill parents, or are parents themselves; must work to financially support themselves or others; do not feel safe at school; or were not challenged by traditional teaching methods and found themselves too bored to complete a high school degree.

The bottom line is that, even with student engagement and dropout prevention policies in place, some young adults are going to leave school without a diploma. Acknowledging this fact is crucial if we are to prepare *all* young people for success in life. And that’s where the GED comes in.

“GED” stands for General Educational Development and is a series of tests—reading, writing, mathematics, science and social studies—that a candidate usually takes over the course of two days. The state refers to the GED as a “high school equivalency diploma,” and NYSED states that it is a rigorous exam that 40% of graduating high school seniors could not pass. Others disagree, saying that a high school diploma represents four years of work, while a GED represents only a comparable skill level.⁴ Still, if used as a stepping stone to postsecondary education and training, it can be a valuable tool for those who achieve it.

States do not count people who earn GEDs as high school graduates. Under federal No Child Left Behind policy, a “regular high school diploma” means the standard high school diploma awarded to students in a state that is fully aligned with the state’s academic content standards and does not include a GED credential, certificate of attendance, or any alternative award.⁵

Until recently, New York City-specific data looked different, because it *did* count GED attainees as graduates. Beginning with the cohort that started high school in September 2004 and graduated in June 2008, both New York City and the state counted graduates as those students meeting the requirements for a diploma in June or following summer school completion in August. New York City ceased to count GED attainees as graduates; instead, they will now be in their own category, separate from dropouts and others.

Both high school completion and GED attainment should be considered avenues to postsecondary education and training. While that is NYSED’s intent, the current GED system most resembles a funnel, with a large group taking the tests, a small group passing the tests, and an even smaller group using the GED as a means to higher education and a career. These results have a great deal to do with a lack of resources, a lack of GED test preparation, and with restrictions on GED testing.

Chapter 2: The GED Funnel

Despite ongoing efforts to improve high school graduation rates, the GED remains a necessary and important support for many people who leave high school without diplomas. Since its establishment during World War II, the GED has given high school dropouts the opportunity to show employers that their literacy and numeracy met acceptable minimum standards.

Today, meeting high school graduation standards is no longer enough. Increasingly, employers' minimum standard is a postsecondary credential beyond high school, in most cases a college degree or training certificate. The rising threshold stems from permanent changes in the economy that have resulted in the automation or offshoring of those jobs that require little in the way of reading, writing or math skills.

Asking GED holders to pursue a college degree raises serious questions, however. At least one-third of all high school graduates never attend college. Is it fair to expect college enrollment of young adults and adults who dropped out of high school? Are GED holders capable of succeeding in college? If not, why not?

In brief, people with GEDs can and do graduate from college every year. But too few do. An analysis by the City University of New York (CUNY) found that GED holders who make it to their third year are just as likely to stay as students with Regents high school diplomas, and they actually earn higher grades. Unfortunately, only four in ten GED holders attending college survive that long.

The odds of success can be visualized as an educational funnel. At the wide end is the whole population of working-age young adults and adults lacking a high school diploma, more than 2.8 million New Yorkers. The funnel narrows as they seek a GED, since many do not seek it or get discouraged during preparation. Many take the GED and fail. Of those who pass, few enroll in college. Then the funnel narrows further at the bottom, as

college students who earned GEDs struggle to stay in school and graduate. In 2007, fewer than 2,000 students at community colleges—the main post-secondary route for GED holders—graduated or remained in school after six years.⁶

As we will see, each stage looms large for out-of-school New Yorkers, especially since they usually lack the kind of sustained support that most high school graduates take for granted.

Taking and Passing the GED

It might seem like the most obvious step for a dropout: take and pass the GED. Yet the number of young adults and adults in New York State who do is astonishingly low.

Roughly 2.8 million New York State residents over age 18 lack a high school diploma.⁷ In 2008, 57,000 New Yorkers took the GED, and 31,075 passed it.⁸

The GED pass rate in New York State has fluctuated between 50-60% for several years. The state has consistently ranked near the bottom, with a pass rate only slightly higher than Alabama and Mississippi. In 2008, those two states improved their performance, leaving New York State with the nation's lowest GED pass rate—60%, compared to a national rate of 73%. Take note that New York City alone has only a 50% pass rate, which certainly influences the overall ranking.⁹ See Chart 1.

Yet, New York State also has the highest access to the GED. It is the only state that offers the GED in English, Spanish, and French, and allows candidates to take the ESL (English as a Second Language) component. The state also leads the nation with the largest number of testing accommodations offered to candidates with disabilities. Data indicate that New York State has approximately 45-50% of all requests in the U.S. for such accommodations—1,300 to date for 2009 (likely to surpass 2,000 by year's end).

