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FROM BASIC SKILLS TO BETTER FUTURES: Generating Economic Dividends for New York City

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FROM BASIC SKILLS TO BETTER FUTURES: Generating Economic Dividends for New York City

by Lazar Treschan and David Jason Fischer

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The Community Service Society of New York is an informed, independent, and unwavering voice for positive action on behalf of the city’s 3.1 million low-income New Yorkers. CSS draws on a 160-year history of excellence in addressing the root causes of economic disparity through research, advocacy, and innovative program models that strengthen and benefit all New Yorkers.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Through good times and bad, more than one million working-age New Yorkers without a high school degree or equivalent—nearly one in five of the city’s working-age population—find themselves on the fringes of the labor market, stuck in low-wage jobs with little chance of advancement (at best) or out of work (at worst). The single biggest reason is their lack of basic skills. To have any hope of success in today’s labor market, individuals must demonstrate an ability to read and perform math operations at a reasonably high level. Those who cannot are unlikely ever to enjoy job security, much less a middle-class standard of living.

This report looks at how individuals too old or too far behind to earn a conventional high school degree can pursue other routes to show mastery of the basic skills necessary for success in the workplace—in particular, by attaining a GED. The term “GED” is universally known, but almost as widely misunderstood. Few even know what the initials stand for (General Educational Development), and fewer still have a clear idea about what the GED exam covers or how individuals go about preparing for it. Misperceptions about the test linger, as does the stigma that the GED is nothing more than a “Good Enough Diploma” for individuals who could not handle high school academics.

Despite the misunderstandings, the GED offers tremendous potential value to low-skilled individuals and to our city as a whole. This report aims to shed light on the “GED system,”¹ including not only programs explicitly designed to prepare individuals for the exam, but also the broad range of adult basic education and other programs that seek to raise students’ basic skills to the level where they can pass the GED and take the next step in their educations and careers.

We divide our analysis into three sections:

1. Why are basic skills and the GED important for New York City?
2. How does our basic skills development system currently perform?
3. What can we do to improve our efforts to build and certify basic skills and put people on track for successful careers?

1. Why are basic skills and the GED important for New York City?

As a signifier to potential employers, colleges, and other stakeholders that an individual has mastered basic skills, the GED is a key resource for low-skilled New Yorkers looking to improve their employment prospects and earning power. Data shows that individuals without a high school degree or equivalent are far less likely than their better-educated counterparts to find work—and when they do, they typically work fewer hours for lower pay. Individuals with at least a high school diploma earn more, work more, and are less vulnerable to layoffs. In fact, during the current recession, those with less than high school educations lost jobs at nearly twice the rate of high school graduates and more than ten times the rate of college graduates. Even before the recent downturn, during the current decade, jobs for those with less than a 12th-grade education had declined in number and relative pay.

Purely in fiscal terms, individuals with less than a 12th-grade education represent a net cost to New York City, whereas those with high school-level skills or higher are a net benefit to our city.

Analysis of lifetime data finds that on average, those who do not complete high school cost the city treasury nearly \$135,000 more than they pay in taxes, for expenses such as incarceration or shelter. Even those who only complete high school, by contrast, pay an average of over \$190,000 more into city coffers than is expended on their behalf. Thus, in the aggregate, simply helping one low-skilled New Yorker earn a high school degree or GED is worth more than \$325,000 to the city.

The GED is not an “easy way out.” Despite misperceptions to the contrary, the GED exam is not easy. In fact, by definition anyone who passes the GED compares favorably to high school graduates: The organization that develops the exam sets its passing score as the point where only 60 percent of a sample of graduating high school seniors pass the test. Additionally, very few individuals who enroll in coursework toward a GED say they left high school because it was too difficult for them. Rather, the reasons for leaving typically include fear for their physical safety at school or severe disruptions at home.

“I got laid off. I had been working 15 years since high school—I always had a job. But now it’s rough out here without a GED. I don’t want to be stopped anymore.” Marvin, 37

Supporting the GED does not conflict with supporting traditional K-12 education. Even if school reform is successful to the point where New York City cuts its dropout rate to half of what it is today, we would still see more than 10,000 individuals leave high school without graduating each year. The circumstances surrounding high school leavers are as varied as the young people themselves; not every individual will follow the same path to success, and we must have options for all to advance. We can have high expectations for every young New Yorker while maintaining a robust second-chance system.

2. How does our basic skills development system currently perform?

The outcomes of our current GED system are abysmal. New York State ranks 48th in the country in GED pass rate, with only 60 percent of those who take the test passing as of 2007. New York City performs even worse, with only 47.5 percent passing. What’s worse, the relatively few city residents who do pass the exam and move on to college—the point at which they can truly enhance employability and earning power—have poor rates of retention and graduation.

Insufficient resources, lack of oversight, and a complete absence of coordination contribute to our system’s poor performance.

The majority of programs that aim to support individuals in attaining a GED are funded at approximately \$1,000 per participant, per year. Programs funded at this level simply cannot offer the necessary hours, retain good teachers, focus on transition to college or careers, or provide participants with the supportive services they need to succeed. The underfunding of GED programs is matched by a near-complete lack of uniform standards and oversight. Individuals who wish to enter a program—a vital step for any young New Yorker looking to get back on track to success after leaving high school—have no single resource to help them sort through all existing options to find the one that is right for them.

Our GED system looks too much like a basic literacy system, without the funding. Less than ten percent of students in adult education programs have sufficiently high basic reading and math skills to sit in a GED test preparation course. Most

students are in Adult Basic Education (“pre-GED”) or English as a Second or Other Language course. These students need long-term, intensive support if they are to progress from low literacy to be able to pass the GED exam. Yet funding for programs is extremely weak.

There are some bright spots to build upon. Despite the aggregate underperformance of our GED system, various programs and subsystems have shown promise and merit greater support and replication. For youth and young adults in particular, recent years have seen the launch of several promising efforts to build rigorous pathways for those with low literacy to earn a GED and move on to college. New program models for adults integrate the teaching of basic and career skills, so that participants can make strides toward earning a GED while receiving focused job and career training. Within areas of the NYC Department of Education and the City University of New York, public sector leaders have taken important steps to strengthen programming by focusing on professional development and student transitions after GED attainment. We should invest in enhancing and expanding these efforts so they become the rule, not the exception, within the GED world.

3. What can we do to improve our efforts to build and certify basic skills and put people on track for successful careers?

Obtaining a GED will require considerable effort for most individuals, and real investment from the public sector. Most adults and older youth without a high school diploma begin their efforts to earn a GED with literacy and numeracy levels so low that they will require considerable time to raise those skills before they can pass the GED exam. But their prospects of getting to that point depend largely upon strong, adequately funded programs that deliver quality instruction in building skills. Unfortunately, such programs are very rare. City officials should make investments to create more and better pre-GED programming of this sort, in recognition of the fact that most GED seekers will need more than a few months to earn the credential. Along the same lines, the city should support

“It’s not only about the job, it’s also about myself—to grow in this world. It’s important to know certain things at a certain age so you don’t get taken advantage of.” Keon, 22

innovative programs that offer stronger incentives for often-frustrated students to “stick with it” through stipends, internships, and other inducements. For older youth and adults with family responsibilities, programs should also incorporate opportunities to develop technical skills that carry value in the labor market while they work toward earning their GED—rather than sequencing learning before earning.

Position the GED as a milestone, not a destination. Although obtaining a GED is no small endeavor for many individuals, our efforts must also focus on the next step after earning the credential—be it college, advanced training, or a job that offers a career track with advancement opportunities. GED preparatory programs should anticipate and help prepare participants for all of these possible outcomes. Program design and funding must reflect that the most important step for a GED program participant is the one they take after obtaining their diploma.

Create an infrastructure that will promote success. Despite a handful of standout programs scattered across the city, the network of GED programs collectively fails to produce strong results in large part because no “connective tissue” binds them together. With very few exceptions, each program or subsystem (such as the network of programs run by District 79 within the Department of Education) conducts its own recruitment, makes (or doesn’t make) referrals based on its own relationships, and keeps best practices to itself. We can significantly improve citywide GED performance by enhancing and expanding mechanisms of information dissemination, program referral, and recruitment.

Fix the testing mess. Much of our system’s poor performance in terms of GED results can be explained by the inefficiency of the way New York administers the exam itself. This report endorses the recommendations made within a recent analysis of the GED testing system by Jacqueline Cook, which include increasing the funding for test site administration and a number of steps to improve testing infrastructure.



