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CHANGES TO THE GED COULD LEAVE SOME NORTH CAROLINIANS BEHIND

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On January 1, 2014, significant changes to the General Educational Development (GED) test will take effect. After 70 years of being administered by the non-profit American Council on Education, the test will become a project of a public-private partnership with Pearson VUE, the largest existing testing company. Along with the shift in delivery, there are a number of changes that could create significant accessibility obstacles for low-income, low-skilled adults: costs will increase, all tests will be computerized, and the content will be more difficult within a two-tiered certificate format.¹ Moreover, any students to date who began the current GED Test series but do not finish all five tests before January 1 will need to start over under the new system.²

The importance of a high school credential

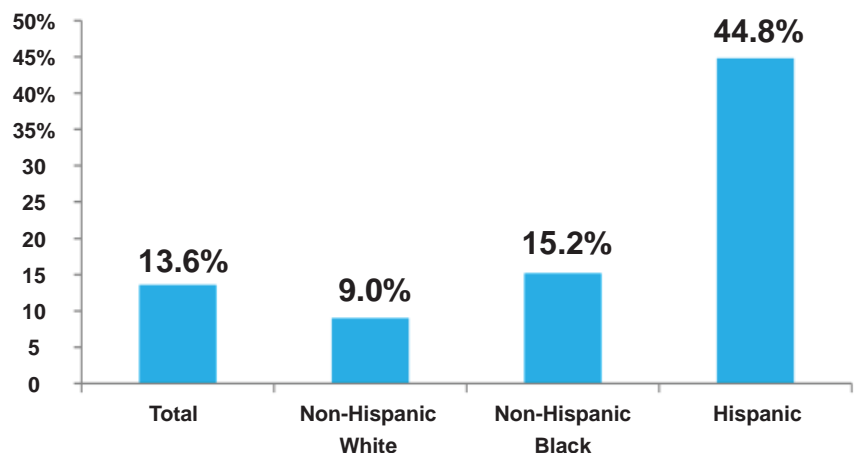
More than 800,000 working-age adults in North Carolina lack a high school credential, placing the state at the low rank of 38th in the country.³ The percentage of those without a high school credential is higher for African American and Hispanic adults in North Carolina (see figure 1).

Access to postsecondary education is a commonly recognized threshold for establishing middle-class earnings, and a high school degree or GED is an important milestone in accessing the education and skills training to succeed in today's economy.

For adults without high school diplomas or the equivalent credentials, prospects of economic security can be daunting.⁴ Research shows that working-age adults without high schools degrees or

FIGURE 1:

The rate of adults without a high school credential is especially high for Hispanics in North Carolina



SOURCE: Working Poor Families Project, Population Reference Bureau 2013 analysis of 2011 American Community Survey.

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GEDs are often mired in low-wage jobs with few opportunities for advancement. In North Carolina, 37 percent of working families living under the meager federal poverty level have at least one parent without a high school credential. And in 56.4 percent of working families earning below the poverty level, neither parent has any post-secondary education.⁵

Potential impacts of the GED changes on low-income adult learners

GED completion is a critical step for many North Carolinians who do not have a high school degree to access post-secondary education. The changes being implemented on January 1st may make this step more difficult for some low-income North Carolinians.

- **Costs will increase.** As of 2013, the cost of the paper-based GED is set at \$35 per student for the full battery of five required tests, including re-testing.⁶ A new transitional computer-based testing option was rolled out in the summer of 2013 and the fee for this assessment is currently set at \$24 per test, with an additional \$24 for any re-test.⁷ The testing fee for the new 2014 test is \$120 for the entire battery of tests - only 4 tests as compared to the 5 tests now offered - which equates to \$30 per test in 2014. There are concerns about the higher cost of computer-based assessment and future increases due to the for-profit nature of the new GED testing service.
- **GED tests will only be provided at sites that meet Pearson's technology requirements.** The new GED test will be available at Pearson VUE testing facilities and at existing GED testing centers, as long as these centers have the necessary equipment and capacity for the new computerized tests. North Carolina currently has 72 testing centers. Only North Carolina community colleges will be allowed to offer the test in 2014. After that time, Pearson VUE may allow its other centers to test.
- **All tests will be computerized.** Up until this shift, North Carolina has offered pencil and paper tests for all test takers. Excepting test takers who need accommodations due to a disability, the new GED will only be available to test takers by computer. Although the so-called "digital divide" has become smaller over the last decade, research shows that for some demographic groups technology access and competency disparities remain. National data show that adults living in households earning less than \$30,000 per year are by far the least likely income group to have access to desktops or laptops.⁸ There may be significant challenges in ensuring that test takers who lack access to and proficiency with computers are able and ready to succeed at a computerized version of the test.
- **The new GED content and two-tiered credential could cause short and long-term obstacles.** Beginning January 2014, the current five subject-matter test format will be revised to align with the Common Core standards being used in North Carolina public schools. The new four-test format - which will demand higher order critical thinking skills and competency in subjects such as Algebra II - is expected to be more challenging for test takers than the current five subject-matter tests.

North Carolinians who are in the process of taking the current GED should check with their local community college for their last scheduled test date. Many colleges will close in mid-December, which is prior to the December 31 expiration date of the test.

