

# THE WORKING POOR FAMILIES PROJECT

POLICY BRIEF ■ FALL 2012

## PREPARING FOR THE NEW GED®<sup>1</sup> TEST: WHAT TO CONSIDER BEFORE 2014

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### THE WORKING POOR FAMILIES PROJECT

Strengthening State Policies for  
America's Working Poor

Millions of American breadwinners work hard to support their families. But, despite their determination and effort, many are mired in low-wage jobs that provide inadequate benefits and offer few opportunities for advancement. In fact, nearly one in three American working families now earn wages so low that they have difficulty surviving financially.

Launched in 2002 and currently supported by the Annie E. Casey, Ford, Joyce, and Kresge foundations, the Working Poor Families Project is a national initiative that works to improve these economic conditions. The project partners with state nonprofit organizations and supports their state policy efforts to better prepare America's working families for a more secure economic future.

For more information:  
[www.workingpoorfamilies.org](http://www.workingpoorfamilies.org)

### INTRODUCTION

Significant changes to a long-established part of the educational system—the General Education Development (GED®) test—are scheduled to take effect in 2014. The upcoming changes have profound implications for low-skilled adults' ability to continue their education and attain the postsecondary credentials needed to access good jobs.<sup>3</sup>

Although the value of the GED test has been challenged in recent years,<sup>4</sup> it is commonly recognized as an important milestone in gaining the education and skills needed to succeed in today's economy. With increasing evidence of the role education plays in helping individuals earn family-sustaining wages—including the value of postsecondary certificates—a high school diploma or equivalent is one of the steps needed to succeed in today's labor market.

While many agree that updating the GED test is needed,<sup>5</sup> there is concern among adult educators and others that the pending changes may create obstacles for a number of individuals, particularly low-income students. Changes that could impact individuals who take and pass the GED test include: increased test costs, a shift to computerized tests, more difficult test content especially in math, and, in many states, a reduction in the number of test centers. Coupled with Congress' July 2012 elimination of the Pell Grant "Ability to Benefit" regulation—which made those without a high school diploma or equivalent ineligible for federal financial aid—progressing to postsecondary education may become more difficult for many low-income students.<sup>6</sup>

The development and refinement of state policies to enable working low-income adults to access education and skills training has always been a priority of the **Working Poor Families Project**. This report examines how states are addressing upcoming changes to the GED as well as how they are pursuing

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other options to help students attain a high school equivalency diploma. Although the changes to the GED test are significant and must be addressed, these changes also provide an opportunity to rethink how to better meet the needs of low-skill working adults, many of whom are years away from any classroom and academic testing environment. The ultimate goal of adult education should be to help all students, including working adults, attain the basic skills needed to connect to higher levels of education—especially postsecondary education—and better employment.

This brief offers a two-track approach to ensuring that low-income adults maintain access to, and success in attaining, a secondary credential. First we provide an overview of the GED test and a primer outlining the changes that will be made for 2014 and offer ways states can prepare for them. Next we describe alternatives to attaining a high school equivalency diploma (HSED) that states may want to provide. The HSED overview is based on an analysis done by the Center for Law and Social Policy, with descriptions of secondary equivalency programs that are already in place in some states and are worthy of consideration. The brief then summarizes actions states need to take to ensure that those with the most need and least resources, low-income adults, are not shut out of the education system.

Because the GED test is the most widely accepted method of obtaining a high school equivalency diploma, state and local adult educators are concerned about the effect these changes will have on low-income and low-skilled individuals' opportunities to advance in education. Efforts are

underway in many states to inform local educators about the changes and provide assistance to help them adjust instructional programs accordingly. In addition, multiple efforts are underway to encourage current GED students to accelerate their studies so that they can take their GED test before 2014. States are also exploring the creation or adoption of alternative tests to the GED as well as exploring options that lead to alternative equivalency diploma programs. Although options are few, and attempts to create new ones are still in development, many educators recognize the need to take action and are thirsty for information about possible actions that can be taken.

## A PRIMER ON THE GED TEST: CURRENT AND NEW

### *The Current GED Test*

The GED exams were developed in 1942 by the American Council on Education as a high school completion strategy for veterans returning from World War II who wanted to go to college. Since that time, some 18 million GEDs have been awarded. The GED test is the most widely recognized alternative to a high school diploma. In 2011, 723,000 (worldwide) took the test and 454,000 passed it. Most GED candidates were male (56 percent) and about half were white (48 percent). About three-fourths reported they had completed 10th grade (71 percent) and on average, candidates have been out school nine years when they take the test. The average age of test takers is 26. Nationally, GEDs now comprise one in every seven high school diplomas and one in every 20 college entrants has completed their GED.

The GED battery of tests encompass five subject<sup>7</sup> tests which, when passed, certify that the taker has American (or Canadian) high school-level academic skills. The five tests include reading, writing, math, science and social studies. Many state adult education programs sponsored by local school districts, colleges and even community organizations provide both preparation for the test and the actual GED examination site. And typically the battery of tests is taken with paper and pencil and lasts more than seven hours. To ensure

fairness, all Official GED Testing Centers must adhere to the uniform testing standards specified by the American Council on Education. Local policies determine how many GED tests may be taken by an examinee in one day. Typically, examinees complete the entire five-test battery over a period of weeks or months.

The market for the GED or a high school equivalency is significant. In the United States, 25.7 million people between ages 18 and 64 are without a high school diploma or equivalent, representing more than 13 percent of that population.<sup>8</sup> This demographic statistic may be increasing as the number of high school dropouts, especially among minority populations, increases. Also, as an impact of the 2008-2012 economic recession, many states have seen an increase in the number of older, unemployed or underemployed adults who are accessing high school credential options as they prepare to upgrade their future employability.