Recommendations, in brief:

A. Make the GED a true gateway to opportunity.

1. Require all GED programs to offer a bridge to higher education.
2. Fund GED programs to focus on building bridges to careers.
3. Create new programs and expand existing programs for low-level learners.
4. Expand and leverage existing funding sources.
5. Expand and enhance District 79 of the New York City Department of Education.
6. Improve the quality of GED instruction.
7. Build more central accountability and coordination.

B. Create and sustain a true GED system that ensures access.

8. Develop a comprehensive information and referral network.
9. Expand existing referral sources.
10. Improve processes for GED testing.

The body of this report contains a detailed description of each of these recommendations.

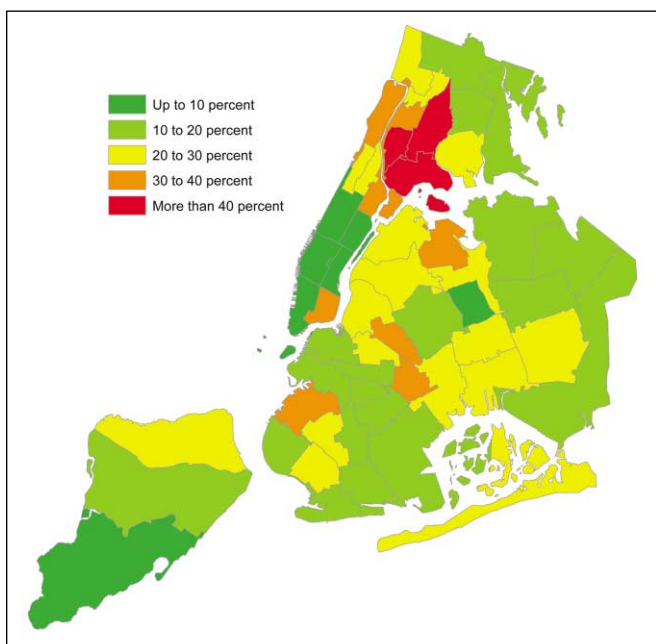
WHY THE GED IS IMPORTANT FOR NEW YORK CITY



More than one million New York City residents over age 16 and out of school—nearly 20 percent of the city’s working-age population—have not earned a high school diploma or its equivalent.² Within this group, an overwhelming majority lack basic proficiency in literacy and numeracy, most reading between the fourth- and eighth-grade level.³ Their plight presents both a near-term challenge (given the current recession) and a long-term drag on our city’s prospects for growth.

In both good times and bad, New Yorkers without basic skills face steep hurdles to finding work. Only 60 percent of individuals in New York City between the ages of 18 and 64 with less than a high school education are working, compared with 73 percent of those with a high school diploma or equivalent, 80 percent of those with some college, 87 percent of those with a bachelor’s degree, and 90 percent of those with a graduate degree.⁴ Workers who did not complete high school also work considerably fewer weeks per year (on average, 26 versus 36 among workers at all educational levels) and far fewer hours per week (24 versus an average of 32 among all workers) than workers with higher educational credentials.⁵

Map 1: People 16 years old and older and out of school with no high school diploma



Decades ago, both in New York and elsewhere, it was possible for individuals with less than a high school education to find relatively secure and remunerative jobs. But as the American economy has shifted its emphasis from production of goods to provision of services, such jobs have all but disappeared, and financial rewards increasingly have accrued to those with higher educational attainment. This decade alone has seen a major divergence in employment outcomes for individuals who did and did not complete high school or its equivalent.

Table 1 compares New York City employment levels in 2000 with those from 2005–2007 (using a three-year average to avoid year-to-year fluctuations). Even as the overall economy added nearly 400,000 jobs and grew by 8 percent over that period, more than 42,000 positions for New Yorkers with less than a high school diploma or equivalent disappeared, amounting to a net 8 percent loss. Jobs at every other level of education increased, creating a wider range of opportunities for those who have completed high school and college.⁶

Table 1: Trends in Employment Among 18- to 64-year-olds in New York City⁷

| | 2000 | % of Workforce | 2005-07 | % of Workforce | Absolute Change in Employment | Relative Change in Employment |
|-----------------------------|------------------|----------------|------------------|----------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Less than HSD | 502,377 | 16 | 460,164 | 13 | -42,213 | -8% |
| HSD/GED | 667,186 | 22 | 867,786 | 25 | 200,600 | 30% |
| Some College | 732,748 | 24 | 745,472 | 22 | 12,724 | 2% |
| Bachelor’s or Higher Degree | 1,135,639 | 37 | 1,364,870 | 40 | 229,231 | 20% |
| Total | 3,053,598 | 100 | 3,446,931 | 100 | 393,333 | 13% |

Our current economic crisis has only intensified this trend. Between December 2007 and January 2009, the employment rate for those without a high school diploma dropped 7 percent in New York City. High school completers lost jobs at only half that rate (down 3.6 percent), while those with some college (down 1.8 percent) and those with bachelor’s degrees or above (down 0.3 percent) were largely insulated from the effects of the current recession.⁸

Looking forward, the trend toward greater returns on education is likely to intensify, as newly created jobs rely more and more on educational attainment and advanced skills. An analysis

Each individual without a high school diploma represents a net cost to New York City of \$134,037, whereas each New Yorker with a high school diploma or GED yields a net benefit of \$192,715—a swing of more than \$325,000 per person.

of jobs likely to be created through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA)—the recent federal stimulus package—found that more than half will require education and training *beyond* high school, be it college or vocational certification.⁹ This is in spite of efforts on the part of the bill writers to incorporate as much opportunity as they could for lower-skilled job seekers.

Given these trends, it is not surprising that research has found strong links between low educational attainment and poverty among those who have jobs as well as the unemployed. The share of workers with household earnings below the federal poverty level is highest among working-age adults *without* a diploma. Those with at least a high school education or equivalent are far less likely to live in poverty.¹⁰ As illustrated in Map 1, in numerous communities across New York City, a third or more adult residents did not complete high school; almost without exception, these communities are the city’s most economically desolate, as measured by unemployment and poverty rates.¹¹

The total number of adult New Yorkers who have not completed high school increases every year. Right now, more than 100,000 New Yorkers between the ages of 16 and 24 without a high school diploma are neither in school nor working.¹² This population is comprised mainly of African Americans and Latinos, whose high school graduation rates lag considerably behind their White and Asian counterparts in New York City.¹³ Thanks in part to a series of reforms within the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) over the past eight years under the rubric of Children First, Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg and New York City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein’s systemic overhaul of the education system,¹⁴ the city has seen seven straight years of slowly rising high school graduation rates. Despite these gains, nearly 25,000 students still do not graduate on time each year, and data suggests the majority of these students will never receive a high school diploma or equivalent.¹⁵ Even if the graduation rate continues to improve—from its current 56 percent to the national average of approximately 70 percent—there would still remain more than 10,000 students per year who leave high school

without having received a diploma or mastered the basic skills they need for employment.¹⁶

The test of General Educational Development (GED) offers a pathway to steady work and higher earnings for the more than one million New Yorkers whose lack of a high school diploma or equivalent severely limits their prospects in the labor market. Preparation for and passage of the test offers a second chance—arguably, a last chance—to acquire the basic skills necessary for any further success in education or the workforce. Passing the GED exam sends a meaningful signal to potential employers, demonstrating mastery of basic numeracy and literacy skills as well as determination and perseverance. Just as important, GED exam completion also opens the gates to college and further career training, through which individuals can greatly increase their earning power.

But as this report details, this second-chance system is second-rate at best. Additionally, most of the high school dropouts served by GED programs were already disadvantaged by their exposure to the worst aspects of public education in our city. Many others are newly arrived immigrants whose prospects for achieving the “American Dream” will rest in large part upon how well they fare in acquiring the skills and educational attainment employers demand.¹⁷ Our own societal values as well as economic need compel us to seek improvements to GED preparation and attainment.

A Primer on the GED System

The GED exam today serves a dramatically different purpose than was originally the case. The original examination was adopted in 1942 for members of the armed forces returning from World War II, who had left high school in order to serve in the war. The military, concerned about issues of morale, did not want returning service members to have to re-enroll in high school; to show support for the war heroes, college administrators agreed to recognize the GED as an alternative route into higher education. The American Council on Education secured the copyrights to the exam and became responsible for its development and administration. The test was later made available to civilians in 1947.¹⁸

What is the GED?