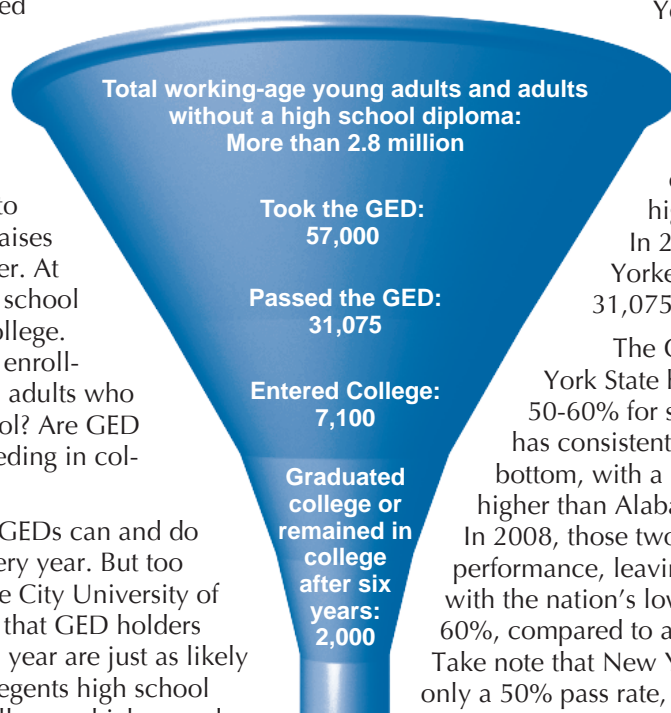
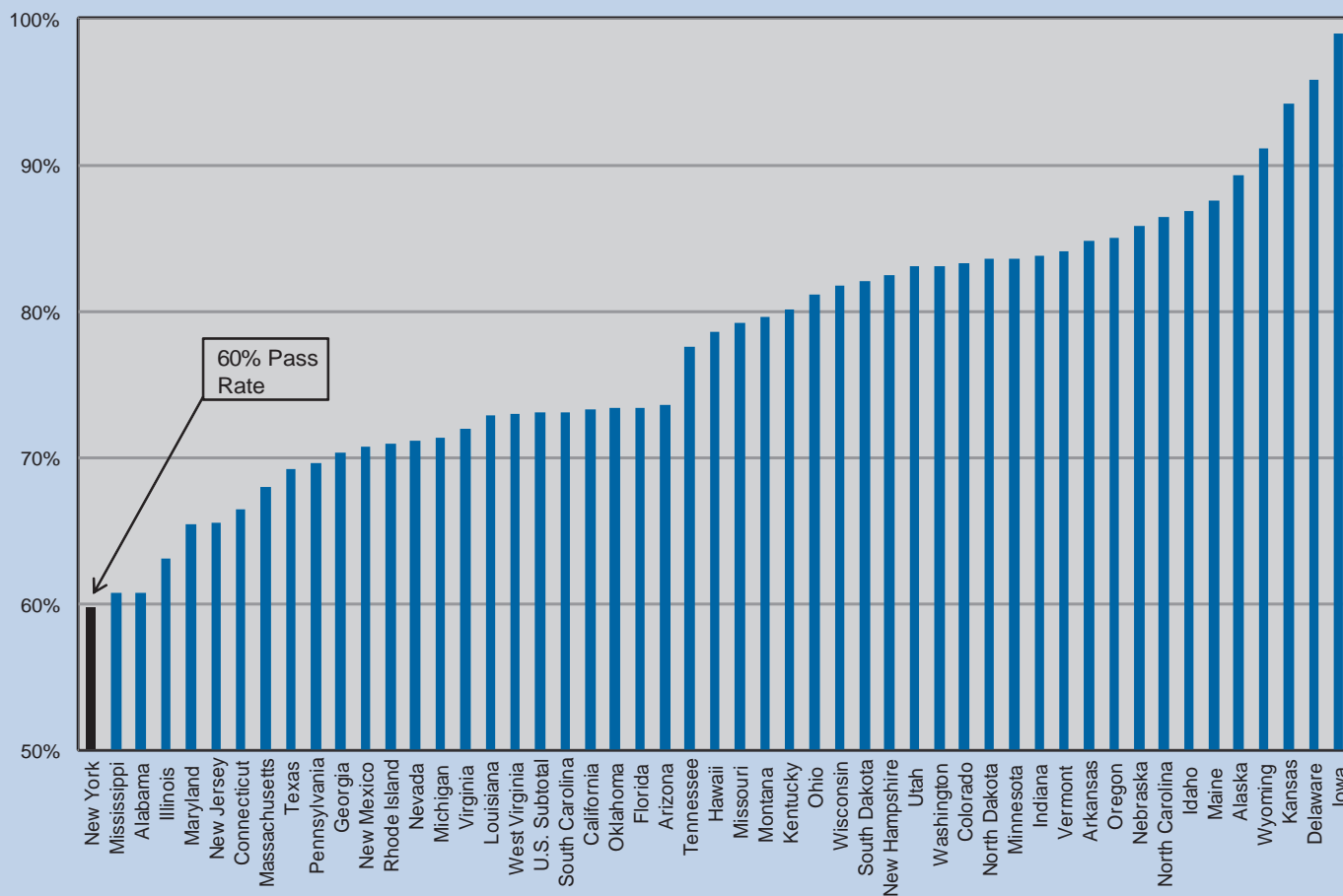


Chart 1. GED Pass Rate by State, 2008



Source: GED Testing Service, 2008 Statistical Summary, Appendix K.

