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NEW JERSEY HIGH SCHOOL EQUIVALENCY TEST *MORE TEST OPTIONS, LESS OPPORTUNITY*

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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 testing options to achieve an 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 present our analysis and 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. However, in 2011, ACE announced the creation of the new *GED Testing Service*, a joint venture of ACE and the for-profit company Pearson VUE. The new test aligned with Common Core

State Standards (CCSS) and was now available only online (it had been administered in a paper-based format).⁴ These changes were accompanied by a substantial increase in the cost of the test. The changes took effect nationwide.

The new testing policy caused concern among policy-makers and other stakeholders in many states, who feared that it would be more difficult for test takers to access and complete the test. 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 altogether. In 2013, the 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 available tests.

Beginning March 2014, HSE test takers in New Jersey could take exams from one of three for-profit providers – GED Testing Service (GED/Pearson), Education Testing Service (HiSET), and McGraw Hill (TASC).⁵ These options vary in cost, content and scoring, and location of the test sites. Prior to 2014, the cost of the test had been capped at \$50. Now, costs range from \$90 to \$120 for the full battery of tests with additional fees for retaking the test. The most expensive of these options is 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, from 150 to 145, and to offer two additional score levels – a score of 165-174 is considered “GED College Ready”; and a score of 175 or more is considered “GED College Ready +Credit.”⁶ 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 2012, prior to the changes to content, delivery, and cost, the GED had a total of 13,591 test takers in New Jersey, with 97.1 percent (13,198) completing the exam (see Table 1).¹⁰ Of those who completed, 59.2 percent (7,808) passed all four knowledge areas and received an HSE diploma. The number of test takers and GED recipients significantly increased in New Jersey in 2013 due to the anticipated changes in

HSE Test-Taking Terminology

Test Taker: individual taking one test in a series of knowledge areas

Test Taker who Completed: individual who took one test in a series of knowledge areas and received a passing grade in that area

Test Taker who Passed: individual who took and completed the entire series of tests

Knowledge Areas: Social Studies, Science, Reading, Math and Writing (writing section on HiSET and TASC only)

the system; 16,877 people took the test, 94.1 percent (15,876) completed, and 68.1 percent of those passed (10,811). The passing rate for 2012 and 2013 demonstrates a baseline level of success for the GED in reaching adult learners prior to implementation of the changes. In Table 1, the passing rate is calculated as the number of those who passed among those who completed and passed any one subject area of the test. It is important to note that under the previous system, completion rates were very high: 97% in 2012 and 94% in 2013.

Table 1. New Jersey GED Test Takers, 2012 and 2013

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

Sources: 2012 Annual Statistical Report on the GED Test, GED Testing Service, (<https://www.gedtesting.com/uploads/files/8d4558324628dfcf1011dc738acca6eb.pdf>); 2013 Annual Statistical Report on the GED Test, GED Testing Service, (<https://www.gedtesting.com/uploads/files/5b49fc887db0c075da20a68b17d313cd.pdf>).

To 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 (in Table 1). Data from 2014 were not comparable because the changes took effect two months into the year.

Our findings demonstrate that after the changes in format and administration, there was a sharp decline in the total number of test takers and a significant decline in completion and passing rates.¹¹ These data appear in Tables 2 and 3 below.

In 2012, 13,198 people took the test, 15,876 did so in 2013. By 2015, the total number of test takers in New Jersey who took one of the three tests offered (GED, HiSET and TASC) had declined to 8,375, by 2016, the number was 8,808. Completion rates also declined sharply, from over 90% in 2012 and 2013 to just over 70% in 2015 and 2016. A number of factors could be behind these declines, but cost, accessibility of testing sites, and method of administration all undoubtedly factor into the explanation.

Comparability of passing rates is more difficult to assess. Under the previous formula (see Table 1), the number who passed the test and received their GEDs was divided by the number who completed the test. This calculation for 2015 and 2016 appears in Table 2 below, and indicates slight increases in the passing rate under the new system.

This comparison is not entirely accurate, however, because completion rates have declined so dramatically under the new system. If we instead calculate the passing rate as the number who passed and received their GEDs out of the total number who took the test (which is a number

arguably far more relevant to prospective GED test-takers), we find a passing rate of 55% for 2015 and 54% for 2016 (see Table 3). Making this same adjustment for 2012 and 2013 yields passing rates of 57% and 64%, respectively. By this calculation, passing rates have declined somewhat under the new system.

No matter what calculation one uses, the bottom line is this: the number of those receiving GEDs in the state of New Jersey has declined sharply – from 18,619 in 2012-2013 to 9,333 in 2015-2016. This is a decline of 50 percent. Even if one takes into account the fact that 2013 was an unusual year due to the fact that many people opted to take the test before the changes took effect, the comparison of 2012 (when 7,808 people received HSE degrees) to 2015 (when 4,619 received degrees) still represents a decline of more than 40 percent.