The current GED exam is a battery of five tests, passage of which is the most commonly accepted equivalency for high school-level skills. Four of the test sections—language arts reading, mathematics, science, and social studies—are solely multiple choice; the final section, language arts writing, also requires an essay. Together, the tests take over seven hours to complete; including breaks and check-in time, a test-taker will be at the test site for approximately 10 hours. In New York City, students typically take the exam over the course of two days, most often Friday evening and Saturday morning.

The American Council on Education (ACE), a private, nonprofit organization, develops the test and establishes minimum passing

standards and norms for test administration, much like the SAT. After developing the test, ACE administers it to a national sample of high school graduates. The cutoff for passing the exam is performance equal to that of the 60th percentile of those graduates who took the test. In this sense, the competency of GED passers is equivalent to that of high school graduates. The federal government offers no support or standards for GED testing; each state pays ACE to use the test, defines its own passing standards, funds testing administration, collects and reports data, and issues diplomas. Localities administer GED tests through public and nonprofit agencies that apply to become GED test sites and receive a small reimbursement for administrative expenses incurred.

In broad terms, the GED “system” consists of infrastructure around GED *testing*, the administration and certification of the exam itself, and *preparation* for that exam through instruction in basic skills offered outside of the traditional K-12 public school system. As described in much greater detail below, the world of GED preparation is divided among a vast array of public and private funding streams and programs under the umbrellas of adult education and literacy, alternative schools, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), workforce development, welfare-to-work, and remedial education. Along with a chronic and severe lack of resources, this absence of coordination and alignment lies at the heart of the dysfunction that characterizes the GED system in New York City.

The New York City Mayor’s Office of Adult Education reports that approximately 73,000 individuals were enrolled in adult education classes citywide in 2008. But only about 7 percent of this number received instruction specifically intended to prepare them for the GED exam. The majority of adult learners enter programs with such low basic skill levels that they must pass through lower-level classes—often classified under Adult Basic Education (ABE), “pre-GED,” or ESOL—before they can entertain realistic hopes of passing the GED exam.¹⁹ (It is important to note, however, that many who take ESOL classes either have no need for a GED because their educational attainment in their countries of origin went through or beyond high school completion, or no immediate interest in obtaining one.)

The Value of the GED

Perhaps the greatest value of the GED is that, despite misunderstandings about its content or value, it is well known

by those without a high school diploma as a symbol of how to get back on track to success. According to Bruce Carmel, Deputy Executive Director at Turning Point, a nonprofit which provides adult education programs, “It’s code for people. The GED is a code used to explain that I need to return to education to improve myself.”²⁰

And while the GED may be the end goal on which an individual without a diploma will focus, the best service providers typically view it as just a starting point. “They come here thinking about getting a GED, but we want to sell them on lifelong learning and career development,” says Evelyn Fernandez-Ketcham, Executive Director of New Heights Neighborhood Center in Upper Manhattan.²¹

Beyond its value as a signifier to individuals looking to reconnect, research and labor market data have illustrated three major benefits conferred by the GED:

1. *The GED sends a signal to employers that a prospective worker has mastered basic skills and is “job ready.”* Faced with imperfect information about a candidate’s abilities and potential, employers view the GED as a valid marker of employability, certifying both a baseline of knowledge and the ability to take instruction and add further skills.
2. *The GED represents a gateway to college and/or postsecondary training.* Until an individual obtains a GED, many further milestones of advanced education and training are beyond his or her reach.
3. *Completing the GED has a positive effect on earnings.* Individuals with a GED have significantly higher lifetime earnings than those without.

“They come here thinking about getting a GED, but we want to sell them on lifelong learning and career development.”

Evelyn Fernandez-Ketcham, Executive Director,
New Heights Neighborhood Center

1. Basic Skills and Job Readiness

Passing the GED exam indicates mastery of basic skills at roughly the same level as a high school degree earner. Studies have shown that on literacy tests, GED completers score comparably to high school graduates and higher than those without a high school degree or GED.²²

Beyond the classroom, strong literacy and numeracy skills are crucial for success in today’s labor market. Economists Richard Murnane and Frank Levy have studied the changing demands of the market and argue that strong literacy and math abilities (at a ninth-grade level or above) are essential to an individual’s employment prospects.²³ But individuals and their households are not the only ones who gain from passing the test; the community gains as well. “Strengthening literacy skills is not just important from the standpoint of equalizing opportunities for those who are struggling to succeed in the current labor market,” writes Andrew Sum, an economist at the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University. “It is also key to increasing future employment and labor productivity and expanding the nation’s economic growth potential.”²⁴ This is particularly true in a knowledge-intensive local economy such as New York City’s.

The GED also carries symbolic importance in the labor market. Various studies have found that the credential carries a “signaling” effect, by which employers use the GED in making hiring decisions.²⁵ Employers contacted for this report regarded the GED on par with a high school diploma as a signifier of key employability skills. “The person who is motivated and has completed the GED, lots of times that motivation, and being a little bit more ‘on the ball,’ comes over to their performance at work too,” says Tom Healy, Head of Operations at the Track and Field Center at the Armory in Upper Manhattan.²⁶ “Employers understand the GED as a recognized credential that’s almost as good as a high school diploma,” adds Randy Peers, Executive Director of Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow (OBT), a Brooklyn-based organization that serves out-of-school youth and young adults. OBT’s program, described in more detail in the next section of this report, includes both GED preparation and job readiness and placement; the combination of education and

employment services provides both immediate assistance and long-term value to participants.²⁷

2. The GED as a Gateway

As a wealth of data on compensation levels by educational attainment shows,²⁸ for high school non-completers looking to improve their job prospects and earning power, obtaining a GED is a necessary but not nearly sufficient step. The GED is most beneficial when an individual who passes the test then goes on to enroll in college and/or advanced training. Returns to higher education are growing, as our economy continues to shift from manufacturing to knowledge-based industries. In particular, higher-paying jobs in areas such as business services, education, and health care require postsecondary education and credentials.²⁹ Economist John Tyler has shown that individuals who were at or above grade level when they left high school do not typically get much benefit from merely passing the exam itself; the benefit comes if the GED is a stepping stone for advancement to postsecondary education, or to training that yields a recognized certification or credential.

Tyler’s research also shows GED holders enjoy the same magnitude of earnings gains resulting from postsecondary education and training as high school graduates. However, since so few GED earners go on to postsecondary education or training, these potential gains mostly go unrealized.³⁰ In focus groups with GED students conducted to inform this report, many participants indicated an interest in continuing their studies at the postsecondary level. Unfortunately, as the next section details, very few GED programs in the city have the resources or expertise to offer linkages to college, apprenticeships, or additional education and training opportunities. Adding these connections to programs—and sending the message that GED attainment is a milestone, not a destination—is a necessary and vital component of GED reforms.

3. Positive Effect on Earnings

Numerous studies have attempted to determine the financial value of GED certification in the labor market. Research shows that obtaining a GED increases an individual’s chances of being employed and earning an income and can significantly

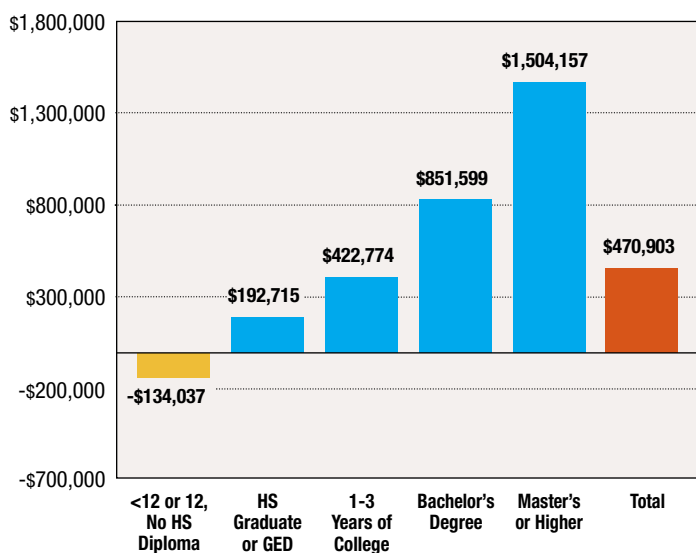
“High school degree or GED—it’s still something. I’m going to college either way.”