Unfortunately, access without preparation may be unproductive. The consequences of such low passing levels are serious. Many applicants take the test again and again until they pass. While this wastes taxpayer dollars and strains the capacity of GED test facilities, worse is the impact of failure on the test-takers themselves, which can be seen in the thousands of first-time candidates who fail the GED and walk out of the test facility, never to return. In 2002, about 25,000 people passed the GED and 23,000 failed it. Of the latter group, almost 10,000 never retested.¹⁰ Based on several years' data, it appears that 35-40% of GED candidates who fail do not retest within the next three years. "Failure on the GED exam...each year dampens their motivation to engage in educational pursuits and fulfill aspirations for the future," notes Jacqueline Cook in *Our Chance For Change*, a landmark 2008 report on the GED testing system in New York City.¹¹

Why are pass rates in New York State so poor?

New York State has limited resources dedicated to the GED system. Funding for GED testing comes from NYSED's state operations budget, which has been cut 24% in the last two years. For state fiscal year 2010, \$2.9 million has been budgeted for GED testing. Another \$300,000 is available from fees collected to replace high school equivalency diplomas and transcripts, giving the GED Testing Unit a total of \$3.2 million to operate the system. This amount of funding must cover personnel costs, the contract with the GED Testing Service, payment for 60,000 seats at \$20 per seat, and an array of miscellaneous costs. By contrast, the two other states that test 50,000 or more candidates annually, California and Texas, support the system by charging fees. In 2007, the per-test fee in each

of these two states was \$100 per test. Texas tested 53,052 candidates and California tested 51,667. Based on this information, Texas' budget for GED testing was \$5,305,200 and California's was \$5,166,700. New York State could raise revenue and might get better test results by charging a fee.

Non-preparation program candidates are more common than those with preparation. The 2008 pass rate for candidates who took a preparatory class before attempting the GED was 69.3%, far higher than the 51% pass rate of non-preparation program candidates who study on their own or not at all.¹² Unfortunately, non-preparation program candidates are more common. New York State does not require GED preparation for students 19 or older. However, adult candidates who have passed the Official Practice Test (OPT) receive priority seating at the actual exam.¹³ See Chart 2.

New York State does not require passage of the OPT. The practice test is not mandatory and there is no formal incentive other than preferential seating at the testing site, for taking and passing the OPT. NYSED is trying to change the culture by making the OPT a common screening tool. As part of an incentive grant with the New York State Department of Labor, NYSED is funding OPT testing in 18 recently-established Literacy Zones in high-poverty areas around the state. The Literacy Zones are an education reform initiative developed by the Board of Regents and NYSED's AEWD team. They are one-stop shops that move beyond the school door to link with early childhood initiatives; offer case management, access to benefits and services such as health supports; and make direct connections with pathways out of poverty.

Test preparation courses have no minimum teacher quality or curriculum standards. There is an absence of consistent standards for teacher qualifications and curriculum. Given this absence, wide variability in the effectiveness of GED instruction can be expected.

NYSED is currently aligning the GED testing database with the ASISTS® (Adult Student Information System and Technical Support) database for student outcomes. ASISTS is a web-based student accountability database that tracks outcomes for every student served in adult education programs receiving NYSED-administered literacy funds. In addition, NYSED is setting testing standards for every preparation program and connecting low-performing programs to the Intensive Technical Assistance Planning (ITAP) initiative. The ITAP

What Constitutes a Successful Preparation Program for Young Adults?

Pros

- Programs are age-appropriate
- Programs are attractive to the young adult population
- Programs are structured but have flexible teaching methods and class scheduling

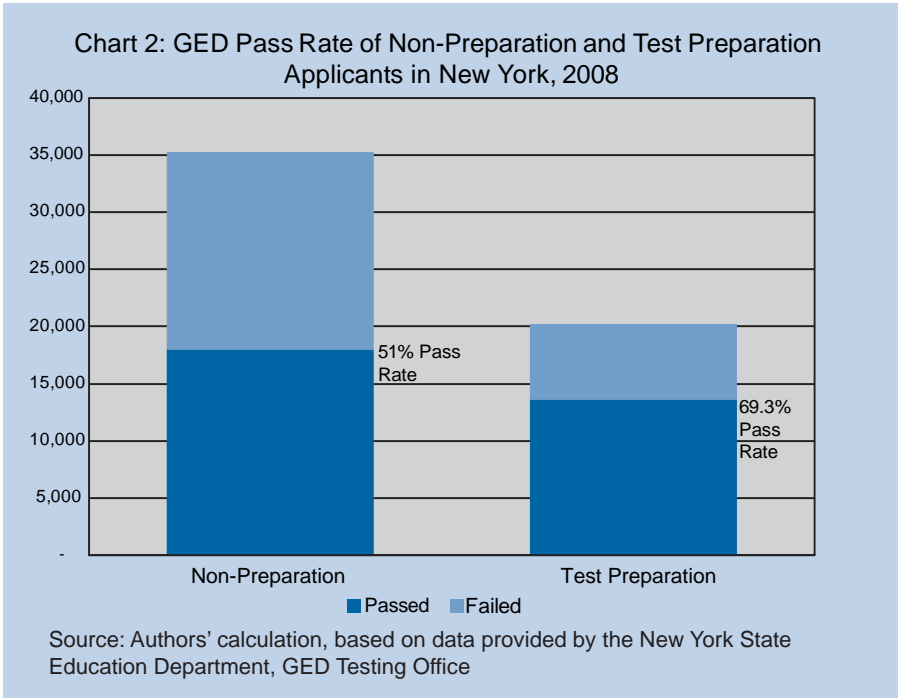
*Feedback from staff at Threshold Center for Alternative Youth Services, Inc., Rochester, NY