### *The New GED Test*

In early 2011, the American Council on Education (ACE), the not-for-profit organization that developed and has administered the test for 70 years, announced the creation of a jointly owned for-profit partnership with Pearson VUE, the world's largest testing company. Characterized as a public-private business partnership, the two organizations worked together to launch the GED 21st Century Initiative while retaining the GED Testing Service name. The partnership was formed as ACE officials believed that the test content did not adequately reflect college preparedness and that the testing process needed to be computerized to align with contemporary testing protocols.

Further, ACE believed that Pearson's significant expertise and resources were necessary to develop, norm and implement a new GED test that incorporated strong college readiness standards, specifically the Common Core State Standards.<sup>9</sup> These standards were considered important in helping assure colleges, universities and prospective employers that adults who have passed the GED tests are prepared to compete and succeed

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in a global economy. This major overhaul of the test will be completed and implemented by 2014, with an online practice test ready in 2013.

One significant change includes redesigning and revising the five subject-matter tests to incorporate college readiness standards. The test will align with the Common Core Standards as well as similar standards developed by Texas and Virginia. These changes are intended to not only help the GED test keep in step with the nation's increasing focus on postsecondary education, but also to keep up with the knowledge and basic skills requirements of today's economy. The content redesign will result in a four-test format—literacy, math, science and social studies. Writing skills will be assessed within the content of two or more of the tests rather than in a separate writing test. In addition, two types of certification will be available through the GED test—general high school equivalency and an endorsement that indicates college and career readiness.

Another change involves transforming the test to a computerized-only format, which test developers believe is needed to make scoring faster and more sophisticated as well as to improve registration, test security and consistency in delivery and reporting. The GED Testing Service is also adding professional development for teachers, reworking curricular resources and adding a counseling component to connect GED test takers to career and education opportunities.

The GED test leads to the one high school equivalency credential that all 50 states and the District of Columbia recognize. It is also widely used in the military and by correctional institutions. Not surprisingly, the changes for 2014 will have substantial implications for states, adult education providers and test-takers.

## CONCERNS ABOUT THE NEW GED TEST

The following four issues are ones that some state officials believe they will likely confront as they take steps to transition to the new GED test.

### 1) Costs

Concern about increasing costs for the new GED test has multiple dimensions – costs to the examinee, costs for diplomas and transcripts, and costs for preparation or instructional delivery services. Currently, the GED test is available through Official GED Testing Centers that have been approved by the central GED office and the state administering agency. Although there is no charge by ACE to the coordinating state agency, called a jurisdiction, the agency typically supports the effort by providing a state GED administrator and data/records staff. Also, to the extent possible, states support the current GED preparation process through limited state and federal adult education funding.

*Examinee costs* are typically determined by the cost of operating and staffing a testing center, the cost of GED examination materials (test booklets and answer forms), and the amount, if any, of subsidies received by the testing center. Whereas some states subsidize (in whole or part) their testing centers, others do not; thus some testing centers set examination fees based on a break-even philosophy. Because state and local subsidies vary greatly, there are wide differences in the cost to the examinee among and within states. As costs increase and state subsidies likely decline, there is significant concern that the costs to examinees will invariably rise. A recent survey by the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) and the National Council for State Directors of Education of state adult education directors suggests that the cost for

2014 GED examinees will increase in most states.<sup>10</sup>

A computer-based test (CBT) version of the 2002 (current) paper pencil test has been developed and all early implementers of this CBT test are paying \$120 to GED for the administration of all five tests (GED policy newly set in 2011). The testing centers are refunded \$38 for each complete five-test battery administered. For most testing centers, the \$120 fee is a moderate to significant increase in their fee structure. The GED Testing Service has announced that the cost for the new 2014 test will remain the same (\$120 for all four tests), however many states fear that the for-profit nature of the GED Testing Service could mean fee increases in the near future.

In recognition of the low-income status of many GED clients, some states or local areas preclude test centers from determining the price of the test and establish state policy on the cost to the examinee.<sup>11</sup> In fact, Arkansas and New York offer the GED test free to students. There is considerable concern that the test will no longer be affordable for many who take the test as most states have limited and often declining resources to subsidize the increased fees.<sup>12</sup> In addition, some states that currently subsidize the cost of the tests for examinees are rethinking the state funding commitment because of the for-profit status of the GED Testing Service and the fear of possible test fee increases. Some of this state-level thinking results from a prohibition of public agencies subsidizing for-profit companies without competitive bidding.

*Diploma certificate and transcript costs* currently vary across the country with many states managing all of their GED client records and, in so doing, offering free or low cost diplomas and transcripts to graduates, colleges and employers. Since GED Testing Service will assume all responsibility for scoring the test in 2014, there is some thought that they may become a central repository for all GED test records. Some states are concerned that if this occurs, the price of state licenses to maintain their own repositories may increase. If states opt to use the central repository they will want to know specifically how graduates, colleges and employers will access records and what cost might be incurred. Related to this is what access states will have to GED test data and whether they will incur

costs in obtaining data on student outcomes in their state.

### *Preparation and instructional delivery costs*

associated with the GED test are also a source of concern. With the change in the GED test content, preparation services will need to purchase all new materials, thus possibly requiring states to make additional investments in professional development activities. Concerns have been raised that the GED testing service may increase prices for adult education commercial vendors to access the GED test content and those costs would be passed on to preparation programs. Additionally, new costs are anticipated for practice tests as well as for new technology hardware and software related to the development of computer skills (for test taking).

The cost issues noted above are of immediate concern as the new test implementation date of January 2014 draws closer. Of parallel concern to adult education providers and many other organizations that serve low-income, under-skilled clients, is the ability of Pearson VUE, as a for-profit company with a monopolistic status over the GED test, to significantly increase costs over time. This fiscal uncertainty is a key factor in the impetus of some states to explore alternatives for adult educational certification and credentialing, which are discussed below.