Brian, 18, GED student at The Door, a Manhattan-based youth organization

improve quarterly earnings.³¹ A deeper look at the research shows that GED attainment offers its highest possible value for individuals who had low skills when they left high school—a large majority of the New York City high school dropout population. Benefits include increased probability of employment and higher earnings compared to those without a GED, although those gains do not always show up immediately.

According to Paul Harrington, an economist at the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University, the difference in average lifetime earnings for an individual with and without a high school-level diploma is greater than 65 percent—\$626,470, compared with \$1,034,476 for those who completed high school. And the gap is growing: in 1979, an individual with less than a high school diploma could expect to earn an average of nearly \$687,000 (in 2007 dollars) over their lifetime—9 percent more than they will earn today. On the other hand, those with a bachelor’s degree have seen their expected earnings rise by more than 29 percent over the same period.

Chart 1: Net Fiscal Contributions of New York City Residents Ages 18 to 64³²



This earnings equation has profound importance for the New York City budget. The difference in earnings means that individuals with a high school diploma (but no further education) pay on average 55 percent more in taxes over their lifetimes than those who didn’t finish high school. Conversely, New York City spends considerably more on its residents with lower levels of education, in terms of cash benefits, in-kind transfers, and institutional costs such as prison or the shelter system. As Chart 1 illustrates, in pure lifetime budgetary terms, each individual without a high school diploma represents a net cost to New York City of \$134,037, whereas each New Yorker with a high school diploma or GED yields a net benefit of \$192,715—a swing of more than \$325,000 per person. And this calculation does not factor in other, less directly quantifiable benefits of individuals who work more and earn more, such as stronger, more financially viable households and communities.³³

The GED system offers a path to career development for the more than one million New Yorkers whose lack of basic skills have left them with few opportunities for self-sufficiency. In attaining the credential, they can develop their basic skills, certify their employability, and open the gates to college and further training. As our economy becomes ever more knowledge-intensive, both labor market demand for skilled workers and the economic importance of skills mastery for workers themselves will only grow. At the same time, increasing access to the GED is an important economic strategy for New York City. Reducing poverty and boosting the skills and earnings potential for all New Yorkers will create a more equitable, and more livable city. But access is not the only concern: improving the current dismal performance of the GED system is an equally important priority. The next chapter of this report examines the shortcomings of New York City’s current array of GED programs and suggests effective models that policy makers should look to build upon.

NEW YORK CITY'S GED SYSTEM: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES



The Sad State of GED Outcomes in New York City

New York City stands out for its abysmal GED outcomes. Nationally, the GED pass rate in 2007 was 71.5 percent. Statewide, New York’s pass rate was 60.2 percent, 48th in the country—ahead of only Alabama and Mississippi. The performance of New York City test-takers dragged down the statewide figure, with only 47.5 percent passing the exam. By comparison, 62.5 percent of those who took the exam in the District of Columbia passed it.

The city falls far short on other metrics as well. Despite the fact that about 1.1 million New Yorkers age 16 and over are without a high school diploma, only about 28,000 even took the test in 2007—just 2.5 percent of those eligible. The 47.5 percent that passed represent just 1 percent of the GED-eligible population. These figures represent a missed opportunity not only for the other 99 percent (who could bolster employability and earning power by passing the exam), but for the city as well: as noted in the first section of this report, every New York City resident who completes high school or equivalent represents an average positive difference to the public treasury of nearly \$330,000 compared with those without a high school degree. But despite the tremendous added value of non high school completers attaining a GED, only one in one hundred of those eligible are reaching that milestone—and city policy is doing very little to help them.³⁴

Table 2: National, State and Local GED Results, 2007 ³⁵

| 2007 | Number of Test-Takers | Number Who Passed the Exam | Passage Rate |
|------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|--------------|
| USA | 603,023 | 429,149 | 71.5% |
| NYS | 51,620 | 31,097 | 60.2% |
| NYC | 28,471 | 13,536 | 47.5% |

Testing data alone does not tell the full story. Rates of completion for programs intended to prepare students to take and pass the GED are dismal as well. A very small percentage of those who take classes for out-of-school youth or adult education classes get far enough to take the GED exam.

The situation is dire even in one of the better-funded segments of the GED prep world: District 79 (D79) within the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE). In 2005, just 17 percent of D79 students completed their GED programs. Working with the Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation (OMPG), the research and development arm of the NYCDOE, D79 has developed new programs to raise these rates; after two years of these efforts, the program completion rate had not quite doubled to 31 percent.³⁶ But while D79’s rates still have much room for growth, their improvement shows the potential impact of efforts at reform.

Another way in which the city’s GED system falls short surrounds the difficulties completers face when they attempt to transition into college, where much larger economic benefits of educational attainment begin to accrue. A recent study by the City University of New York found that GED earners do not perform well on college entrance exams. As a consequence, they must take more non-credit-bearing remediation classes, whereby they accumulate credits at slower rates, and ultimately have lower retention and decreased chance of graduating.³⁷ One sad element of our GED system is that even the few who manage to pass the exam rarely reap its greatest benefits.

Why are GED outcomes in New York City so bad? Three interrelated factors seem to be of particular importance:

- 1) Too little financial support to create effective programs;
- 2) Inconsistent instruction; and
- 3) No standardization and accountability across the system.

Exacerbating all of these problems is the reality that little or no coordination exists between the preparation programs and the actual experience of taking the test itself, which features its own poor administration and inefficiencies.

Four Types of GED Program Settings

Depending on eligibility, New Yorkers looking to prepare themselves for the GED exam can pursue programming offered by four main institutions: the city's Department of Education, community-based organizations (CBOs) in neighborhoods across the city, the City University of New York (CUNY), or public libraries throughout the five boroughs. Each setting comes with its own advantages and disadvantages: Department of Education programs tend to place greater emphasis on academic rigor but are weaker on engaging with the high-need GED student population, while CBOs offer programs that young people find more appealing but seem less likely to include the effective pedagogy they require above all else. The absence of standards—or coordination and interaction of any kind—across the different types of programming contributes to the poor outcomes of test-takers and impedes the development of a GED “system” worthy of its name.

New York City Department of Education

The NYCDOE offers and supports a wide range of programs, serving New Yorkers between the ages of 17 and 21 looking to earn a GED through District 79 as well as through courses at conventional high schools administered by the principals of those schools during evenings and weekends. Perhaps the most promising of D79's programs is the recently launched ACCESS GED, a highly structured full-day program that incorporates a work component along with rigorous academics. D79 also offers part-time programs during the day and in the evenings, and provides teachers and meals for students enrolled in GED programs offered by community organizations. The Department also serves GED seekers over age 21 through programs administered by the Office of Adult and Continuing Education (OACE). As is not the case in other GED programs, all teachers in NYCDOE programs are certified, usually in a high school content area, and work under the rules of the UFT contract.

Community-based organizations

These organizations come in all shapes and sizes and offer a diverse array of programs for students with different interests, skills, and needs. Most are supported through adult education funding streams, which pay far less per student and might be inappropriate for the deeper needs of young New Yorkers. CBOs typically must cobble together program funding from a variety of public and private sources. The major strengths of CBOs include a close connection to

their clients—who typically reside near the CBO and might have a higher comfort level than they would in an institutionally run program—and an ability to blend funding streams to provide comprehensive services. The drawbacks include often-lower academic standards, thinly stretched resources, and the absence of formal systems to support or monitor the quality of services they provide.

City University of New York

The 17 CUNY senior and community college campuses offer a wide range of adult education classes for literacy, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), and GED preparation. CUNY programs draw funding mostly from federal adult education dollars administered by the New York State Education Department (NYSED), in a similar manner to CBOs. Although CUNY adult education programs serve all levels of learners, most sites offer at least one GED class that focuses on making the transition to postsecondary education. That programs are located within the college environment gives them an advantage in helping students make this transition. Although most CUNY adult education instructors are not certified by the NYSED, many receive some manner of professional development through CUNY.

Public libraries

Public libraries in neighborhoods across the city offer adult education programs in a setting that community residents might find more comfortable than NYCDOE or CUNY classrooms. For the most part, however, these programs focus more on basic literacy and ESOL than specific preparation for the GED exam. Therefore, the remainder of this report does not include a focus on these programs.

Table 3: Adult Education/GED Programming Enrollment by Type, 2007 ³⁸

| Type of Educational Institution | Count | Percentage |
|---------------------------------|---------------|------------|
| NYCDOE (D79 & OACE) | 28,460 | 47 |
| CBOs* | 16,311 | 27 |
| CUNY | 10,330 | 17 |
| Public Libraries | 5,957 | 10 |
| Totals: | 61,058 | 100 |

*This includes programs supported through a specific funding stream that goes through the Consortium for Workers Education, which serves 6 percent of all literacy/GED students.

