NEW JERSEY HIGH SCHOOL EQUIVALENCY TEST

MORE TEST OPTIONS, LESS OPPORTUNITY

By Karen White, Elaine Zundl, Zoe Heard, and Pranay Sinha

Introduction

An educated workforce is widely recognized as an important driver of state economic growth and prosperity. For most jobs, and even admission to the military, a high school diploma is the bare minimum credential required. New Jersey ranks high in terms of education with over 35 percent of its workforce having completed four years of college or more.² But New Jersey is also home to 256,000 adult workers who do not have a high school diploma or GED, 7.3 percent of whom were unemployed in 2014.³ For these workers, the High School Equivalency (HSE) diploma, previously known as a GED, is the primary path to gain access to the basic skills necessary to compete in today’s labor market.

In January 2014, New Jersey began offering three pathways to achieve a HSE diploma: GED Testing Service (GED); Education Testing Service (HiSET); and McGraw Hill (TASC). To better understand the impact of these changes in New Jersey, we analyzed NJ Department of Education data from 2015 and 2016 and compared it with GED data from 2012 and 2013. Data from 2014 were not comparable because the changes took effect two months into the year. We conclude with recommendations and policy prescriptions for New Jersey policy makers, educators, and other stakeholders for improving access to affordable, quality HSE diplomas that lead to post-secondary education and better jobs and security for more New Jerseyans.

Background

Since 1959, the General Education Development (GED) test administered by the non-profit American Council on Education (ACE) had been the only adult education test available in New Jersey for those who wanted to obtain a state-issued high school diploma. However, in 2011, ACE
announced the creation of the new *GED Testing Service*, a joint venture of ACE and the for-profit entity of Pearson VUE, in order to align the new GED test with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and computerize the test. After decades of being administered by ACE, in 2014 the GED test became a project of a public-private partnership between ACE and Pearson VUE. Along with the change in management, other significant changes were made. These changes included aligning test content with the Common Core State Standards; doing away with paper-based testing and replacing it with computer-based test access; and substantially increasing the cost of the test. The GED changes caused concern among state policy makers and other stakeholders that it would be more difficult for test takers to access and complete. While the majority of states have continued to support GED tests, eight states, including New Jersey, have added additional options and 10 states have stopped offering GED tests all together. In 2013, New Jersey Department of Education passed a Resolution adopting three test options for state-issued high school diplomas, becoming one of only 5 states to offer all three test options.

Beginning March 2014, test takers in New Jersey were given three options for taking the NJ State HSE test – GED Testing Service (GED), Education Testing Service (HiSET), and McGraw Hill (TASC). The test options varied in cost, content and scoring, and location of the test site. Costs ranged from $90 to $120 for the full battery of tests with additional fees for retaking the test if necessary. The most expensive test was the GED. All tests align with Common Core State Standards. In 2016, after extensive analysis of test data and in consultation with policy makers and elected officials, GED decided to lower its passing score by 5 points, 150 to 145, and to offer two additional score levels – score level of 165-174 is considered “GED College Ready”; and a score of 175 or more is considered “GED College Ready +Credit.” New Jersey has yet to adopt the new GED scoring system.
**Adult Learners in New Jersey**

Having a high school diploma comes with a range of benefits for workers and their families, from increased earnings and employment, to improved cognitive and decision-making abilities, to even living longer.⁷ Workers without a high school diploma or equivalent earn only 58 percent of the U.S. average weekly wage.⁸ According to the New Jersey State Council for Adult Literacy Education Services (SCALES), 20 percent of NJ adults without a high school diploma or equivalent were living under the poverty line in 2013.⁹ Having an HSE diploma helps to raise workers’ incomes, and puts them on a path to other educational and skills development opportunities.

In 2013, prior to the changes to content, delivery, and cost, the GED had a total of 16,877 test takers in New Jersey with 94.1 percent (15,876) completing the exam.¹⁰ Of those who completed, 68.1 percent (10,811) passed all four knowledge areas and received an HSE diploma. This represents a significant increase in GED completion in New Jersey due to anticipated changes and demonstrates the level of success for the GED in reaching adult learners prior to implementation of the changes.