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

Table 2 - Passing rates calculated using traditional formula

Test Type	2015					2016				
	Number of Test Takers	Number of Test Takers who Completed	Completion Rate (%)	Number of Test Takers Who Passed <i>All Subtests</i>	Passing Rate (%)	Number of Test Takers	Number of Test Takers who Completed	Completion Rate (%)	Number of Test Takers Who Passed <i>All Subtests</i>	Passing Rate (%)
HiSET	1410	927	65.7%	569	61.4%	1846	1252	67.8%	888	70.9%
TASC	5,853	4,592	78.5%	3,612	78.7%	5494	4,234	77.1%	3,292	77.8%
GED	1112	644	57.9%	438	68.0%	1464	794	54.2%	544	68.5%
TOTAL	8,375	6,163	73.6%	4,619	74.9%	8804	6,280	71.3%	4,724	75.2%

Table 3 - CWW calculation of passing rates

Test Type	2015					2016				
	Number of Test Takers	Number of Test Takers who Completed	Completion Rate (%)	Number of Test Takers Who Passed <i>All Subtests</i>	Passing Rate (%)	Number of Test Takers	Number of Test Takers who Completed	Completion Rate (%)	Number of Test Takers Who Passed <i>All Subtests</i>	Passing Rate (%)
HiSET	1410	927	65.7%	569	40.4%	1846	1252	67.8%	888	48.1%
TASC	5,853	4,592	78.5%	3,612	61.7%	5494	4,234	77.1%	3,292	59.9%
GED	1112	644	57.9%	438	39.4%	1464	794	54.2%	544	37.2%
TOTAL	8,375	6,163	73.6%	4,619	55.2%	8804	6,280	71.3%	4,724	53.7%

Sources: CWW analysis of data available from Department of Education, <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. According to NJ DOE website, five are statewide agencies, five provide more than one of the three test options, and two provide all three test options.¹² 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.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

Additionally, though 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, this information is not readily accessible 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-

WELL-KNOWN HSE EARNERS
Former US Surgeon General Dr. Richard Carmona ---
News Anchor Peter Jennings ---
Congressman Charles Rangel ---
Former Governor Jim Florio ---
Chris Rock ---
John Travolta ---
Dave Thomas (Wendy's) ---
Vidal Sassoon ---
Wally Amos (Famous Amos Cookies) --
Beyoncé

Source: Bergen County Workforce Development Board.

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. 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

Vendor	Full Test		Single Subtest	
	Test Only	Total Cost (Includes Admin. Fee)	Subtest Only	Total Cost (Includes Admin. Fee)
GEDTS (GED)	\$80.00	\$120.00	\$20.00	\$30.00
ETS (Hi-SET)	\$50.00	\$90.00	\$8.00	\$18.00
McGraw Hill (TASC)	\$52.00	\$92.00	\$10.40	\$20.40

Source: State of New Jersey, Department of Education, NJ Adult Education, <http://www.nj.gov/education/students/adulted/>.

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 with a relevant disability covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act have access to paper-based testing.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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 subtests: 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 completion 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 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 a test.

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 accessibility.

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.

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³ Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Geographic Profile of Employment and Unemployment, 2014", Table 15, Employment status of the Civilian Non-institutional Population 25 years and Older, by Educational Attainment, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/gp/laugp.htm>

⁴ American Council on Education, "ACE and Pearson Collaborate to Transform GED Test, Align with Common Core State Standards, Based on GED 21st Century Initiative" March 15, 2011 Press Statement. Accessed on January 3, 2018 at: <http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Pages/ACE-and-Pearson-Collaborate-to-Transform-GED-Test.aspx>.

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⁶ GED Testing Service, "In Session With the GED Program." Big Changes to the GED Test Score Levels, February 8, 2016. Accessed January 3, 2018 at https://gedtestingservice.com/in-session/big-changes-to-the-ged-test-score-levels_022016/

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⁹ Jacobson, Erik. "Needs Analysis and Recommendations Regarding the State of Adult Literacy Education in New Jersey." Comp. Hal Beder, Lansing Davis, Eleese Greene-Smith, Nancy Fisher, and Barry Semple. Investing In New Jersey's Adult Learners (2013): 1-89. Jan. 2013. Web. 17 Aug. 2016.

¹⁰ "2013 Annual Statistical Report on the GED Test," GED Testing Service, last modified 2014, <https://www.gedtestingservice.com/uploads/files/5b49fc887db0c075da20a68b17d313cd.pdf>.

¹¹ CWW analysis of data available from Department of Education, <http://www.state.nj.us/education/students/adulted/reports/>; Data downloaded on November 11, 2017.

¹² Authors' review of NJ Department of Education's Adult Education website on September 13, 2017. <https://homerom5.doe.state.nj.us/adulted/search.php>

¹³ Data USA. Cumberland County, NJ data. Accessed September 11, 2017 at <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/cumberland-county-nj/>

¹⁴ 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 Education. State of New Jersey, Web. 11 Aug. 2016. See Also: "Quick Facts." United States Census Bureau. U.S. Department of Commerce, 2015. Web. 11 Aug. 2016.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Yaple, Michael, and David Saenz. "Christie Administration Announces Adult Education High School Equivalency Tests to Be Fully Computer-Based by January 2016." State of New Jersey Department of Education. State of New Jersey, 29 Dec. 2015. Web. 17 Aug. 2016.

¹⁷ Pew Research Center. "Digital Divide Persists Even as Lower Income Americans Make Gains in Tech Adoption." March 2017. Accessed 8/30/2017 at <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/03/22/digital-divide-persists-even-as-lower-income-americans-make-gains-in-tech-adoption/>.