

The Impact of the 2014 GED on Adult Education in Colorado (CAEPA)

Commissioned by the Colorado Adult Education Professional Association

Author: Paulette Church, MA; Past President of CAEPA

SUMMARY:

The GED has been the only test used to document a Colorado high school equivalency diploma for decades. Revised GED exams were released to be administered in 2002 and most recently in 2014. Because of computerized record-keeping by the WIA Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) grant recipient centers, the effect of the newest version can be studied in relationship to the previous version.

A recent survey of the directors of AEFLA-funded grantees administered by the CAEPA Board of Directors has brought to light serious concerns and implications for Colorado employers and adult learners who need the alternative diploma in Colorado. They are:

1. GED test passing rates have dropped as low as 85% of the rate in 2012 with at least one center reporting no high school equivalency graduates in 2014.
2. 81% of adult education program directors reported a significant decrease in student enrollment, so even fewer adults are preparing to enter post-secondary study and workforce training.
3. The 2014 GED is not appropriate for the adults in Colorado who need to enter the workforce. The recently passed Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) was created so “that our domestic workforce has the guidance and pathways needed to obtain required skills” (National Association of Workforce Boards). The lack of GED graduates documents a significantly reduced opportunity for more than 435,000 (GEDtestingervice.com) adults over 25 without a high school diploma to complete the only pathway to skilled jobs in Colorado.
4. While Colorado continues to receive the lowest amount of state funding of adult education in the US, which is only distributed through a competitive grants program, AEFLA grantees’ funding has been reduced while they have been required to spend tens of thousands of dollars on new curricular materials, more advanced computers to access on-line resources and to offer GED testing, and on countless professional development workshops at all levels to prepare teachers for the new expectations. Programs report that the curricular materials published to date are not adequate or complete.

BACKGROUND / PROBLEM:

In January of 2014, a new version of the GED (General Education Development) was launched in the United States by the GED Testing Service, a joint venture between Pearson, a for profit company, and the American Council on Education (ACE).

www.ged.com This new version was designed to align with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) adopted by Colorado and most states as the academic standards required to earn a high school diploma. Since it must be administered using a computer, adult education programs were forced to purchase computers and update

their technology support to deliver many of the new educational materials.

The new GED is designed to confirm that those who pass the exams have the skills and knowledge needed to be successful in first-year credit-bearing college courses. The new areas of academic study have required teachers to have additional professional development training to prepare students for the new format and revised test style of administration on computer. This has been very difficult since adequate study materials have not been developed and disseminated even one year after the release of the test.

What has been the impact of the new, more expensive version of the GED? According to a recent NPR story:

- In 2012, a total of 401,388 people passed the GED test
- In 2013, people rushed to take the old test in its final year, creating a bump: A total of 540,535 people passed.
- In 2014, 58,524. In the general population (Not including those in corrections, typically fewer than 100,000.)
<http://www.npr.org/blogs/ed/2015/01/09/375440666/a-sizable-decrease-in-those-passing-the-ged>

This apparent drop of over 60% is of grave concern for incumbent workers who need this pathway to post-secondary certificate and workforce training programs leading to family sustainable wages. While data could not be found for Colorado, Washington state's data (<http://restoregedfairness.org>) would be comparable:



Our Colorado AEFLA-funded programs that responded to the 2015 CAEPA survey reported that 44% of the programs experienced a decline in GED student enrollment. The critical indicator of the impact of the new GED is that 81% of the programs reported a significant decrease (more than 15%) in the number of graduates compared to 2012. One director reported an 85%

decrease in the number of graduates in 2014.

An equally disturbing trend is that even those students who pass the new GED are not enrolling directly into college at the same rate as they have in the past, according to the survey results. Students who enroll in college while preparing for the new GED exams have reported that college courses are much easier than the GED test.

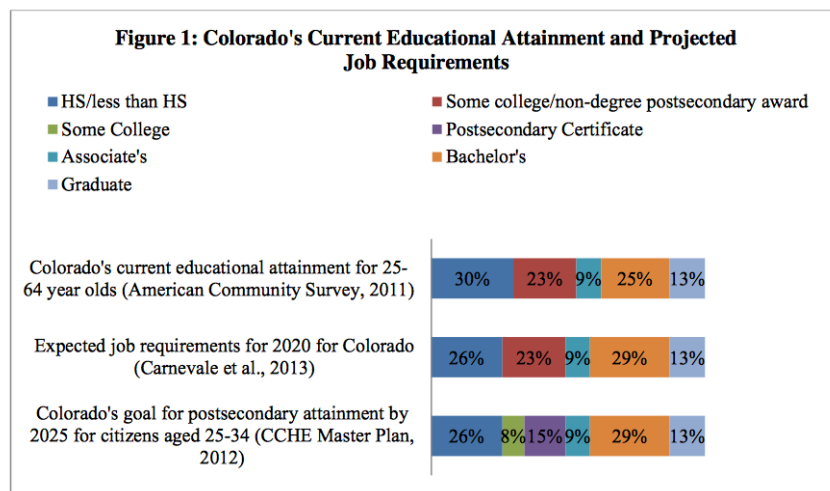
It is essential to note the value of the high school equivalency diploma to Coloradoans.