## **2) Transitioning to a Computerized Version of the GED Test**

Many recognize the need for computerizing the GED test as well as the importance of computer literacy in the marketplace. Nonetheless this change may present challenges in effectively serving test takers that lack access to and proficiency with computers. Since the paper-pencil version will only be available for those needing special accommodations related to disabilities, providers will not only have to add computer literacy to their offerings, but they will also have to help students become familiar with registering for and taking computerized tests. Since access to computers has long been a problem for many adult education providers, this computer literacy need is an issue that will warrant serious attention.

As mentioned above, the GED Testing Services has developed a computerized version of the 2002 paper-pencil test and plans to make a computerized practice test of the new GED test available in 2013. However, many adult education providers have limited capacity to provide computerized instruction, which will add to the costs to prepare students for the test. Moreover, the GED test is offered throughout corrections systems, which often do not allow computers. It is uncertain how this problem will be addressed.

## **3) Availability of Testing Centers**

Pearson VUE announced that testing will be available at their existing testing facilities. The numbers of these facilities vary within states, but typically are fewer than currently provided via state managed testing centers. It is expected that the number of test sites (currently 3,400 worldwide) will be reduced, resulting in more limited accessibility.

The GED Testing Service will authorize existing state testing centers to administer the GED test, provided they have sufficient facilities and capacity, especially the equipment necessary for computerized tests. For many places this will require new investments and resources. States will have to assess the trade-offs of covering the costs of enhancing existing facilities while maintaining geographic accessibility across the state. A reduced and limited number of centers may become particularly challenging for those without transportation or for those in rural areas where distances between testing centers can be considerable. It is also uncertain how states may choose to cover any additional costs, such as looking to students to help defer the increased costs of providing computerized testing.

On a positive note, it can be speculated that it is in GED Testing Service's best interest (as well as the examinees') to work with other stakeholders to make the GED test as accessible as possible. This mutual benefit may bode well for solving problems that could arise from a reduction in the number of testing centers in certain areas.

#### 4) Test Content and Impact on Preparation Programs and Curriculum

Many applaud the reworking of the GED test to incorporate strong college readiness standards and the attempt to improve the ability of the test to measure skills needed for entry into careers and college. With more than 25 million working-age adults lacking a high school diploma, and a labor market that increasingly demands higher education levels, an overhaul was needed.

The GED Testing Service is planning to make available a new diagnostic assessment along with additional curriculum, as well as professional development resources and counseling supports that are intended to help providers and test takers adjust to the changes in content and the increased difficulty. These changes will require significantly revised preparation materials as the Common Core Standards are based on a different instructional framework than the current GED test, which means even more efforts and costs to states and local areas that invest in GED test preparation programs.

The GED Statistical Reports for the past several years note that about half of GED test-takers prepare for the test on their own and half participate in state and local adult education programs. Not surprisingly, jurisdictions with higher pass rates generally require test takers to have completed an adult education program of study or to pass the GED Official Practice Test before allowing them to take the GED test.<sup>13</sup> More than likely, students will need even more preparation for the revised GED test because of the increased rigor—especially for the college readiness portion.

A major change for the GED test will be its two-tiered approach to the credential. That is, a certain passing score for each test will be established, first indicating general high school competence or equivalency. Then, if a student scores well on the college readiness items on the test, their credential will indicate both high school equivalency and college readiness. Over time, it will be important to understand how the two levels of credentialing are received in the marketplace and how the college

readiness affects efforts to connect to postsecondary education.

Preparation programs will have to be revamped to include not only computer literacy and keyboarding for those without these skills, but also extensive critical thinking and problem solving because the new GED test will include higher-order thinking skills, which are not the focus of the current GED test.<sup>14</sup> In addition, the college readiness portion of the test will include Algebra II content, which adult educators anticipate will be very challenging for many test takers.

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This change also has implications for the functional value of the level one GED test: If students pass only this high school equivalency level, there is concern that they will be discouraged from entering college believing that they are not “college material.” As time passes, students may have difficulty finding the time and motivation to access preparation classes and retake un-passed portions of the test. An unknown issue regarding the two-tier GED test is how employers will view and accept the basic equivalency endorsement. If employers establish policies to not hire individuals who only have the high school equivalency, it may be a disservice to individuals to offer it as an option.

Of additional concern is the challenge and short timeline adult education programs have to align GED test preparation content with the new GED, especially given the incorporation of the Common

Core Standards into the test. Although states have experience revising their GED preparation content, the task of revising content in accordance with the Common Core is an explicit, highly focused task that requires a thorough understanding of how the new GED test will embed Common Core content into actual assessment items and activities. Adult educators fear that there may not be sufficient information about the 2014 test to adequately change curricula and provide the necessary professional development. Also, it is important to note that the Common Core Standards were designed to be applied to the K-12 system, not the adult education system.<sup>15</sup>

### Emerging State Actions

States are responding in a number of ways to these major changes in the GED test. Some have formed internal working groups to consider the four issues discussed above, recognizing in some instances they may need legislative approval for certain changes. The National Council for State Directors of Education (NCSDAE) has established a work group of adult education directors and staff from approximately 25 states, recognizing the need to collectively consider a variety of options for documenting that students have the education and skill competencies commensurate with a high school diploma.

These options encompass students who are currently preparing for the GED test and those millions of adults who have not finished high school but are returning to school to gain new skills. One concrete action already underway involves states engaging in marketing efforts to encourage current students to take the full 2002 GED battery before the end of 2013—test takers must finish and pass all five tests before December 31, 2013 or start completely over on January 1, 2014.