1. Not Enough Money

The single biggest reason for New York City’s poor performance in virtually every aspect related to the GED is the lack of financial resources for testing infrastructure or preparation programs. On the testing side, New York State currently allocates \$3.9 million per year for GED examinations. This includes \$1.4 million to reimburse organizations that serve as test sites at \$20 per test administered, toward the goal of administering 70,000 tests per year.³⁹ The remaining \$2.5 million is intended to cover all other test system costs, including testing supplies, exam readers, and administrative staff. In “Our Chance for Change,” author Jacque Cook, a long-time administrator of various GED programs and former Executive Director of the Mayor’s Office of Adult Education, argues that this level of support does not come close to representing the costs of administration. Specifically, she finds the organizations that serve as test-taking sites must supplement the state funding with their own resources. Importantly, the state offers no assistance for one vital aspect of their work: providing information to individuals interested in taking the exam.⁴⁰

The amount made available for GED instruction varies widely across the system. With few exceptions, however, providers are not paid enough to adequately cover the true costs of preparing low-skilled New Yorkers—who are facing a range of barriers and concerns beyond the classroom—for taking and passing the GED exam. Of the approximately 74,000⁴¹ out-of-school youth and adults who enter GED prep programs each year, a large majority is funded, on average, at less than \$1,000 per person. About 13,000 individuals⁴² receive services at much higher funding levels,⁴³ mostly through programs supported by District 79 of the NYC Department of Education. But D79 eligibility is restricted to individuals ages 17 to 21, and those slots do not even represent the full potential demand among New Yorkers in that age range: over 10 percent of adult education students outside of D79 are between the ages of 16 and 21, in programs that offer less than a quarter of the per-capita funding for D79 programs.

Scattered across the city are a handful of other programs that provide much more robust support to participants. One is CUNY Preparatory High School (CUNY Prep), a program

serving more than 300 New Yorkers each year that works with students to earn their GEDs as one step toward college preparation. CUNY Prep utilizes funding from the New York City Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO), the city’s public/ private antipoverty effort, at \$3.5 million per year, or approximately \$10,000 to \$12,000 per student, which appears to be the highest funding level, and the closest to that allocated for K–12 public schools. The Young Adult Literacy Initiative Pilot, another CEO effort, supports literacy programs for approximately 150 young adults at \$755,000 per year, or about \$5,000 per student.

Data about GED exam performance by prep program type is limited—another indication of how little oversight is exerted over the GED system as a whole. While funders typically require individual programs to take attendance and track participant hours spent in class, there is little systematically collected information about program details, student progress, and instruction. That said, what outcome data is available strongly suggests that reimbursing providers at a higher level allows them to offer more effective programs with better teachers and instruction, more and higher quality supportive services, and a focus on transition to college and career.

Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow (OBT), a Brooklyn community-based organization with sites in Sunset Park and Bushwick, provides an example of what can be accomplished when an organization is able to cobble together funding from multiple sources, as well as the limitations of reliance on just one source of support. In its programs for youth, OBT has creatively leveraged a wide range of funding streams including those stemming from the federal Workforce Investment Act, the state’s Adult Literacy Education (ALE) program, and the city’s Out-of-School Youth (OSY) and Adult Literacy Initiative programs. D79 also provides two trained teachers for OBT’s GED programming. By using a variety of funding streams, OBT is able to offer more programming to engage participants, leading to better results.⁴⁴ For example, OBT students who meet the OSY eligibility requirements⁴⁵ can enroll in OBT’s comprehensive program for youth ages 16 to 21 that offers work readiness training, career development, wrap-around counseling, and job placement support, in addition to GED preparation.

New York City’s GED passage rate has never risen above 50 percent, putting it well behind other urban centers and the current national average of 71.5 percent.

By contrast, OBT’s programs for adults only draw upon ALE funding, so the organization is not able to provide as many additional services to build skills and help move participants into jobs. “In our youth program, I think we do a pretty good job of focusing on transitions and next steps,” says Executive Director Randy Peers. “Not so much for the adults. There isn’t enough money in adult literacy to do transitions.”⁴⁶

As discussed earlier, successful transitions are key to a successful GED system. The benefits of having a high school diploma in the labor market are dwarfed by those provided by college and/or career training. But programs need resources to provide these bridges for their students. Navigating the worlds of higher education and career development on one’s own is not easy—and in programs without the wherewithal to integrate these steps, students are left to do just that.

One reason many programs in the city struggle with inadequate resources is that they must rely upon funding streams designed to serve a different kind of student. CUNY Director of Adult Education Programs Leslee Oppenheim observes that when youth and young adults enter programs intended for adults (as thousands do every year) the mismatch ensures service gaps. “Funding is tied to an instructional hour format that does not provide for a reasonable amount of counseling or academic advisement,” Oppenheim states. “Youth and young adults often have support needs that are not easily funded.”⁴⁷

Programs funded at low levels typically cannot find, pay, and support good teachers; provide full-time options; offer students the wrap-around services they often need to persist in the program; or support transitions from GED classes into work and/or higher education. Even when CBOs find ways to supplement state funds through private sources, as many do, the added money usually allows only some choice among all these indispensable elements of a successful program. If we as a community want to improve GED outcomes, the first step must be to fund existing programs at levels that will enable them to succeed with their students.

2. Inconsistent Instruction

Instructors in GED programs face the worst of all worlds. They must work with students who did not succeed in the

traditional high school setting and continue to face multiple barriers, starting with very low literacy and self-confidence. But with few exceptions, they are asked to meet this challenge despite drastically lower pay and much less institutional support than was afforded to the high school teachers who were unable to guide these students to graduation.

There are no standards for GED instruction, and as a result, teacher quality varies widely from one program to the next—as well as within the same program. Most instructors are not state-certified as educators; many are volunteers whose good intentions run far ahead of their pedagogical mastery. It does not seem logical to expect better student outcomes from a GED system in which instructors receive lower pay and less support than the certified K–12 teachers who were unsuccessful with the very same students.

Broadly speaking, there are two types of teachers in the GED preparation system: those within the New York City Department of Education, and everyone else. NYCDOE teachers are certified, usually in a high school content area such as English or mathematics, and work under the contract negotiated by the United Federation of Teachers, the union for New York City public school educators; usually, this means they are considerably better paid than GED prep teachers outside of the Department of Education.⁴⁸ In addition to minimum pay standards and other protections, the contract also specifies the hours NYCDOE teachers can be asked to work. It does not necessarily follow, however, that NYCDOE teachers are more effective than their non-union counterparts; the quality within both groups of GED teachers is uneven, and neither receives a uniformly good level of support.

Further, certification does not necessarily prepare DOE teachers for teaching in the GED system. CUNY Prep Principal Derrick Griffith identifies and hires his own teachers, stating that certification alone does not prepare teachers with the skill set required for a program like his. “Certification in the high school content areas is irrelevant when teaching GED as a pathway to college,” he suggests. “There is a need in the city for a new type of educator who can offer reading and math remediation, as well as content area accelerated learning opportunities for older students, with life skills that focus on



the habits of mind associated with college survival.”⁴⁹ Another challenge to the quality of instruction within the NYCDOE is that GED programs have traditionally been viewed as an area where teachers could find shorter hours—many GED programs are part-time—and less accountability. Robert Zweig, who helps administer D79, laments this tendency. “While we have had many dedicated teachers in our GED programs, we did not place enough emphasis on supporting or developing their instructional skills and abilities.” He adds, “We also had too many teachers who sought assignments in GED programs for the wrong reasons.” While recent changes to D79 programs have curtailed this concern, the veteran educator believes GED courses will continue to fall short unless officials begin hiring appropriately skilled instructors. “My ‘magic-wand issue’ is definitely the recruitment and development of the highest quality teachers.”⁵⁰

Outside the NYCDOE, variation in the teaching corps is even more pronounced. Programs at CUNY, the libraries, or the hundreds of CBOs across the city do not require their GED teachers to have any specific credentials or experience (though many do have formal or informal requirements and/or offer formal or informal technical assistance for instructors). The ability and resources of each provider organization to identify, train, and support teachers thus has tremendous bearing on

whether a program effectively serves its students. “It is very difficult for CBOs to get and retain good math teachers,” says Peter Kleinbard of the Youth Development Institute, a Manhattan-based advocacy group and technical assistance provider. “Even for DOE.”⁵¹

The majority of adult education teachers choose their jobs out of a desire to contribute to our city. This civic spirit is a precious resource that policy makers should actively support through standards of instruction, strong professional development to meet those standards, and assessments to drive improvements. New York State Education Department official Tom Orsini suggests creating a GED teaching certificate program. “Right now, anyone can teach GED prep,” he says. “There should be a track for GED teachers in education programs.”

