



Commentary/Op-Ed - July 2012

GED® change will be costly for N.Y.

In July 2012, the Albany Times Union published an op-ed by our senior fellow Tom Hilliard which notes that beginning in 2014 the GED® exam will cost twice as much to take and be significantly more difficult to pass, changes that will almost certainly lead to significantly fewer New Yorkers getting their GED® credential. Already, New York is 49th out of 50 states in the GED® pass rates. In the op-ed, Tom urges New York State education officials and legislators to explore alternatives to the GED® test.

by Tom Hilliard

Every year, roughly 26,000 young people and adults in New York State get a GED® credential, qualifying them for decent jobs and access to a college education. That will all change on Jan. 1, 2014, when the GED® Testing Service—recently taken over by Pearson LLC, a for-profit corporation—introduces a radically new version of this familiar high school equivalency exam that will cost twice as much to take and be significantly more difficult to pass.

The new test could be a disaster for New York. The cost hike will likely mean that only half as many people can take the test each year, and the increased rigor is likely to reduce pass rates significantly. New York already ranks 49th out of 50 states in the rate of takers who pass the GED®.

The GED®, created six decades ago to serve returning WWII veterans, has become a vital service for millions of Americans. Leaving high school without a diploma means mounting a treadmill of low-paid work, no health benefits and high turnover, and the GED® offers an escape from that treadmill. In New York, 2.9 million young people and adults lack high school diplomas, and fewer than 1 percent earn a GED® each year.

New York has a stake in increasing these numbers. In today's knowledge economy, employers in every industry are looking for workers with higher levels of educational attainment and the most competitive states and regions are the ones with the best human capital. Unfortunately, the opposite may now happen.

The GED® Testing Service, which has long administered the GED®, announced plans to revamp the test to ensure that anyone who passed it would be ready for college-level coursework. This is understandable given the premium on college credentials in today's economy. But as it set out to create a new test, the GED®'s stewards decided to enter into a

partnership with Pearson LLC, the world's largest educational publisher. Pearson took over leadership of the GED® Testing Service, and in May 2012 announced plans to raise the price of the GED® to \$120, effectively doubling its cost to New York state.

The increase is particularly troublesome because New York state bars the charging of a fee to take the GED® and pays the full costs of testing out of the state budget—roughly \$2.7 million last year. Unless the state doubles its expenditure—an unlikely prospect—the number of test slots for people to take the GED® could fall by half, from 45,000 to 22,500.

As a result, New York could easily lose thousands of GED® holders a year, a damaging blow to the state's economic competitiveness and the job prospects of low-income youth and adults.

New York State policymakers need to ensure that the GED® remains widely accessible. It's time for the state to end its partnership with the GED® and give New Yorkers an alternative high school equivalency exam—preferably one that is less expensive but every bit as accepted by employers and colleges as the GED®. The State Education Department has wisely begun exploring alternative tests, but time is running out. The Board of Regents should endorse a decisive strategy to certify at least one alternative test for statewide implementation.

The GED® monopoly is no longer harmless and can no longer be passively accepted. New York needs competition, experimentation, and more access to educational attainment rather than less.

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CENTER FOR AN URBAN FUTURE

120 Wall Street, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10005

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