According to a 2012 CLASP and NCSDAE survey on adult education tuition and financing issues,<sup>16</sup> some 25 states anticipate that they will try to do something to keep the GED tests affordable for students. Ideas include allocating more funding to help offset costs, pursuing state laws that currently prohibit funds from being used to subsidize the test and working with other workforce or social service

agencies to identify resources to offset the costs of the GED to test takers. These approaches, however, are dependent on resource allocations that are not always possible during times of fiscal uncertainty.

State officials are also thinking about options to the GED test. For example, states such as New York and Texas are seriously considering the development of an alternative test to the GED. Other states that already have alternatives to the GED test are looking at how to make these various high school equivalency diploma options more available and acceptable to a wider range of students. And states such as Minnesota and Washington are exploring the development of new competency-based high school equivalency diplomas (HSEDs).

The following section provides examples of existing and prospective state HSED options.

### BEYOND THE GED: OTHER HIGH SCHOOL EQUIVALENCY DIPLOMA OPTIONS<sup>17</sup>

Although the GED test is the most commonly used high school equivalency diploma program in the United States, a number of states have established alternative approaches to documenting and certifying the attainment of high school education and skill competencies. As states are preparing for the new GED test and at the same time becoming aware of the cost and structural issues noted above, many are examining the viability of expanding existing options and developing new ones. In fact, some state officials believe that the GED test overhaul can serve as a catalyst to foster needed change in the design of adult education and high school equivalency diploma programs by shaping these programs to help all students, particularly working adults, attain the basic skills needed to connect to postsecondary education and better employment.

#### An Overview of Non-GED HSED Programs

High school equivalency diploma programs provide students who typically have not finished high school an opportunity to earn a diploma that is generally considered to have equal value to a

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diploma awarded for completion of the high school graduation requirements established by the state and/or school district. Subject to state legislation, HSEDs can be awarded by a state, a local school district, a community college or a combination of these entities. Similar to a high school credential, the level of knowledge, skills and abilities needed to attain an HSED vary considerably across and within states, as there is very little consistency in standards of achievement. Not surprisingly, approaches for delivering high school equivalency programs are quite diverse as well.

Although 18 states offer GED test attainment as the only alternative to a high school diploma, individuals in many other states can attain an HSED by completing requirements at local educational agencies, school districts and/or community colleges. These alternatives vary considerably and are often designed to address the needs of specific populations.<sup>18</sup>

A number of alternatives have been designed to address the needs of adult learners. This is not surprising as the GED test serves only a small percentage of adults. In 2008, 4.8 percent of adults ages 18 to 24 without a high school diploma received a GED and for those ages 25 to 49 it was only 1 percent.<sup>19</sup>

One alternative is the National External Diploma Program (NEDP), a performance-based assessment

system utilized by seven states that was developed to better serve adult workers. In addition, states have developed their own competency-based equivalency diplomas designed especially for adult learners. Some have targeted their programs to specific populations such as refugees, incarcerated individuals and migrant farm workers. While many states charge fees for courses, services and/or materials related to the diploma program, about 10 states provide services for free.<sup>20</sup> There is also evidence that some states are beginning to infuse college readiness standards (e.g., Common Core Standards) into their current HSED requirement and curricula content.

At least 27 states provide HSED options in which students can earn credits toward their high school diploma in standard high school subjects such as math, English, science, social studies, physical education and health. Whereas this credit make-up approach may not exactly fit a technical definition of an HSED because it simply extends the regular high school diploma to dropouts, it is a form of alternative diploma pathway that is frequently used by many young adults who seek the shortest possible route to a high school diploma or equivalency. The number of credits students must earn for the HSED varies greatly, but most are in the 20 to 24 credit hour range. It is important to note that credit definitions do not follow any nationally established protocol and that some of these programs are geared toward younger individuals who have recently dropped out of high school, enabling participants to “recover” credits by taking classes that they did not complete in high school. In some states, students must also pass state high school exams or even the GED test to attain the HSED.

Most traditional HSED programs are operated through the local school districts that award the diploma and establish local curriculum and credit requirements; however, some states operate programs through their community colleges. For example, in the state of Iowa, the Adult High School Diploma program is offered at all 15 community colleges. Requirements vary across colleges, but students must complete three credits each of English, math, social studies and science as well as take additional courses in U.S. government,

American history and physical education. Up to 36 credits must be completed to earn the diploma and course costs range from \$25 to \$40. In Iowa, as in other states, students can receive some credit for prior work experience that counts toward the diploma, which is awarded by the community college with approval from the local school district.

### **One Option for States: The National External Diploma Program**

The National External Diploma Program (NEDP) was designed to serve adults in ways that addressed their need for more flexible schedules, more appropriate assessment tools, and content that was relevant to their life experiences.<sup>21</sup> The NEDP was established as a competency-based program without a formal class structure to allow students to demonstrate experience gained while working, raising a family and living in the community.

NEDP has two major phases—diagnostic and competency demonstration. The diagnostic phase ensures that students have basic reading, writing and math skills; those with low basic skills receive remedial instruction before working on the life and work skill competencies—the foundation of the diploma. The diagnostic phase also includes self-assessments in career interests and skills required for successful transition to postsecondary education and careers. Students must demonstrate 100 percent mastery in 70 competencies across 10 generalized content areas such as communication, information technology, applied math, cultural and financial literacy, health, civics, geography and history, scientific inquiry, and 21st century workplace. Students must also demonstrate an individual competency such as employment, continuing education, or obtaining a work-related certificate. Diplomas are awarded by either the state or the local school district.