### New Jersey GED Test Takers, 2012 and 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test Year</th>
<th>Number of Test Takers</th>
<th>Number of Test Takers who Completed</th>
<th>Completion Rate (%)</th>
<th>Number of Test Takers who Passed All Subtests</th>
<th>Passing Rate (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>13,591</td>
<td>13,198</td>
<td>97.1</td>
<td>7,808</td>
<td>59.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>16,877</td>
<td>15,876</td>
<td>94.1</td>
<td>10,811</td>
<td>68.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


While ACE and Pearson VUE formed a partnership in hopes of increasing the number of GED test takers and completion rates and exponentially developing the test into a comprehensive, for-profit product, data on uptake and usage in New Jersey show that after implementation of the new tests, there was a sharp decline in the total number of test takers and a significant decline in completion and passing rates.¹¹
In order to better understand the impact of the new HSE tests in New Jersey, we analyzed NJ Department of Education data from 2015 and 2016 and compared it with GED data from 2012 and 2013. Data from 2014 were not comparable because the changes took effect two months into the year.

In 2015, the total number of test takers in New Jersey who took one of the three series of tests (GED, HiSET and TASC) was 8,375, with a 73.6 percent completion rate. Of those who completed, only 4,619 (55.2 percent) passed all subtests and received their diplomas representing a decline of 49.6 percent (8,502) from 2013.11 Even though 2013 was considered an outlier with a spike in testing candidates,12 there was still a 38.3 percent decline in test takers in 2015 relative to 2012 (when administrative changes were not yet implemented).

In 2016, the overall passing rate declined slightly to 53.7 percent.13 Further research and evaluation is necessary to better understand the 2014 test changes and the drop in HSE participation and pass rates in NJ.

**New Jersey HiSET, TASC, and GED Test Takers, 2015 & 2016**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test Type</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of Test Takers</td>
<td>Number of Test Takers who Completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HiSET</td>
<td>1410</td>
<td>927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TASC</td>
<td>5,853</td>
<td>4,592</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GED</td>
<td>1112</td>
<td>644</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>8,375</strong></td>
<td><strong>6,163</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: CWW analysis of data available from Department of Education, [http://www.state.nj.us/education/students/adulted/reports/](http://www.state.nj.us/education/students/adulted/reports/); Data downloaded on November 11, 2017.
Access to New Jersey HSE Tests

Low-income adult learners face a number of barriers in accessing education and training opportunities. These barriers include childcare, irregular work schedules, and access to transportation. Added to those challenges, NJ’s working adult learners may encounter additional barriers such as:

- Test locations and language requirements;
- Cost of the battery of tests; and
- Sufficient computer skills and preparation to understand and take the test.

Location and Language. New Jersey has taken strong steps to provide test locations throughout the state and to provide tests in both English and Spanish. In 2013, HSE tests were available in 32 locations throughout the state. Today, there are 52 HSE test locations and according to NJ DOE website, five are statewide, five provide more than one of the three test options, and two provide all three test options. Additionally, a majority of test centers provide the test in both English and Spanish. Providing three test options (TASC, HiSET and GED) offers a range of choices for test takers, but because they are not all available at all test locations in New Jersey, test takers are in practice limited in the choice they can make. Also, more test centers are available in densely populated urban areas and fewer in rural areas of the state. In many cases, these rural areas are also characterized by high levels of poverty. For example, in Cumberland County, 18% of the population lives below the poverty line, and 23.5% have not completed a high school education. This makes sense given the correlation between poverty rates and high school graduation. However, according to the NJ DOE Adult Education website, only one test center exists (Cumberland County College) in the entire county and it only provides one test option, HiSET, in only one language, English. The same is true in Atlantic County, where the poverty rate is not much better, at 11.9%, and the percentage of the population without a high school degree is 15.3 percent. In Atlantic County, there is only one test center for the entire county.

Additionally, the NJ Department of Labor and Workforce Development (LWD) has identified several career paths that provide additional opportunities to obtain a high school diploma and additional skills training. However, this is not readily apparent on either NJ DOE or LWD websites.

**Cost.** Although New Jersey has sought to keep costs down by offering several test options, costs have increased as a result of the switch to both computer-based testing and to a for-profit format. Prior to 2014, GED tests were paper-based and costs were capped at $50 (because paper-
based testing is less expensive). Effective January 2014, costs increased from $50 in 2013 to a range of $90 to $120 depending on the testing location and series selected. This increase represents a significant expense for working poor adults who are already struggling to make ends meet. However, in order to fully understand the extent to which this may hinder low-income adult learners from taking the exam, more research is necessary.