Cons

- Programs are not specifically suited for young adults
- Programs are inflexible with regard to a student's child care needs or work schedule
- Programs have infrequent start-up times, long waiting lists, or no openings

*Feedback from young adults and staff at Hillside Family of Agencies, Monroe, NY

process hinges on the use of data to drive action. An ITAP will be completed for each preparation program based on performance data and on-site review. NYSED will conduct formal compliance monitoring and evaluations of each low-performing provider. The Regional Adult Education Network (RAEN) will provide technical assistance to help programs improve their performance. Programs that do not show improvement will be subject to corrective action.



New York's City's GED system needs to be more effective. The largest population of GED candidates and the lowest pass rate are both in New York City, where less than half of all applicants (48%) passed in 2007. The City's system for handling the torrential volume of GED candidates, either in test preparation or in testing, is ineffective. Studies have documented an environment in which prospective GED candidates attempt to reserve seats at testing facilities through sheer guesswork, forcing them to apply at multiple sites simultaneously—in some cases joining hundreds of other applications for test dates that are already fully subscribed. As a result, some testing facilities are clogged with no-shows, and applicants may wait months or travel long distances to reach a testing site—which hurts their test performance. With public and private funding, the Literacy Assistance Center is in the middle of a one-year pilot project aimed at addressing these problems and restructuring the system. The GED Compass program includes a web portal and a centralized application that should streamline the process and decrease inefficiencies.

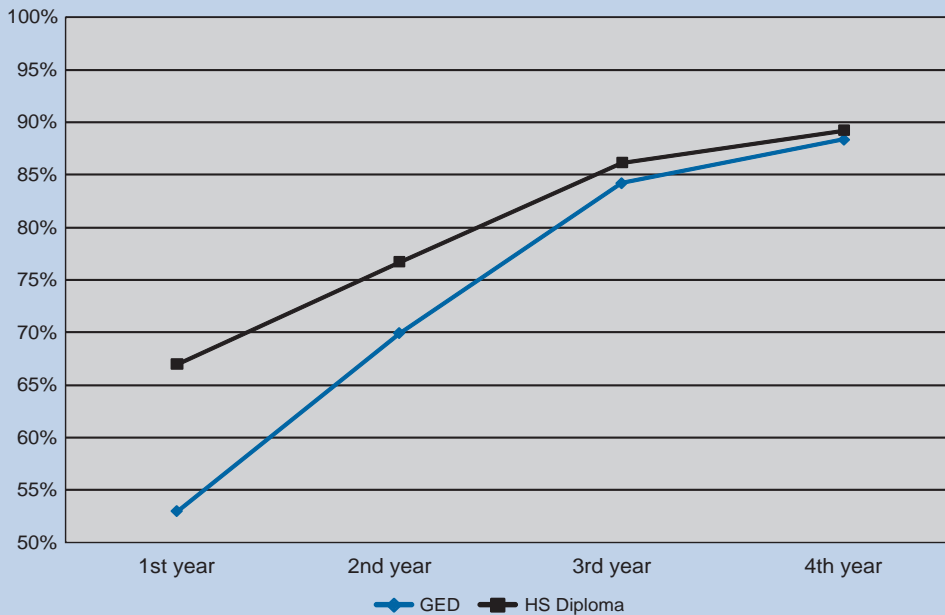
Going to College — and Graduating

The majority of GED passers (60% in 2007) report that their motivation for taking the test is to attend college and obtain a degree or certificate.¹⁴

This may come as a surprise to many Americans whose image of high school dropouts is sharply negative—unmotivated slackers, criminal element, and so on. Yet surveys of recent dropouts paint a different picture. For the majority of these young adults (and the adults they grow into), the root problem is not lack of ability to handle academic subjects, but a mix of unmet personal needs and unsupportive environments at home—and at school.¹⁵ They want to learn, they want to succeed in life, and if given the opportunity to continue their education, most will proceed.

Still, the college-going rate of GED passers remains low. A national study found that only one in nine GED holders went on to get a college degree, compared to half of all high school graduates.¹⁶ In New York State, administrative data provided by CUNY and the State University of New York (SUNY) paints an even bleaker picture. In 2001, CUNY reported that 5,400 GED-holding students enrolled, and SUNY reported an entering class of 1,700.¹⁷ Almost all went to community colleges to seek Associate Degrees or certificates. The combined population of 7,100 entering freshmen represents only 20% of the previous year's class of GED passers and less than 1% of the 2.8 million working-age New Yorkers lacking a high school diploma. The educational funnel has narrowed sharply.

Chart 3: Persistence of CUNY Community College Students by Secondary Credential, 2001 Cohort



Source: City University of New York. Chart represents share of students remaining enrolled after previous year.

According to a detailed CUNY analysis, almost one-half of all freshmen with a GED drop out in their first year of an Associate Degree program, compared to one-third of freshmen with a high school diploma. In the second year, GED-holding students are also more likely to drop out. In the third year, however, something surprising happens: GED-holding students' attrition rate actually falls slightly below that of students with a high school diploma, and they earn higher grades. See Chart 3.