A basic infrastructure is in place to develop such a track. The U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Vocational and Adult Education has asked states to develop core curricula for adult education teachers. Here in New York, NYSED contracted with the Literacy Assistance Center (LAC) to create a foundation curriculum for adult education, which LAC now uses.⁵² NYSED has mandated that the adult education/GED programs it funds must employ teachers who have this training, but it has not imposed any penalties for non-compliance.



3. No Standardization or Accountability

Although most challenges faced by GED providers cross the lines of program type and funding source, there exist few formal mechanisms to share best practices or to allocate resources in response to shared concerns.⁵³ Two of the most commonly shared concerns are the lack of supportive services for young GED seekers and the difficulties they face in finding a program that fits their interests and circumstances. Another huge concern is that no single entity within city government is responsible for tracking the performance of GED programs, much less ensuring that results improve over time. “We manage what we measure” is a common saying in the public policy world; in the GED world, we essentially measure nothing. That terrible results have ensued should not come as a surprise.

Supportive Services

The educational component is only one aspect of the challenge instructors face in working with high-need youth and young adults. If these students are to gain skills and ultimately earn credentials starting with the GED, they typically require supportive services that could range from transportation assistance to substance abuse counseling. Considerable research has shown that the practices of “Positive Youth Development”—the presence of a caring adult, high expectations, engaging activities, and the wrap-around services discussed here—are vital if young people are to reap the benefits of programs designed to build their cognitive skills.⁵⁴

If anything, young people who return to education via a GED program are likely to have greater need than their former schoolmates for a broad range of support. But where high schools usually can provide guidance counselors, college advisors, social workers, and other resources, the adult education system—which accounts for the majority of funding for GED programs in New York City—offers none of these things. Fernando Tinio, who oversees GED and high school-based programs for Good Shepherd Services, explains that programs for returning young people “have to have strong instruction, but they need to provide a lot more. In addition to academic, there is more work to be done to help young people build life skills.” CBOs such as Good Shepherd are more likely to have the resources and programming to offer wrap-around

It does not seem logical to expect better student outcomes from a GED system in which instructors receive lower pay and less support than the certified K–12 teachers who were unsuccessful with the very same students.

services because they are able to blend the more generous funding from District 79 with other sources. But CBOs serve fewer candidates than do adult education programs and might not have the resources to emphasize academic rigor while they fully engage high-need students.

Lack of Direction

Young people seeking to reconnect through enrolling in a GED preparatory class must find their own way through a baffling system without much if any guidance. There is no single phone number to call, Web site to visit, or other centralized source of information across the variety of preparation options.⁵⁵ This presents an immediate obstacle to an individual's aspirations to get back on track: given the wide range of service options and rules for eligibility among different programs, a young person often will be turned away more than once before finding a program for which he or she qualifies. Some entities, such as District 79 within the NYC Department of Education, conduct efforts to inform potential students of their options within a particular subsystem. But students have no means to find and compare programs across funding streams. Nor is there any sorting mechanism across the system that helps facilitate program matches that best fit students' interests and circumstances.

The time squandered and the frustration endured stems in large part from the near-total absence of coordination between programs supported by different funding streams and, in some cases, even programs funded by the same stream. Each program operates in isolation, separately conducting outreach and recruitment, often leaving it to the students to find them. A common reason for the absence of information about programs is that those programs lack the resources to offer any additional seats: GED classes on some CUNY campuses are so oversubscribed that they conduct no outreach whatsoever. The result is that students who ultimately make their way into programs do so as much from good luck—stumbling upon a suitable program on their own, or benefiting from the support of a savvy adult—as anything else.

Students at three different GED prep programs convened to inform this report described learning about those programs

via word of mouth, often enduring long waits and unpleasant experiences along the way. Rhonda, a 21-year-old woman who lives in East Harlem, first tried to enroll in a program offered by Good Shepherd Services, which was full. Her next stop was the “hub” run by D79 in the Marcy section of Brooklyn—a subway trip of well over an hour from her home. There, she said, she was “treated like a criminal,” forced to take off her shoes and socks. She left after one day and went to a different D79 hub, in Manhattan on 35th Street. There, she found a list of programs that included The Door, a multi-service youth organization based in Lower Manhattan, where she applied and was accepted.

As Rhonda's story illustrates, students end up in programs as a result of their ability to tolerate rejection and mismatches as they make their way through a labyrinth of often-full program options. What is unknowable is how many students fall by the wayside before finding an appropriate program, and how much less likely they are to try again at some later point.

The Testing Mess

The complexity of the GED testing system bears a large share of the blame for New York City's poor GED outcomes. In her analysis of the testing system, Jacque Cook notes that many test-takers simply do not have much information about the exam. Often, Cook found, students sit for the test without even knowing what it covers. Another common area of ignorance concerns exam-day schedules and procedures, and Cook also cites major challenges with test-site operations, including poor conditions and untrained staff.

Not surprisingly, individuals who take the test without having participated in preparation programs are less likely to fully understand the exam. They also tend to score substantially lower than those who took a prep course—only 41 percent of test-takers who went in without any formal preparation passed the exam in 2007, compared with 60 percent who sat for prep classes—presumably due to their ignorance of both the subject matter and test-day norms.⁵⁶

But even those who participate in preparation programs face challenges when it comes time to take the GED exam if their

The Myth of Moral Hazard

Of the many misperceptions that have contributed to the underdevelopment of the GED system in New York City and nationwide, the most prominent might be that the GED does actual or potential harm to the traditional K–12 education system by offering students an opportunity to leave high school and pursue a less rigorous course of study. Economists refer to this dynamic as “moral hazard”: the greater likelihood that an individual insured against the full consequences of a risky or harmful activity will engage in that activity (in this instance, dropping out of school). In the case of the GED, this question carries additional political undertones, as some officials might fear that any sentiment they voice for improvements around the GED will be regarded as manifesting a lower set of expectations for individuals in that system.

The reality is rather different. Considerable research indicates that no causal relationship exists between the availability of the GED and the phenomenon of dropping out. Further, strong sorting mechanisms within a system—such as providing students with multiple ways of staying in and reconnecting to K–12 programs, and requiring a parent’s permission to enroll in a GED preparatory program as well as a waiting period between leaving high school and starting a GED course—are effective at eliminating any concerns of moral hazard by adding some cost, in time or the need for a guardian’s approval, to the action of dropping out.⁶⁰ The social stigma attached to the GED probably plays a role here as well.

Were moral hazard effects in play, it seems likely that students pursuing the GED would report having found high school beyond their abilities. But in focus groups of GED students at The Door and New Heights Neighborhood Center conducted for this report, not one young person claimed that he or she left high school for academic reasons.⁶¹ Rather, students cited reasons such as family problems that impeded their ability to do schoolwork, concern for their physical safety in violent high school hallways, and the sense that no adult within the school had a particular interest in their success when they fell behind. Conversely, they pointed to characteristics of their community-based GED programs—small classes, caring relationships with adults, and a sense of community—as the main reasons they persisted in those programs.

It is not surprising that many young people whose experiences in public schools were so uniformly negative will only consider returning to educational programs offered in a more supportive environment, such as a community-based organization. Emelinda, an 18-year-old student in a GED and career development program at New Heights Neighborhood Center, put it this way: “Here, they call you if you don’t come. It feels like your family. They tell you what you did wrong. In high school, they just made you look bad in front of the whole class. And there are no security guards here.”⁶²

program does not also serve as a certified test site—as only 23 of the more than 100 total prep-course-offering organizations do.⁵⁷ Organizations that are not test sites have no formal way of finding open seats at test sites, as no database exists. Instead, they rely on personal relationships and other informal methods to get their students tested, sometimes applying for seats at multiple locations for the same student.⁵⁸ Cook reports one GED prep service provider sends four students to one test-site administrator, along with an iced coffee made to order, in the hopes finding open testing slots on the day of the exam.⁵⁹

Models to Build On

Any administrator, instructor, or researcher asked to name the characteristics of an ideal GED preparatory program would likely offer a very similar response: academic rigor; resources sufficient to provide support services and counseling; and strong links to the college and career options that represent plausible and productive next steps. Student priorities, including

employment assistance—both in finding a job and keeping it—and training, should inform curriculum and program design. Classes should meet students at their current level of academic accomplishment and offer a clear upward progression. Schedules should be flexible enough to accommodate participants with work or family obligations. Participants should traverse a clear pathway from prep classroom to test-taking site. Finally, the program should support a full range of transitions after GED attainment, including postsecondary education, career-track work, and military service.