Administered by the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS),<sup>22</sup> NEDP presently operates in six states and one jurisdiction—Connecticut, Maryland, New York, Rhode Island, Virginia, Washington and Washington, D.C. States identify sites to operate the program, which vary in

number and type of organization; nationwide there are 75 sites across the seven states with 10 more sites planned for early 2013. The cost of NEDP varies—all sites pay an annual fee of \$850 and about \$100 for materials per student, including all assessment instruments. CASAS does not impose age eligibility requirements; however, states set their own requirements, and for some states, individuals must be 21 years old to enroll in a program.

Since CASAS took over the administration of the NEDP in 2008, 8,709 individuals have graduated, with an average of 4,471 participants a year. Participants can complete the program in as little as three months, but the average is six to eight months. The NEDP was developed for adults and indeed attracts older individuals—31 years of age on average, only 2.5 percent are under age 18, 19.4 percent are 19 to 24 years old, and 78.1 percent are over age 25. Almost twice as many females participate as males—63 percent compared to 37 percent. And a significant number of African American/black students are served, close to 48 percent, who are typically underserved in other high school diploma programs. Well over half of the students using this option are employed.

Some of the states using NEDP are working with CASAS to redesign the program to increase the rigor and align with Common Core Standards. The program is also moving to a web-based platform and will do away with the paper-pencil version once all sites have transitioned to the web-based system.

### **Current State HSED Options<sup>23</sup>**

Several states offer a variety of HSED options for adult learners. These options include diplomas awarded for college credits, statewide competency-based HSED programs and, in Wisconsin, a mix of options. In a few states, competency-based options or HSED programs provided through partnerships between community colleges and public schools may be available, but only locally. For example, competency-based options are available in a few local school districts in Massachusetts; and in Portland, Oregon students who have dropped out of school can earn high school and college credit simultaneously at Portland Community College.

Vermont and Hawaii have developed their own competency-based programs, which primarily serve adults.

### Vermont

Vermont's Adult Diploma Program (ADP) targets adults over age 20 with family and work responsibilities. Free to students, ADP requires students to complete performance-based projects aligned with the Equipped for the Future Content Standards and Vermont Framework of Standards. Projects can be completed at home and include demonstration of practical tasks relevant to adult lives that require students to gather, organize and analyze information, draw conclusions and apply findings to real problems and situations. An assessor meets with students to review projects and evaluate work against a list of skills and performance criteria to determine satisfactory completion. ADP takes most students about four to nine months to complete, and about 100 students participate per year at 17 locations throughout the state. Diplomas are awarded by local school districts, which are reimbursed for each student through a state education fund.

### Hawaii

Hawaii offers the Competency-Based High School Diploma Program (CBHSDP) through 11 Adult Community Schools located at seven school districts in the state. The program is offered to individuals age 18 or older (16 and 17 with special approval) for a minimal fee (\$10 to enroll and \$5 for testing). A two-part curriculum—academic and career—includes academic classes in community resources, government and law, health, occupational knowledge and consumer economics. Students develop communication skills—reading, writing, listening and speaking—computation skills, problem-solving skills and interpersonal skills through hands-on

activities and must demonstrate 70 percent mastery in each subject area and on an overall CBHSDP test. It takes students about three to four months to complete each of the five units.

*Wisconsin* has been extremely progressive in their approach to alternative diploma programs since 1988 and currently offers five different options in addition to the GED test. In fact, unlike other states where it may be difficult to discern the value of an HSED relative to a GED, Wisconsin has sought to make HSEDs the highest quality possible while providing varying approaches tailored to meet different student situations. Prospective GED and HSED students must complete a counseling session prior to entering the program where their reading level and career interests are assessed, the various HSED options are discussed and career goals and next steps are determined.

The most common HSED option in Wisconsin builds on initial passage of the GED test and then requires students to demonstrate competencies in other areas, including health, citizenship, career awareness and employability skills. Other HSED options target specific populations. For example, one option targets individuals who recently left high school and another is structured for individuals who want to acquire occupation skills at technical college while getting their HSED. Now that the Ability to Benefit (ATB) regulation has changed for the Pell Grant, this may not be as viable an option for low-income working adults unless they are able to use tuition reimbursement programs provided by employers or other tuition-waiver or financial assistance options. (The ATB will likely affect any HSED option that is designed to connect to postsecondary education that does not have alternative resources or means to address college tuition and other costs.<sup>24</sup>)

Wisconsin also offers a competency-based option, which was initially designed for individuals who were not good test takers. Offered by a technical college or community-based group that has been approved by the state superintendent of public instruction as a high school completion program, it consists of approved competencies spread across academic areas including math, reading and writing.

Students can demonstrate competencies in a variety of ways—assessments, classes and projects including on-line work. To award a high school completion credential, a review committee must verify that students have demonstrated the competencies and submit paper work for final state approval. Wisconsin currently is updating this HSED program to align it with the Common Core Standards and career pathway efforts in the state's technical colleges.

### New HSED Options in Development

A number of states recognize that the GED—a standardized test—cannot capture the scope and wide range of abilities and skills that adults have developed over the years. The impending change is seen as an opportunity to create new diploma programs that can be accelerated and aligned with the needs and experiences of adult learners.

Minnesota and Washington are looking at ways they can use their existing adult education systems to create new HSED options for adult learners and do so with a focus on connecting participating students to postsecondary education.

#### Minnesota

In 2012, Minnesota commissioned a study to explore the possibility of developing an additional high school equivalency diploma program.<sup>25</sup> Based on that study, and with the goal of approaching the state legislature in 2013 to get approval to design and implement a program prior to 2014, Minnesota is working on a three-part design—core literacy competencies, career readiness and college readiness. Core literacy involves achieving acceptable scores on currently available, adult-appropriate standardized academic tests such as the TABE, GAIN, CASAS, WorkKeys or GED to serve as the indicator of competency in reading, writing and math. The career readiness component would include a set of competencies (some required, some recommended based on counseling results) that have to be demonstrated and reported

in a transcript to document that they have been accomplished. The college readiness component would include a set of competencies, such as understanding education and training options in the state, how to access the options—including navigating the financial aid system—and how to succeed in college (e.g. setting goals, time management and study skills).