At last we come to the bottom of the funnel: college graduation. As one would expect, GED-holding students are much less likely to graduate than students with diplomas. CUNY GED-holding students had a four-year graduation rate about two-thirds that of students with high school diplomas, while SUNY's four-year graduation rate among GED-holding students was only half that of students with a

high school diploma. See Chart 4. In all, about 600 GED-holding students graduated from an Associate Degree program after four years statewide.

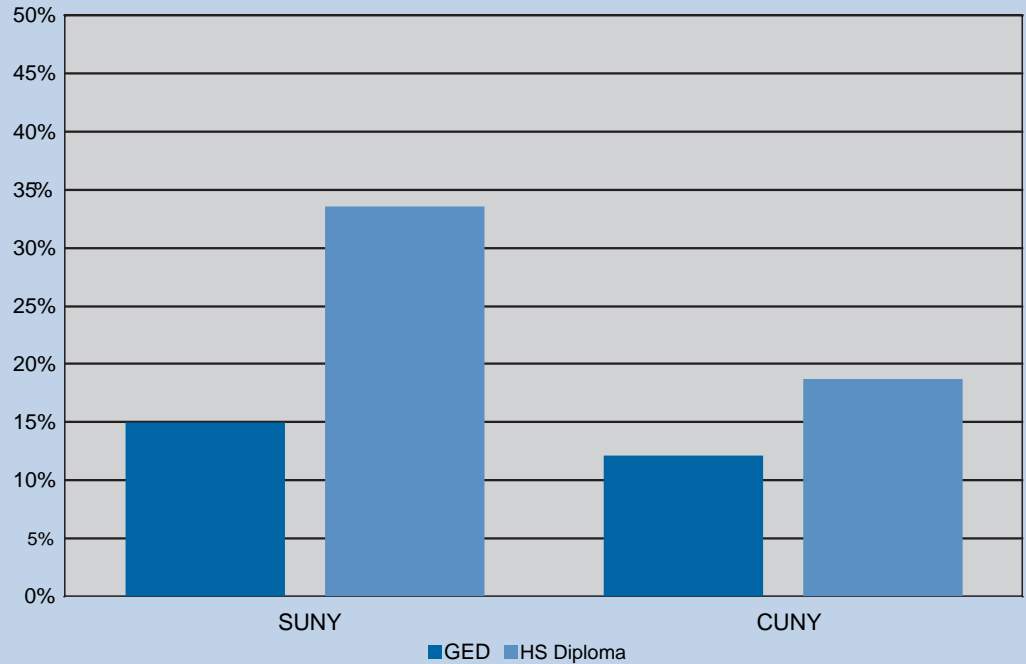
However, many more GED-holding students continue to study and make progress toward a degree beyond the four-year mark. In all, 18% of the 2001 class of GED freshmen at SUNY and CUNY (about 1,300 students) had either graduated or remained in school after four years. Their achievement was remarkable, given the obstacles they faced. Yet the numbers are discouraging. Assuming that all those still in school at the four-year mark graduate, it would still represent only 4% of the statewide GED graduating class of 2000. If we were to double the number to account for students at trade schools or non-credit certificate programs, our total would still fall short of 3,000 annually. New York State cannot solve its skilled labor market shortages by graduating fewer than 3,000 out-of-school young adults and adults each year.

Why do GED holders fail to enroll or succeed in college?

GED holders are less academically prepared than high school graduates. The debate over the GED credential's academic rigor has persisted for years. The GED Testing Service states that the median GED holder tests at the 60th percentile among high school graduates (that is, better than 59 out of 100). In predicting college readiness, the question is further complicated by the fact that while many GED holders lack college readiness, so too do many holders of Regents high school diplomas.

Still, a thorough analysis of GED-holding students by CUNY has found that they lag behind high school graduates in college readiness. CUNY community colleges test entering freshmen on reading, writing and math proficiency. In comparing the results of GED graduates to other freshmen, CUNY found that only three in ten were proficient in math or writing, compared to six in ten high school graduates. Reading scores were comparable. Only one in eight freshmen with a GED was

Chart 4: Associate's Degree Graduation Rate after Four Years by Secondary Credential, CUNY and SUNY