In the article *High School Diplomas vs. GEDs: Do Employers Care?*, Brett Yardley, a marketing and communications specialist for MAU Workforce Solutions, reports that he: Has helped recruit many job seekers, including many who have GEDs. In his experience, many employers focus on whether or not you made the effort to complete your education at all....”The biggest difference is degree -- GED or high school diploma -- versus no degree,” Yardley explains. Employers want to know they’re hiring someone who can complete a goal they’ve set for themselves. “In our experience with trade skills and labor positions, GEDs are typically considered an equivalent of a high school diploma and rarely have any impact on job seekers...Proof of the degree is all that’s required. It’s when a job seeker doesn’t have a GED or a high school diploma that employers move on to the next applicant.” (www.careerbuilder.com)

In the same article, Maya Frost, author of *The New Global Student: Skip the SAT, Save Thousands on Tuition, and Get a Truly International Education*, notes that “What matters most is not whether you earn a GED or high school diploma but whether you use the GED as a way to advance or to catch up”.

Thus, the continued requirement of using only the new GED may well be the death knell for adult education programs whose students want to continue their education. Hundreds of students became discouraged in 2014 and have dropped out before passing the new GED exam, thus blocking their attempt to move out of poverty.

A “2014 Legislative Report on the Skills for Jobs Act” issued by Lt. Governor Joseph Garcia included the following chart to illustrate the current and future needs of Colorado’s employers:



Source: American Community Survey (2011); Carnevale et al. (2013); CCHE (2012)

The report went on to clarify the two new categories:

The category of ‘some college/non-degree postsecondary award’ is admittedly rather nebulous and difficult to measure specifically as it includes a range of people, from those who do not complete the requirements for any type of postsecondary program to those who complete a one- or two-year certificate program...

The main purpose of the report was to study the needs of employers for the 30 occupations with high projected opening in Colorado, which differ from national trends:

When we analyze these 30 occupations with high projected openings, it appears that we are currently meeting our state's overall needs for about half of them...Some occupations for which we may not be meeting the state's workforce demands are bookkeeping, accounting and auditing clerks, market research analysts/marketing specialists, and licensed practical nurses.

These are precisely the types of jobs many adult education learners are seeking, along with skilled jobs in the trades and manufacturing. One rural AEFLA-funded program had the opportunity to help fill 200 openings in an electrical training program but they had no GED graduates to fill these openings. This is one example of many in Colorado that proves that both the industries needing electrical workers and Colorado's adults needing a livable wage are losing because of the design and administration requirements of the new GED exams as the only route to a high school diploma equivalency.

The report also noted:

Thus our state's diversifying racial/ethnic composition will also mean more layers of support will be needed for students, especially those from underserved populations who tend to have lower educational attainment rates, in order to achieve higher levels of academic success. These factors dramatically impact the long-term sustainability of our educated workforce, which contribute to the development of our state economy.

A look at the demographics of adult learners in Colorado as reported by AEFLA grantees shows that nearly 75% are low income with more than 40% being from Hispanic and other minority groups. Most come from homes where there are no college enrollees, let alone graduates. In addition, it is estimated by a variety of sources that between 50% and 80% of low skilled adults experience diagnosed and undiagnosed learning disabilities. This further confirms that Colorado needs a high school equivalency exam that is accessible to all adults who need a credential to enter employment and post-secondary training.

The following is written in the Recommendations section of the 2014 Legislative Report:

Colorado will not meet the workforce needs of the future unless it can improve the rate at which members of those underserved groups graduate from high school are ready to enroll in college-level classes, enroll in and persist through certificate or degree completion, and enter the workforce.

This speaks directly to the need to support adult education in Colorado as a viable and affordable pathway for adult learners to earn a credential that is equivalent to a high school diploma and prepare for the middle skills occupations that are in high demand in Colorado those occupations cited in the *Colorado's Forgotten Middle Skills Jobs* report released by Colorado Skills2Compete members in partnership with the National Skills Coalition. Incumbent on those education centers, their students need to demonstrate their ability to benefit from those programs through appropriate tests and measures.

These findings lead to the fundamental question: Is the GED the appropriate tool to measure the readiness of a typical, minority, low-income adult in Colorado who wishes to enter the workforce and/or a community college, certificate or workplace training program to obtain family supporting job skills? **There are alternative high school diploma equivalency exams, but Colorado is one of the few states that allows only one option, the GED.**

SOLUTION:

Our recommendation is that the State Board of Education in partnership with the GED Testing Office at the Colorado Department of Education takes steps to allow Coloradoans a choice of exams that are accepted in many other states to document high school diploma equivalency. It is to be noted that the current high school equivalency diploma issued by Colorado does not name the GED and that a separate transcript is issued directly by GED, a brand name like Kleenex, to the student.

Ten states have already dropped the GED due to cost of testing and materials (usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/05/08/fewer-ged-test-takers/8847163).

The April 2, 2013 White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics and New High School Equivalency Assessments HiSET and TASC webinar (www.ed.gov) presentation noted that these two exams were developed to offer:

- Affordability
- Access to paper- and computer-based versions
- Available in English, Spanish, Large Print, Braille, and Audio versions
- Rigorous content aligned to State and national standards:
 - – Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE, formally known as OVAE) College and Career Readiness Standards
 - – Gradual alignment to Common Core State Standards

Currently 14 other states have approved as high school equivalent the Iowa Testing Service and Educational Testing Service (ETS) HiSET test, which can be administered on computer or on paper. This exam is provided at a significant cost savings.

Likewise, CTB-McGraw-Hill, a for-profit corporation, has developed the Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC™) to measure high school equivalency. Seven states have now adopted this high school equivalent test and many others are considering it. (usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/05/08/fewer-ged-test-takers/8847163).

Offering a choice of three exams to earn a Colorado high school equivalency diploma will open the doors for tens of thousands of Colorado incumbent workers who have given up the hope of ever being able to enter a public post-secondary education or certificate workforce program to become economically self-sufficient and end the cycle of poverty for their families. The research is compelling. The time to change is now.