Our research found that even in the overall context of poor outcomes and systemic shortcomings, a number of program offerings and mini-systems, described below, have made progress toward one or more of these ideal traits. These efforts should be supported, refined, and replicated. Given adequate resources and the sustained attention of policy makers, they could serve as the foundational elements of a GED system worthy of the city it serves.

Community Education Pathways to Success (CEPS)

The Youth Development Institute (YDI), an organization that develops program models and provides technical assistance to programs that serve at-risk young New Yorkers, has engaged a group of community-based organizations in an effort called Community Education Pathways to Success (CEPS), supporting eight sites in the city as of late 2008. A pre-GED program, CEPS is a highly structured instructional sequence targeted to young people whose basic skills in literacy and math are far below the level at which they can plausibly expect to pass the GED exam. Rigorous evaluations of CEPS have shown strong results, with students moving up an average of 1.5 grade levels in only six months.⁶³

“The CEPS population isn’t ready for the GED,” YDI Executive Director Peter Kleinbard explained at an October 2008 event to showcase the program. “Sixty or 70 percent of high school dropouts arrive [at GED preparatory programs] with very low reading levels. We hope this program helps build the case that this problem can be addressed.”

The CEPS initiative deals with several of the challenges of program approach. It features a rigorous instructional program founded on research; strong professional development and support for teachers; use of data to inform program development; and clearly articulated pathways from low levels through college. At the system level, YDI is also demonstrating how an intermediary organization can play a valuable role in building a program model, and supporting it with technical assistance to advance the work of the field. In partial recognition of the success of CEPS, the NYC Center for Economic Opportunity recently awarded YDI a contract to provide technical assistance to a small, new young adult literacy pilot program administered by the NYC Department of Youth and Community Development. Kleinbard characterizes the eight programs in the pilot as “not CEPS, but along the same lines.”

CUNY Programs: CUNY Prep and LaGuardia Bridge Programs

The sign on the door reads, “CUNY Prep is College Prep.” Unmentioned is the GED, even though CUNY Preparatory High School only serves individuals who never received a high school diploma; taking and passing the GED is the prerequisite

for graduating CUNY Prep, as well as for starting college. But this is as it should be, explains Principal Derrick Griffith: “CUNY Prep is a college prep program that offers a chance for high school equivalency. People come here for college, not for a GED.” Indeed, the program’s commitment to successful college transitions is illustrated by the presence of two staff members on the campus of Hostos Community College, to ensure that CUNY Prep graduates have the support they need to thrive in the postsecondary environment.

The curriculum at CUNY Prep, which serves 16- to 18-year-olds in its full-time day program and those 19 and older in the evenings, is designed to give students the skills necessary to succeed in college. CUNY Prep features a rigorous academic environment, with a particularly strong emphasis on reading and writing, but also offers a range of opportunities for day students to develop their skills and interests. Unlike many GED programs outside the city’s Department of Education, which consciously seek to avoid recreating a traditional classroom environment, CUNY Prep attempts to recreate the more pleasant aspects of high school: students are required to participate in at least one extracurricular activity, and there’s even a prom for its senior class.

CUNY Prep’s success⁶⁴ makes a strong case that the program has found effective ways of providing the academic rigor, teacher support, and structured transitions to college that are often lacking in GED preparatory programs. But direct comparisons with other programs are problematic, given that CUNY Prep enjoys a level of financial support far beyond most other programs in the city—a reality that allows the program to offer components such as extracurricular activities and a senior prom. It currently receives funding from the New York City Center for Economic Opportunity at \$3.5 million per year. CEO does not fund any other such GED programs, despite high demand; meanwhile, CUNY Prep has to turn away students. Nonetheless, the city’s support for CUNY Prep seems to indicate a clear recognition of the potential value of GED programs that incorporate the credential but focus on the transition to postsecondary activities.

Other programs at CUNY campuses, most of which are designed for adults, are also relatively effective in encouraging

and supporting transitions to college and careers. In some cases, such as the LaGuardia Community College Bridge Programs, they are able to produce integrated programs that link GED preparation to careers in business, technology, and health. Too often, however, CUNY programs are supported only by thin adult education funds, which make transitional programs difficult. LaGuardia's GED programs have produced strong results both in improving GED pass rates and helping students transition into college, certification programs, and employment.⁶⁵

ACCESS GED

A rigorous, full-time GED program developed by District 79 that began in the 2007-2008 school year, ACCESS GED both prepares students ages 18 to 21 for the GED exam and includes a work internship component known as Learning to Work (LTW). Operating at only three sites throughout the city thus far, the program attempts to address the issues of academic rigor and a focus on transition to postsecondary employment opportunities.

ACCESS sites partner with community-based organizations to offer LTW, with CBO partners providing counseling, career exploration, and subsidized internship opportunities. The programs stand out for their conscious use of the principles and practices of Positive Youth Development: a highly structured environment; the Primary Person Model, in which every student is guided by a caring adult; and a range of instructional and assessment methods specifically designed for the young adult GED population.

District 79 Reforms

Under new leadership for the past two years, D79 of the NYCDOE has made a variety of reforms to improve its performance. These efforts include D79's recent launch of referral centers, which attempt to add a degree of coordination to the part of the GED system run by the NYCDOE. The referral centers are intended to serve as a single point of entry for young people seeking either to enroll in a GED program or to return to high school. One center operates in each borough, staffed by a team of guidance counselors who talk with students to discern their interests and experiences. These conversations

supplement information gleaned from an assessment test to determine literacy and math skills. Referral center guidance counselors try to match students with the right program depending on their age, interests, and skill level. Opened in fall 2007, the centers initially faced some early bumps in the road—as the story told by Rhonda from The Door on page 18 suggests. Now starting their third year, they are reportedly operating more effectively and driving an increase in overall GED enrollment across D79 programs.⁶⁶ But the centers still face some limitations: they offer information only on NYCDOE programs and do not serve students older than 21. Additionally, referral center guidance counselors are provided limited resources: essentially, they have a binder with information about NYCDOE-sponsored GED programs and a list of phone numbers, as well as whatever personal connections they might have at each site listed in the binder. By some anecdotal reports, one common problem is that counselors attempt to refer students to programs that are fully enrolled, to the frustration of both students and administrators.

Contextualized Workforce Development Programs

A number of programs across the city have sought to embed preparation for the GED exam within a programmatic emphasis on getting and keeping a job. One advantage of such a focus is that it enables programs to draw down workforce development funds; another is that it is more effective to recruit participants whose first priority is usually to find employment and contribute financially to their households rather than going back to school. Some providers are explicit—and unapologetic—in characterizing this approach as a “bait and switch.”

Particularly for young GED candidates, organizations that offer GED instruction as part of a comprehensive strategy that also includes career readiness and job training can provide greater value than a program featuring test help or job readiness alone. Contextualizing GED attainment within a workforce framework also helps students grasp the connection between educational advances and the types of jobs—and level of compensation—they can expect and to which they can aspire. “We offer business skills and job training for disconnected youth in a way that models the workplace: office procedures,

Students end up in programs as a result of their ability to tolerate rejection and mismatches as they make their way through a labyrinth of often-full program options.

computer skills, business math, business English,” explains Randy Peers, executive director of Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow. “The GED became an integrated add-on.” Additionally, providers such as OBT in Brooklyn or New Heights Neighborhood Center in upper Manhattan have developed a network of relationships with local employers who come to trust that the organizations will refer qualified candidates—and can provide needed correction and replacements if a job match does not work out.