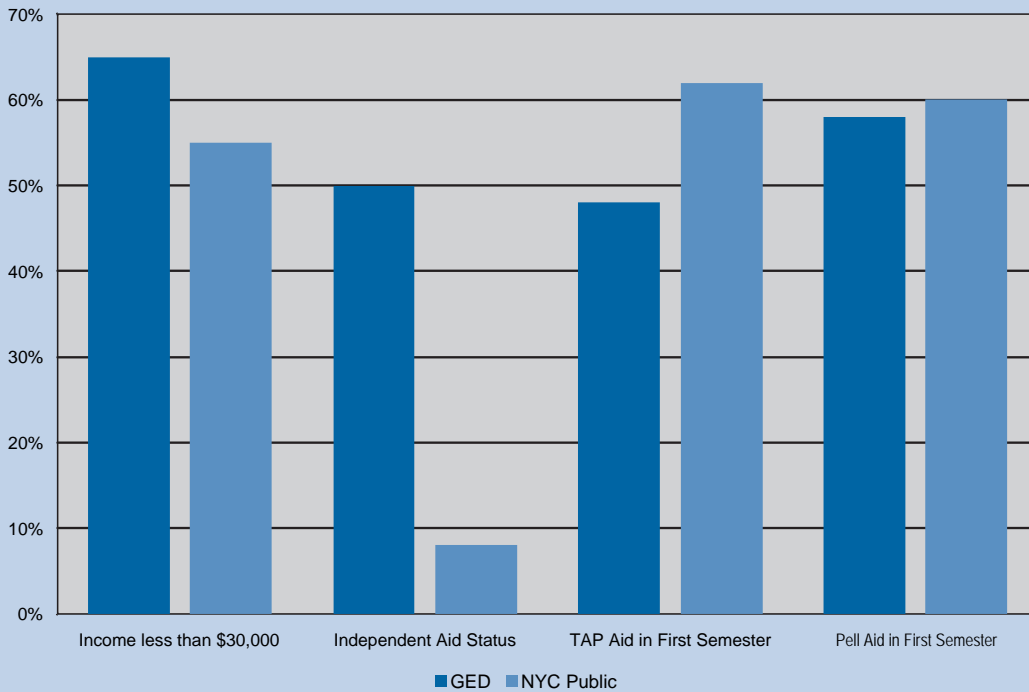
Source: Authors' calculation, based on data provided by the City University of New York and the State University of New York.

proficient in all three areas. "On the whole GED recipients are substantially less prepared for college than graduates of New York City public high schools," concludes CUNY.

The result, for GED-holding students at CUNY and elsewhere, is widespread failure to qualify for admission to four-year colleges, heavy reliance on remediation courses to make up gaps in learning, slow accumulation of college credits, and greater likelihood of leaving college after the first or second semester. Clearly, young adults and adults cannot expect to take the GED and proceed directly to college. Either their preparation for taking the GED would need to include college-preparatory material not required to pass the GED—especially in math—or a pre-college bridge program that fulfills the same function.

GED holders have less access to financial aid than high school graduates. New York State has a generous need-based financial aid program, TAP, which should provide significant assistance to GED-holding students. Yet students with a GED credential are less likely to receive TAP, even though they are poorer than other students at CUNY and receive Pell grants at a comparable rate. See Chart 5.

Chart 5: Financial Attributes of CUNY Community College Students by Secondary Credential, 2000-02 Cohorts



Source: CUNY GED Study, Tables 3 and 12

The likely explanation is that GED-holding students are more apt to be older, on their own, and studying part-time. TAP discriminates against such students in several ways. First, TAP is almost entirely restricted to full-time students. Students who take less than 12 credit hours in a semester have access to a part-time version of TAP, but the rules are so restrictive that fewer than 500 students took advantage of it in the most recent school year. Second, independent college students lacking a spouse or children fall into a disfavored category of TAP with extremely low income requirements and lower benefits. Third, personal income is counted against TAP benefits, so independent students who work full-time have difficulty qualifying for TAP. The result is that GED-holding students who have the most need for state financial aid have the most difficulty obtaining it.

GED holders have more family and work responsibilities than high school graduates. The average GED holder enrolling in college is older than the average high school graduate. According to CUNY, “In the cohorts we studied, GED-holding applicants to CUNY were most distinct from New York City public high school graduates in terms of

age, with a median difference of four years and a large percentage over 25.” The difference in age means that GED-holding students are much less likely to be supported by their parents. They are more likely to have families and to work full-time to support their families. See Table 1.

As a result, staying in college is more difficult for GED-holding students. They struggle with the dilemmas of the working parent: scheduling classes around job responsibilities, finding time away from the family to study, and dealing with unpredictable shocks, such as losing a job or taking care of a sick child. Under these circumstances, dropping out of college is a predictable response.

GED holders are less familiar with college culture and have weaker non-academic supports. GED hold-

ers start out with one disadvantage right off the bat—they are mostly from low-income families, many of whom are unfamiliar with college. “Many first-generation high school graduates and GED holders may need college information and planning support to develop realistic transition plans,” notes Stephen Reder, a leading adult literacy expert at Portland State University. But first-generation high school graduates have advantages over dropouts. They can talk to guidance counselors about postsecondary options, financial aid and the steps needed to apply for college. Many high schools set up specialized college preparation

Table 1: Student Attributes at CUNY

Student Attributes	GED Student	All Others
Working more than 20 hours	53%	43%
providing more than 20 hours of care to others	33%	16%
Strongly would like more evening classes	34%	25%

Source: CUNY GED Study, Tables 11 and 13

counseling services at the junior-senior level. Not only do GED holders lack these supports, but they are more likely to let time go by before applying for college—time enough to forget the ins and outs of “classroom culture.”

NYSED’s AEWD team is partnering with CUNY to pilot three postsecondary transition programs for NYSED-funded adult literacy programs in New York City, including a GED College Preparation Intensives program. With 144,000 low and intermediate literacy students in Adult Education programs across the state, initiatives such as this—serving students referred by a New York City Adult Literacy Program educator and offering GED preparation in the context of college preparation, as well as college readiness instruction—are critically important.