Fee Chart for Adult High School Equivalency Tests Diploma
Effective January 1, 2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vendor</th>
<th>Full Test</th>
<th>Single Subtest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Test Only</td>
<td>Total Cost (Includes Admin. Fee)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GEDTS (GED)</td>
<td>$80.00</td>
<td>$120.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ETS (Hi-SET)</td>
<td>$50.00</td>
<td>$90.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McGraw Hill (TASC)</td>
<td>$52.00</td>
<td>$92.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Computerization.** With the introduction of the new HSE, computerized tests replaced paper tests, requiring all test takers to have a basic knowledge of, and access to, a computer to prepare for and take the test (only those covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act have access to paper-based testing). While computerization offers many positive enhancements, including greater variety in testing formats and quicker results, it also provides many challenges for low-wage, low-skilled adult learners. For example, research shows that low-income adults are less likely to have access to computers, and while the digital divide has become smaller over time, technology access and competency disparities remain. Without additional research, however, we cannot adequately assess the efficacy of test centers’ ability to equip and train staff to meet the needs of test takers, including training on computer literacy and keyboard skills development, technical support and education.

**Content and Student Test Preparation.** All New Jersey HSE tests align with Common Core State Standards. The exams have also been updated to align in content, instruction and credentialing methods with current college and career-readiness standards. This has resulted in a more demanding set of exams than the previous GED tests, particularly in terms of critical thinking skills and competency. The GED includes four tests that cover the following subjects: Social Studies, Science, Math, and Reasoning through Language Arts (RLA). The TASC and HiSET are composed of five tests, as the RLA section is split up into a writing and a reading test. All new versions of the exam include items that measure a test taker’s career- and college-readiness. Given the low passing rates for all tests in New Jersey, the rigor of the test as compared to previous GED
tests merits further review and evaluation to determine the efficacy of student preparation for test taking and subsequent higher education or other skills or training programs.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

New Jersey’s High School Equivalency program has successfully helped many New Jerseyans obtain a high school diploma, creating opportunities for post-secondary education, better jobs and financial security. However, many gaps remain in ensuring adult learners who want to obtain an HSE diploma are able to fully prepare for, access, and complete the test. Available data shows a drop in the number of test takers and lowered completion rates since 2013, we offer the following recommendations to close those gaps so that all adult learners striving for an HSE diploma in New Jersey are able to complete the tests and get their diploma:

**Review and adopt GED test scoring change:** Nationally, in 2016, after extensive analysis of test data and in consultation with policy makers and elected officials, GED passing score was changed from 150 to 145. This change should be reviewed and adopted in New Jersey in order to make taking the GED in New Jersey equitable for all test takers.

**Explore additional cost options including scholarships and subsidies for test costs:** Currently, according to the NJ Department of Education Adult Education website, only one location (Eastwick College, Essex County) provides free test at no cost.

**Certify additional test centers:** Open additional test centers in rural and other hard to reach communities.

**Locate test centers near public transportation:** Many of those who are eligible to take an HSE test may not have easy access to transportation. Providing public transportation to test centers would increase testing attendance.

**Provide easier access to information:** Compile and publish online a centralized source of information where potential test takers can access and understand options and requirements in order to make informed decisions.

**Conduct additional research and evaluation:** More detailed research is necessary to understand the impact of changes in the HSE testing process in New Jersey. This research will help policymakers to identify what is working and what is not.

Additional investments in New Jersey’s HSE testing system will result in a stronger, more prosperous New Jersey and put more of New Jersey's adult learners on a path to a state-issued diploma, additional educational opportunities, better jobs, and economic security.
Karen White is Director of Policy Analysis and Community Engagement at the Center for Women and Work (CWW), Elaine Zundl is CWW Research Director, and Zoe Heard and Pranay Sinha served joint internships with CWW and EERC in August 2016 and 2017, respectively. Earlier versions of this Issue Brief authored by Zoe Heard (2016) and Karen White (2014) have been adapted for this Issue Brief. This report was made possible with support from the Working Poor Families Project, a national initiative supported by the Annie E. Casey, Ford, Joyce, and Kresge Foundations, which partners with nonprofit organizations in 22 states to investigate policies that could better prepare working families for a more secure economic future.


10 This information is based on CWW analysis of Test Center Data from all three tests. See also State of New Jersey, “Test Center Reports,” State of New Jersey Department of Education, last modified 2014, http://www.state.nj.us/education/students/adulted/reports/.

11 The increased number of test takers in 2013 was primarily because any test takers who had not completed all tests necessary to receive a diploma by the end of December 2013 would be required to start over again.

12 Ibid.

13 Authors’ review of NJ Department of Education’s Adult Education website on September 13, 2017. https://homeroom5.doe.state.nj.us/adulted/search.php


15 Cumberland County College website indicates that the test is in fact available in two languages, Spanish & English. http://www.cccnj.edu/continuing-education/high-school-equivalency-exam-prep-classes. See also, “Testing Centers.” New Jersey Adult

17 Ibid.