#### Washington

In August 2012, Washington enlisted numerous stakeholders to consider options for individuals age 21 or older to attain a high school equivalency diploma other than the GED. While this effort is in the early planning stage, Washington is building on the authority and capacity of community and technical colleges to award high school diplomas to students who accumulate certain college credits and/or certificates or degrees. The idea is to use the college administered adult education basic skills classes to gain the academic skills needed to qualify for an HSED. Content ideas include demonstrating reading, writing or math proficiency by scoring at specified levels of attainment on the approved National Reporting System list of tests and achieving certain grades in adult education and/or college classes that have well-defined curriculum requirements.

Using a system-wide general framework, local colleges will be able to customize their HSED program requirement to fit their occupational offerings. The state intends to have an HSED alternative in place by the end of 2013. Washington officials see this as an opportunity to create a valid credential that serves the needs of adults and enables them to move quickly to access family-sustaining-wage jobs by taking advantage of what the adult education and college and technical systems already have in place.

Unlike the Minnesota or Washington models noted above, some states such as New York<sup>26</sup> and Texas are considering a single test alternative to the GED

It is likely, at least for most states that the GED test will continue to be an important part of the adult high school equivalency market.

test. The concept of identifying or developing a single alternative exam (presumably with multiple subject test components) is appealing especially from a cost-efficient and a promotional recognition perspective. That is, if a single test could be sanctioned by a state's adult education system as a viable GED test alternative, costs for administration could be regulated, professional development targeted, and strategic and comprehensive recognition and acceptance built within the state for that alternative test.

Tests are already being developed for use in the K-12 arena to measure the Common Core Standards by various consortiums of educational organizations (e.g., Smarter Balanced and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers [PARCC]). Also, established adult education test publishers are in the process of or considering aligning their assessments (e.g., TABE, Accuplacer) to the Common Core. These assessment examples may be considered leading candidates if a state is interested in adopting a single alternative test.

## TAKING STEPS TO ACCOMMODATE THE 2014 GED TEST AND EXPLORING HIGH SCHOOL EQUIVALENCY OPTIONS

No one really knows how significantly the 2014 changes to the GED test will affect low-income students, but the predictions that the poorest and least skilled are very likely to be negatively affected must be considered. As states prepare for the impending changes, their efforts can be described from two perspectives:

- 1) actions to ensure that the new GED test is accessible, affordable and appropriate for all students; and
- 2) actions to provide viable options to achieving a high school equivalency, especially alternatives to better serve adult workers and facilitate connections to postsecondary education.

### Actions to Accommodate the Transition to the New GED Test

It is likely, at least for most states that the GED test will continue to be an important part of the adult high school equivalency market. This makes sense as the GED test offers several important benefits, including: a) students' ability to start the GED in one state and finish it another; and b) the common recognition of the GED test by employers and others throughout the country.

Also, transitioning to viable HSED alternatives will take time and resources. Therefore, state officials will need to engage in a variety of short-term actions to ensure GED test access and success for this population. In addition, states will have to tackle the issue concerning potential future increases in costs, to both students and preparation programs.

**Working Poor Families Project (WFPF)** state partners can play an important role in helping states respond to the forthcoming changes to the GED in several important ways:

- *First, WFPF state partners can raise attention to the forthcoming changes and engage in discussions and actions about the GED test to ensure that the needs of low-income students are considered.*
- *Second, WFPF state partners can help focus attention on the four key areas of change: costs to examinees, computerization of tests, access to testing centers, and test content and preparation activities.*

As state partners become engaged, there are a number of specific issues that warrant attention.

These include:

- *Efforts* to encourage students to finish and pass the GED test before 2014;
- *Opportunities* to offer the 2002 GED test using the computer-based format available through the GED testing service;<sup>27</sup>
- *Strategies* to reduce the cost burden for new GED examinees and preparation, including public and private sector resources;
- *Plans* to provide professional development for teachers and program administrators that link directly to the new GED test content and computer delivered examination processes;
- *Identification and utilization* of internet-based new GED resources;<sup>28</sup> and
- *Increased support* and technical assistance to GED test preparation entities and testing centers.

In focusing on these areas, WFPF state partners can work collaboratively with other interested parties to establish a thoughtful and comprehensive approach to support the change. Since employers and many agencies and organizations, both governmental and community based, are concerned with the high school level educational attainment of adults, these “common client” stakeholders should understand the upcoming GED test changes and work collaboratively to maximize efforts that result in student success.

### **Actions to Provide Viable Options for Adults to Achieve High School Equivalency Diplomas**

Changes to the GED test create an important opportunity for states to consider the advantages of alternative HSED programs and to think about the best ways to help a variety of students gain the skills needed for a 21st century economy and a family-sustaining wage. While pursuing these options may require legislative and regulatory changes as well as require time and resources to adopt or create, states would be wise to give them careful consideration.

WFPF state partners can play an important role in helping states move toward considering viable options to the GED in several important ways:

- *First, WFPF state partners can help make the case that changes to the GED create a significant opportunity for examining how best to meet basic skill needs so that all students are prepared to advance to higher levels of education and employment.*
- *Second, WFPF state partners can share explicit information on a variety of high school equivalency diploma options and match them to specific opportunities and circumstances in their state.*

As WFPF state partners advocate for moving in this direction, they will want to make sure that policymakers are aware of the following five opportunities.