Additional supports, such as non-academic mentoring, time management and College 101 courses, may be needed to guide GED-holding students reliably into and through college. In addition, like all young adults, they require solid “soft skills” such as work ethic and responsibility. Unfortunately, they are often at a disadvantage here. At least one successful program, the Threshold Center in Rochester, New York, notes that it caters to students holistically, addressing health and mental health needs and life skills, as well as providing refresher courses to students to better prepare them for not only taking the GED exams, but for coping with life. Threshold also routinely hosts focus groups of students to gather feedback and find out what might work better for them. According to Tarlon Gibson, Manager of Alternative Education and Workforce Development at Threshold, program staff encourage and engage students, telling them that “you have to be the solution to all your problems”—with the understanding that they are not alone and have the support of caring adults.

We started at the top of the educational funnel, with the 2.8 million young adults and adults who lack a high school diploma. We looked at the 50,000 who take the GED test in an average year and the 30,000 who pass it. We then turned to the 7,000 GED-holders who enrolled in community colleges, following them to the bottom of the funnel—the roughly 2,000 community college students who graduated or were still enrolled six years later. Community colleges are not the only postsecondary route, of course. But very few GED graduates attend four-year colleges of any kind. The picture painted is, in a word, discouraging.

The good news is that the educational funnel can be widened significantly. The educational system in place today is not ordained by natural law, and the failure of New Yorkers who struggle in that system is not inevitable. New York State is taking concrete steps to improve the success of all its citizens, as illustrated in the following chapter.

“Despite measures of cognitive ability similar to high school graduates, GED recipients perform significantly worse in all dimensions when compared to them. GED recipients lack noncognitive skills...that are essential to success in school and in life.”

—James Heckman and Yona Rubinstein, *The Importance of Noncognitive Skills: Lessons from the GED Testing Program*, 2001

Chapter 3:

Taking the GED to College: Next Steps

Reforming the GED system in New York State will yield many benefits to low-income young adults and adults, as well as employers around the state desperately seeking skilled workers. The temptation is to start at the top of the educational funnel.

In the course of our research, we found:

- New York’s 60% pass rate is the nation’s lowest, and more than one-third of all takers who fail do not return.
- The GED can serve as the gateway to opportunity, in the form of postsecondary education and training.
- Too few GED attainers seek postsecondary education, and those who do are more likely to drop out than graduate.

New York State should start by fixing the GED system’s most glaring failures—the low pass rate, the weak connection to college and workforce opportunities, and the low college success rate. Some of the needed steps will take additional funding, and we are conscious of the state’s fiscal predicament. At present, however, New York State is spending taxpayer dollars on a system with an unacceptably high failure rate. A program that appears to be inexpensive is in reality exorbitantly expensive—but the costs have been off-loaded to low-income young adults and adults, overwhelmed service providers, and employers waiting in vain for skilled applicants to respond to their want ads. By strengthening and reforming the GED system, New York State can provide far better value to taxpayers. Furthermore, the state’s modest investments will be repaid many times over by converting high school dropouts—who as a group consume much more in public services than they pay in taxes—into prosperous taxpaying citizens.

The Community Service Society’s recent publication, *From Basic Skills to Better Futures: Generating Economic Dividends for New York City*, laid out a series of recommendations that emphasized two main points—make the GED a true gateway to opportunity, and create and sustain a GED system that ensures access.

- Require all GED programs to offer a bridge to higher education

- Encourage some GED programs to focus on building bridges to careers
- Create new programs and expand existing programs for low-level learners
- Expand and leverage existing funding sources
- Expand and enhance District 79 of the New York City Department of Education
- Improve the quality of GED instruction
- Build more central accountability and coordination
- Develop a comprehensive information and referral network
- Expand existing referral sources
- Improve processes for GED testing

This report endorses those recommendations and builds off them by outlining an Action Agenda for New York State.

Action Agenda

- **Develop a statewide intake function.** The state should develop a testing application database. Prospective test-takers would be assigned a testing site, alleviating any confusion about testing locations. They would also receive education about the importance of test preparation. NYSED, local school districts, and community-based organizations should develop a common message to deliver on the importance of test preparation.
- **Institutionalize test preparation.**
 - **Require that all students in subsidized GED preparation programs pass the OPT prior to taking the GED.** Only eight states currently mandate the use of the OPT. Like the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT), the OPT could only help to prepare test-takers for the actual exams.
 - **Develop a standard curriculum for GED instruction and mandate its use.** NYSED is piloting an online curriculum for low and intermediate readers that includes GED test preparation. There must be minimum standards set to ensure that test-takers obtain a high GED score.