The new test will also include two categories of certification: high school equivalency

and college/career readiness. In practice, a passing score for each of the four tests will be established, which will indicate high school competency. Then, for students who score well on the college readiness portions of the tests, the credential will be demarcated as being both a high school equivalency certificate and a college readiness certificate. While it is still unclear how the two levels will be viewed in the labor market and how the readiness format will connect to postsecondary access, it is clear that test preparation programs will need to be overhauled in an extremely short amount of time. In addition, there is concern that those students who pass only the high school equivalency track may feel discouraged from taking additional steps to seek postsecondary education because they feel less than “college ready.”⁹

- **Test scores on the current test series will expire in 2014.**

During the 2012-13 fiscal year, 25,971 North Carolinians took at least one of the five tests within the current GED series. Of these students, 15,717 have attained a GED diploma. As of September 1, 2013, 10,254 of the nearly 26,000 students had not yet passed all tests necessary to attain a GED diploma.¹⁰

Any students who have not received their GED diploma by December 31, 2013, will begin the process under the new 2014 test series, which means additional time and costs will be incurred. Community colleges have been working hard to encourage test takers to complete the test series, but it is likely that some will not be able to pass all the tests by the end of the year.

Series	Number of GED Credentials Issued/GED Test Passers
1942 series (1943 – 1977)	68,000
1978 series (1978 - 1987)	152,000
1988 series (1988 – 2001)	197,000
2002 series (2002 – 2012)	135,000

SOURCE: 2012 Annual Statistical Report on the GED Test

The GED is currently the most widely accepted high school equivalency credential. However, a number of states have moved forward to examine state policy and explore the creation of alternative credentials for high school completion and skill competencies. Many of these models are more flexible and affordable than the new GED, and have different accommodations for the special testing circumstances for such student populations as those with limited English proficiency or learning disabilities.

In the past year, Iowa, Louisiana, Maine, Missouri, Montana, New York and New Hampshire announced a switch to different equivalency tests and a number of other states are looking into alternatives.¹¹ New York, for instance, has adopted McGraw Hill’s TASC test to replace the 2002 GED as a free, state-subsidized assessment leading to a high school equivalency diploma. The new test will be accompanied by a gradual ramp-up in computer-based testing and will be available at all approved test centers.¹²

North Carolina has released a request for proposals and will be considering bids from various companies that can offer more competitive pricing and greater options to serve adult students.

Conclusion

The upcoming changes to the GED have important implications for all test takers, and especially for low-income low-skilled adults. The fee structure, the computerization of the test, and the new format all pose potential challenges for working age low-income North Carolinians seeking a high school credential. North Carolina has taken an important step by exploring alternative options to the new GED and requesting competitive bids for providers who can reduce some of these barriers to students.

While these challenges are significant, the changes to the GED test also offer an opportunity for states to reflect on ways to better meet the needs of this target population. The goal of adult education should be to ensure that all students are equipped with the basic skills they need to access higher levels of education that will lead to good, quality jobs.¹³ The GED or its equivalent represents an important bridge to further skills training and education. Adequate funding for basic skills trainings is therefore necessary and the connection of basic skills to credential attainment in ways that engage low-income working adults is key to strengthening a path to self-sufficiency.

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1. For a more complete discussion of the current GED test, the upcoming changes, and the potential impact on low-income, low-skilled students see Clymer, Carol, Fall 2012. "Preparing for the New GED Test: What to Consider Before 2014," Working Poor Families Project.
 2. During the 2012-13 Fiscal Year, nearly 26,000 students took at least one of the five tests in the current GED 2002 series.
 3. Working Poor Families Project, Population Reference Bureau 2013 analysis of 2011 American Community Survey. Working age is defined as ages 18-64.
 4. In the last 30 years, the earnings of high school drop outs have fallen by 2 percent and the earning of graduates have increased by 13 percent. See Carnevale, Anthony, Nicole Smith, and Jeff Strohl, June 2010. "Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements through 2018," Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.
 5. Working Poor Families Project analysis of 2011 American Community Survey microdata. A family in this analysis is a primary married-couple or single parent family with at least one child under age 18 present in the household. A family is defined as working if all family members age 15 and over either have a combined work effort of 39 weeks or more in the prior 12 months OR all family members age 15 and over have a combined work effort of 26 to 39 weeks in the prior twelve months and one currently unemployed parent looked for work in the prior 4 weeks.
 6. The State Board of Community Colleges (per G.S. 115D-5(s)) set the fee. See http://www.nccommunitycolleges.edu/basic_skills/ged.htm
 7. Students who began testing prior to January 1, 2013, continued to pay the prior rates of \$7.50 or \$25. NC Community Colleges General Educational Development Program information accessed at http://www.nccommunitycolleges.edu/basic_skills/ged.htm
 8. Pew Internet and American Life Project at the Pew Research Center, February 2013. "Use of digital technology by different income groups."
 9. See Clymer, 2012.
 10. Special data request to the North Carolina Community College System.
 11. Shaffer, Barry, Summer 2013. "State Opportunities for Reconnecting Young Adults to Education, Skills Training and Employment," The Working Poor Families Project.
 12. Foster, Marcie, March 2013. "New York's Move to Abandon the GED is a Game Changer," CLASP.
 13. See Clymer, 2012.