#### **1) The National External Diploma Program (NEDP)**

The opportunity to add the NEDP as an option should be considered by states that are interested in new ways to serve working adults. The NEDP is comprehensive and it includes a competency framework and curriculum materials already used by several states. In addition, the test and materials will be aligned with the college readiness standards and a new computerized version is being developed (although, like the GED testing service, the paper-pencil version will be discontinued when the upcoming revision is completed and once all sites have transitioned to the web-based system). As noted earlier, NEDP was designed specifically for working adults so that it can be accomplished according to an individual's work and personal schedule, and credit for competencies can be awarded for prior experience.

#### **2) Existing State-Led Competency-Based Option**

A number of states have developed and operated their own competency-based high school equivalency programs. The three states profiled

above, Hawaii, Vermont and Wisconsin, allow students to get credit for prior experience, which is very important for adults, and particularly working adults. In addition to providing flexibility in scheduling and the ability to complete the competencies in a self-paced environment, competency-based options can also be good for students who are not good test takers. These three states have been able to keep costs fairly low, although each state reports that it can take almost one year for some students to complete.

### 3) New HSED Opportunities

At least two states—Minnesota and Washington—are in the process of developing mechanisms to create new HSED programs. Although there are similarities in how these states are approaching alternative HSED programs, there is one important difference: Each state is taking a different approach in awarding the HSED. Minnesota has opted to have the state issue the diploma so that they will have a greater chance of ensuring consistency of standards. Washington plans to keep the control with local entities because community colleges already have the authority to grant highschool equivalency diplomas.

### 4) Alternative Adult-Appropriate HSED Exams

States such as New York and Texas are considering adopting a single exam (or a battery of tests within a single exam) such as the TABE, Accuplacer, or other already developed academic exams that were designed for adults. This exploration for a single HSED exam could also include adopting exams such as the Smarter Balanced Assessment or the PARCC assessment, both of which are under development for the K-12 community to measure the Common Core standards of high school students.

### 5) Design New Options to Connect Students to Postsecondary

In several of the above HSED examples, the involvement of postsecondary institutions in

the delivery of the high school diploma is essential. The willingness to enroll students into for-credit career pathway programs while providing them an opportunity to earn their HSED is an important first step. Models found in Wisconsin, Minnesota (FastTRAC), and Washington, offer structures and policies for others to consider. Involvement in this design feature for HSED's could occur at a state level (e.g., postsecondary systems office) or at an individual college level, particularly with community or technical colleges.

## CONCLUSION

The issuance of a completely new GED test will require that states prepare for significant changes to their adult education systems in 2013 and beyond. Identifying key cost issues related to student fees, test centers and GED test preparation are vitally important and should focus on the goal of making sure examinee fees are not a barrier to participation.

For all states this means adjusting instructional delivery to help students get ready for a computerized and much more challenging GED test. It also means working with existing testing centers in the state to help them become GED Testing Service-authorized testing centers. And if states have not already done so, it means developing a comprehensive outreach system to encourage students to complete the existing test before 2014.

The 2014 GED test changes create the opportunity for states to rethink their overall approach to adult education by ensuring that the state system and local providers provide the best options for all students, including working adults, to gain the skills needed to obtain higher levels of education and better employment. This means thinking beyond the GED test and focusing on making other HSED options work for more students, especially working adults.

The changes to the GED are coming quickly. Now is the time for policymakers and other stakeholders to ensure that all students, especially working adults, have practical and cost-effective options to meet their basic skill and educational needs.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Actions to accommodate the transition to the new GED test:

- WFPF state partners can raise attention to the forthcoming changes and engage in discussions and actions about the GED test to ensure that the needs of low-income students are considered.
- WFPF state partners can help focus attention on the four key areas of change: costs to examinees, computerization of tests, access to testing centers, and test content and preparation activities.

Actions to provide viable options for adults to achieve high school equivalency diplomas:

- WFPF state partners can help make the case that changes to the GED create a significant opportunity for examining how best to meet basic skill needs so that all students are prepared to advance to higher levels of education and employment.
- WFPF state partners can share explicit information on a variety of high school equivalency options and match them to specific opportunities and circumstances in their state.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>2</sup> Carol Clymer is a workforce development consultant with more than 30 years of expertise in program design, evaluation and policy development. The author offers special thanks to Barry Shaffer, former director of the Minnesota Adult Basic Education Office, who provided invaluable content expertise and assisted in the writing of this report. The author would also like to thank individuals who provided information for the report: Anne Frank, Mark Leinung, Pat Mooney, Robert Purga, New York State Department of Education; Lewis Payton, Adrienne Simmons, and Yajaira Tejada, 1199 SEIU Training and Upgrading Fund; Bethany O’Day and Janet Anderson, Waukesha County Technical College; Beth Lewis, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction; Mark Johnson, Wisconsin Technical College System; Kathy Cooper, Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges; Jim Harrison and Jane Eguez, CASAS; Marcie M.W. Foster and Patrick Reimherr, CLASP; Lennox McLendon, NCSDAE; and David J. Rosen, Newsome Associates. In addition, much thanks to the reviewers of an initial draft who provided valuable and useful feedback: WFPF states partners Judy Berman, DC Appleseed; Tom J. Hilliard, NY Center for an Urban Future; Ruthie Liberman, MA Crittenton Women’s Union; as well as Marci W.M. Foster, CLASP; Beth Lewis, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction; and Jim Harrison, CASAS. Finally, thanks to Deborah Povich and Brandon Roberts of the Working Poor Families Project who provided guidance and assistance throughout the writing of this report.

<sup>3</sup> Carnevale, Anthony, P., Stephen J. Rose, and Andrew R. Hamson. 2012. *Certificates: Gateway To Gainful Employment and College Degrees*. Washington, DC: Center on Education and the Workforce.