- **Defund GED providers if they have less than a 50% pass rate. Shift GED funding to effective providers who meet outcomes.** Through the ITAP initiative, the state is starting to hold GED providers accountable for results.
 - **Examine concurrent preparation models and take effective models to scale.** NYSED is piloting the GED Plus model in the Mid-Hudson region, which allows teachers to prepare students for the GED and postsecondary education concurrently. The curriculum includes both academic and non-academic skills needed to succeed. NYSED will be looking at GED Plus and other models to determine which should be adopted and adapted for use in New York State.
- **Expand the work of the Governor’s Summit on Dropout Prevention and Student Engagement to include work on GED.** The state held its first Summit in October 2008. Since then, participants have researched and compiled recommendations that they will take to the Governor in October 2009. Understanding that even with the best prevention and engagement strategies in place, some young adults will still drop out of school, the state should expand the scope of work to include a concentration on GED pass rates and transition to higher education. This work should include input from NYSED’s GED Test Administration and AEWD, as well as from GED Testing Office staff.
- **Create a NYSED task force on the needs of GED-holding students and charge that task force with identifying strategies to improve graduation rates.** NYSED should lead a task force, with representation from SUNY and CUNY, and charge it with identifying strategies to improve GED pass and college graduation rates. The task force should research existing best practices around the state and examine the viability of bringing them to scale.
- **Increase soft skills.** Many of today’s students are lacking certain skills not taught at home or in the classroom—the importance of a strong work ethic, punctuality, patience, personal responsibility, and the like. Test preparation programs and schools (both secondary and postsecondary) must pick up where parents leave off and educate students about what teachers, future employers, and colleagues expect from them in the classroom and on the job.
 - **Expand pre-collegiate bridge programs.** Bridge programs provide orientation, college prep, course credits toward graduation, and remediation courses in core subjects such as English and math. The approach has proven effective at institutions such as Erie County Community College. New pilots are being established at Cayuga Community College and Syracuse City schools. Currently, federal and state literacy funding sources end with a GED. It is anticipated that WIA reauthorization in 2010 will expand this mission to include postsecondary transition and connections to programs beyond the GED.
 - **Continue to establish formal relationships between community colleges and preparation programs.** Bringing college representatives to GED classrooms, or bringing prospective test-takers to visit college campuses, serves to encourage students to pursue postsecondary education and gives them an idea of what college life would be like.
- **Allow needy college students who attend part-time to receive proportional benefits without restriction, and abolish the so-called “independent schedule.”** TAP, New York’s need-based financial aid program, has been justly praised as one of the nation’s best. However, it needs at least two substantial changes to help college students with GED credentials. As New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg has noted, the absence of a viable part-time TAP benefit leaves working college students out in the cold. In addition, college students who are independent but lack spouses or children must meet a much stricter income standard to qualify for TAP, and even then receive lower benefits.
- **Establish a fee for GED test-takers.** Forty-eight states finance their GED systems in part through a testing fee. New York and Arkansas are the only holdouts. New York Public Law 317 prohibits the imposition of a testing fee. This prohibition encourages more New Yorkers to take the GED, but it also incentivizes applicants to walk in without adequate preparation or, in some cases, any preparation at all. New York State should learn from states that have implemented a fee successfully. The state should also plan for the capacity of the state to institute a fee. With this research in hand, the state should establish a fee and then study how it affects the pass rate.

Conclusion

New York State has an abysmal GED pass rate—only 60%, the lowest in the nation. This fact should be a cause for concern to educators and policymakers alike. That said, there are a number of things the state can do and is already doing to not only improve pass rates, but ensure that GED attainers prepare for and move on to postsecondary education and training.

The state should follow the Action Agenda outlined in this report, as well as the recommendations made in CSS's *From Back Skills to Better Futures*. With the current fiscal reality in mind, many items on the Agenda are cost-neutral and dependant only on the state's commitment to ensuring that every New Yorker receives a top-notch education and is well-positioned for success in life. Don't we owe all of our residents this opportunity?

ENDNOTES

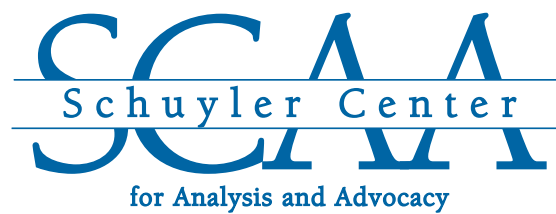
- ¹ Alliance for Excellent Education; www.all4ed.org.
- ² Helen Zelon, *Exit Strategy: Sizing up NYC's dropout challenge and Who Counts and Who's Counting?* New York City's Struggle to Graduate, City Limits Investigates, Volume 31 Number 4, Winter 2008.
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- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ NCLB, 34 C.F.R. 200.19(b)(1)(iv).
- ⁶ Data provided by the CUNY and SUNY Institutional Research offices.
- ⁷ American Community Survey 2005-2007, Public Use Micro Sample Analysis, conducted August 3, 2009.
- ⁸ NYSED data.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Author's calculation, based on data provided by the New York State Education Department, GED Testing Office.
- ¹¹ Jacqueline Cook, *Our Chance for Change: A Four-year Reform Initiative for GED Testing in New York City*, New York City Department of Youth and Community Development, June 2008.
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- ¹³ Students under age 19 must be enrolled in an alternative high school.
- ¹⁴ GEDTS 2007 op cit.
- ¹⁵ John Bridgeland, John Dilulio, and Karen Morison, *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*, Civic Enterprises, March 2006.
- ¹⁶ Stephen Reder, *Adult Education and Postsecondary Success*, National Commission on Adult Literacy, September 4, 2007.
- ¹⁷ *College Readiness of New York City's GED Recipients: Preliminary Report of the CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, Data Tables*, CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, October 14, 2008; SCAA analysis based on data provided by SUNY Office of Institutional Research, August 5, 2009.

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