<sup>4</sup> Heckman, James, John Eric Humphries, and Nicolas Mader. 2010. The GED, NBER Working Paper No. 16064. Cambridge, MA. <http://www.nber.org/papers/w16064>.

<sup>5</sup> Gewertz, Catherine. “Higher Education is the Goal of GED Overhaul.” *Education Week*. 2011. <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/11/16/12ged.h31.html>

<sup>6</sup> After July 1, 2012, newly enrolled college students without a high school diploma or secondary school equivalent were no longer be eligible for federal student aid, due to the elimination of the “Ability to Benefit” (ATB) options by Congress in December 2011. Prior to that, students without a high school diploma or GED could access federal student aid, including Pell grants, by showing that they have the “ability to benefit” from postsecondary education by passing a federally approved test or successfully completing six credits toward a certificate or degree and receiving a “C” or higher For more on this change and its implications, see: <http://www.clasp.org/admin/site/documents/files/CLASP-AtB-one-pager.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> GED test subjects are: Language Arts: Writing; Language Arts: Reading; Social Studies; Science; and Mathematics

<sup>8</sup> See: Working Poor Families Project, Population Reference Bureau analysis of 2010 Data from the American Community Survey.

<sup>9</sup> K-12 systems in 45 states have adopted the Common Core Standards. Their full K-12 implementation timeline is 2015-16. Adult education programs are not required to adopt or apply the Common Core Standards to their programs. For more on the Common Core see: <http://www.corestandards.org>

<sup>10</sup> Foster, Marcie with Lennox McLendon. *Sinking or Swimming, Findings from a Survey of State Adult Education Tuition and Financing Policies, CLASP/National Council of State Directors of Adult Education*, June 2012. See: <http://www.clasp.org/admin/site/publications/files/Sinking-or-Swimming-State-Adult-Education-Tuition-and-Financing-Policies.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> According to *Sinking or Swimming, Findings from a Survey of State Adult Education Tuition and Financing Policies*, 26 states charge students a flat uniform fee ranging from \$13 in Connecticut to \$160 in Georgia. Seven states charge \$50 or less, 13 charge \$51 to \$75, six charge \$76 to \$100. In some states local centers set the fee structure. Page 16.

<sup>12</sup> New York is especially concerned about the fee increases as the state currently legislatively bars local areas from charging fees to test takers. In September, however, the New York State Board of Regents, which oversees the State Education Department, approved a “multiple pathways” approach to high school equivalency exams (HSEs). A Request For Proposals will be issued for test publishers who want to propose an HSE exam to be made available statewide prior to January 2014. The Board of Regents also proposes to abolish the law that prohibits charging a fee for the GED exam and replace it with a flat subsidy for all HSE exams.

<sup>13</sup> See GED Testing Service: 2011 Annual Statistical Report. <http://www.gedtestingservice.com/uploads/files/4176ab251366d3ccfb4e94a9a888e67a.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> For more information on the test content for the new GED go to: <http://www.gedtestingservice.com/uploads/files/d2dcf7999b40b1ff1e593c43beabe77d.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> For the K-12 systems in the 45 states that have adopted the Common Core, their full K-12 implementation timeline is 2015-16. Adult Education programs are not required to adopt or apply the Common Core Standards to their programs. See: <http://www.corestandards.org>

<sup>16</sup> Foster, Marcie W.M. with Lennox McLendon. 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Much of the information for this section was obtained through an unpublished review of high school equivalency diplomas programs of states completed by Marcie W.M. Foster and Patrick Reimherr at CLASP during the summer of 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Some states have developed high school equivalency diploma programs especially for immigrants who have a high school diploma from another country.

<sup>19</sup><http://www.higheredinfo.org/dbrowser/?level=nation&mode=data&state=0&submeasure=325> and <http://www.higheredinfo.org/dbrowser/?level=nation&mode=data&state=0&submeasure=326>

<sup>20</sup> Some local school districts offer free programs even though there is no state policy requiring them to do so.

<sup>21</sup> King, Patricia and Mary Beth Hinton. 1993. *Hey, Why Don't We Start an External High School Diploma Program?* Library Associates. Paper 303. <http://surface.syr.edu/libassoc/303>

<sup>22</sup> NEDP began as a New York state program and was validated by the U.S. Department of Education in 1979. The American Council on Education (ACE)—the same organization that administers the GED—took over the rights to the New York State Diploma program in 1990 with the intent of making it available to all states in 2000. ACE was unable to continue the program and turned it over to Madison Technical for College. In 2006, however, some of the participating states—New York, Maryland and Connecticut helped facilitate and pay for the transfer of NEDP to the nonprofit organization Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS).

<sup>23</sup> The material in this subsection was derived from state websites or other publically available information in addition to CLASP's interviews with adult education state directors.

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.clasp.org/admin/site/documents/files/CLASP-AtB-one-pager.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> For more information about this effort see: *Minnesota Adult Secondary Credential Report: A Student Centered Strategy for Workforce Readiness and Individual Prosperity*, A Report for the Minnesota Adult Secondary Credential Task Force. July 2012. [http://literacyactionnetwork.org/sites/default/files/july2012finalreport\\_0.pdf](http://literacyactionnetwork.org/sites/default/files/july2012finalreport_0.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> NYSED recently released RFPs to identify a new HSE vendor in New York State. <http://www.acces.nysed.gov/aepp/procurement/about.html>.

<sup>27</sup> See GED Testing Service: <http://www.gedtestingservice.com/educators/ged-test-on-computer>

<sup>28</sup> One example has been prepared by David Rosen, Newsome Associates and can be found at: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/u1q3ezmq59bhuwf/GED%202014%20Template%20for%20Planning.docx>.