One program model that has caught the attention of New York City officials is I-BEST (Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training). The model features an integrated classroom, in which courses are co-taught by two instructors: one a specialist in basic skills, the other a trainer in a specific industry certification program. Unlike contextualized programs that separate basic skills and career training, I-BEST has shown the ability to accelerate student outcomes by teaching both content areas at the same time. In addition to the pedagogy itself, one innovative aspect of I-BEST is that the content focus of its

programs are informed by regularly updated labor market analysis of the job opportunities available to potential students in growth sectors of the local economy. In Washington State, where I-BEST began, analyses have found that participating students are far more likely to go onto college, careers, and further workplace training than those who had enrolled in sequential basic and technical skills training courses.⁶⁷

The models described above vary widely, but they share a common focus on rigorous instruction, supportive services, and transitions to a concrete next step. Additionally, they are all funded at a level higher than that provided for most GED programs in the city. As discussed in the previous section of this report, investment in the GED system yields the biggest payoff in higher earnings and more tax revenue for the city when individuals use the GED as a stepping-stone to college and/or careers. The funding outlook likely will remain grim until recognition spreads across the city that, as Jacquie Cook wrote in her recent report, “the GED needs to be seen as a threshold, not an endpoint, for policy making.”⁶⁸



HOW NEW YORK CITY CAN IMPROVE ITS GED SYSTEM



From its origins as a means to provide an alternative assessment for already-qualified individuals whose circumstances took them out of high school, the GED has become a second-class education system serving low-income people of color who were failed by our K-12 school system. That this system is doing no better by them is starkly illustrated by the deplorable outcomes shown on page 11. But the absence of adequate funding or any meaningful oversight to ensure quality renders those outcomes all but inevitable.

These problems are not new. In fact, they have hampered efforts across the range of GED programs in New York City for years, if not decades. One reason is that no institutional actor within the universe of the GED in New York has seen itself as a part of a larger system. This report has emphasized an absence of accountability and coordination across that larger system—but such measures do exist. However, they have not crossed bureaucratic borders to guide all actors within the larger framework. Recognition on the part of Department of Education programs, community-based organizations, and other providers that they contend with many of the same problems and share the same goal—to assist New Yorkers in earning a GED and moving on to further education and work opportunities—might go a long way toward fostering improvement.

Another reason these concerns have remained unaddressed is the absence of a strong “GED lobby.” While advocates, providers, and researchers have devoted considerable energy to encouraging officials to remedy the shortcomings of policy and programming in areas such as public assistance, workforce development, childcare, and the shelter system, the GED as a subject or system has gone virtually unnoticed. An encouraging sign of change came in late 2008, when a report prepared for the Department of Youth and Community Development, “Our Chance for Change: A Four-Year Reform Initiative for GED Testing in New York City,” captured some public attention and prompted the City Council to hold a hearing in January 2009.

This report strongly supports the findings and recommendations of “Our Chance for Change.” But improvements in testing administration alone are not sufficient to improve New York

City’s GED outcomes: the problems New Yorkers face at the point of testing begin earlier along the road, in programs hampered by insufficient funding, ineffective teachers, and inadequate oversight. Finding solutions in these areas, in addition to fixing the testing system, will power dramatic improvement in GED outcomes. The time is right to push for progress: in an economic climate with fewer job opportunities at the lower end of the labor market, we should engage people to build basic skills that will help them succeed when conditions improve. A higher-skilled workforce yields benefits for employers and the public treasury, as well as for workers themselves.

Our recommendations to improve GED system performance in New York City fall under the following two broad areas:

- A. Make the GED a true gateway to opportunity.
 1. Require all GED programs to offer a bridge to higher education.
 2. Fund GED programs to focus on building bridges to careers.
 3. Create new programs and expand existing programs for low-level learners.
 4. Expand and leverage existing funding sources.
 5. Expand and enhance District 79 of the New York City Department of Education.
 6. Improve the quality of GED instruction.
 7. Build more central accountability and coordination.
- B. Create and sustain a true GED system that ensures access.
 8. Develop a comprehensive information and referral network.
 9. Expand existing referral sources.
 10. Improve processes for GED testing.

A. Make the GED a true gateway to opportunity.

To help students achieve the full potential of the GED as a gateway to opportunity, we must enhance and expand the portfolio of basic skills education in the following ways:

Recommendation #1: Require all GED programs to offer a bridge to higher education.

The GED provides the biggest boost to earning power when it opens the door to college. All GED programs should encourage students to continue their education and should have the capacity to support them through a transition to college, which is almost always extremely difficult. Students on the traditional path from high school to CUNY have low rates of retention and graduation; those for GED students are even worse.

Programs such as CUNY Prep and Good Shepherd Services that focus on youth, and LaGuardia Community College’s GED Bridge Program for adults, have shown that when resources are focused on this transition, good outcomes follow. These programs feature college as an attainable goal from the day students enter and maintain staff and advisors on college campuses. Key program aspects include:

- **A focus on college from the outset, with college readiness—not GED completion—the standard and objective.** Successful programs do not merely allude to the possibility of college while preparing students for the GED; rather, they contextualize preparation for the GED as a step on the road to higher education. Instruction is designed to raise students’ skill levels to the point required for them to succeed in college classes, not just to pass the GED (“CUNY Prep is college prep”). In New York City, this means preparing students to pass the CUNY entrance exams with scores high enough that they will be able to begin with credit-bearing courses, avoiding the need for remediation.
- **Exposure to college during the program.** Mindful of the difficulties GED completers frequently face when transitioning into postsecondary education, effective programs acclimate students over time to the challenging college environment. These programs build in time and resources for students to spend time on campus, interact with program alumni who successfully transitioned to college, and engage in other activities.
- **Transition assistance.** Supporting the transition to college

begins with strong advisement and application assistance, but also requires on-campus support to help students stay enrolled when the work gets challenging. As Jim Marley of Good Shepherd Services notes, “College is like a different world, with almost no structure and no adult support. It can be very ‘sink or swim.’”⁶⁹ Mindful of this, Good Shepherd and other programs have full-time staff on site at college campuses.

Recommendation #2: Fund GED programs to focus on building bridges to careers.

In a labor market that increasingly rewards higher educational attainment and lifelong learning, every GED student should receive encouragement to pursue a postsecondary education. For many, however, individual circumstances might dictate finding a job as a more pressing next step following GED attainment. For those students, GED programs that offer training for jobs with advancement opportunities in high-demand sectors of the economy is critical.

For adults who must balance educational pursuits with work and family responsibilities, programs that embed basic skills development into preparation for jobs and careers are unambiguously beneficial. The career approach is less appropriate for younger learners, since their interests likely will change over time. Although many will be able to transition directly into and later advance within a specific sector, others will take a less linear path. Nevertheless, the career approach can provide basic skills within an engaging context in which students grasp the real-world implications of what they learn in class.

The best models of career-bridge programs directly incorporate career development into GED preparation. The key insight of these programs is that wherever possible, instructors should reject the traditional sequence of “basic skills first, job skills second” in favor of a more contemporaneous approach. Among the most effective models and programs in and outside of New York City are:

- **Career Pathways and other comprehensive programs.** The Career Pathways (CP) approach looks to build skills while placing job seekers into employment with advancement

In an economic climate with few job opportunities at the lower end of the labor market, we should engage people to build basic skills that will help them succeed when conditions improve.

potential in growing industries. The CP model utilizes adult basic education, job training, and higher education funding to create programs that can assist a low-skilled individual to achieve successively higher levels of education and employment outcomes. A major benefit of the CP model is that participants are less likely to fall through the cracks as they attempt to transition between types of services.⁷⁰

In 2008, New York State launched a CP program through a partnership between the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance and the New York State Department of Labor. Additionally, some nonprofit organizations have developed programs along the lines of the CP model, in which participants work toward earning a GED while they develop industry-specific skills. Typically, these organizations have to cobble together funding streams to provide the full range of services for participants, which entails a major administrative burden.

- **Integrated basic and technical skills training.** Some programs attempt to offer basic and technical skills in the same classroom by pairing two instructors, one for literacy/GED preparation and another to guide students toward attaining an industry certificate. Similar to college-focused GED programs that emphasize the transition to higher education rather than GED attainment per se, these programs primarily focus on employability through certification in a growth industry, with GED credentialing and mastery of basic skills treated as milestones along the way. Students emerge from these programs with an industry-recognized certificate that boosts their immediate employment prospects and long-term earning power.
- **Corps programs.** These programs offer rigorous full-time initiatives that engage young adults in groups (called “crews”) that divide their days between working on community service projects—through which they learn diverse sets of skills—and studying for a high school diploma or GED. Corps programs have shown strong outcomes in terms of both GED attainment and employment.⁷¹ The model can be uniquely effective for young adults, thanks largely to the youth development benefits they obtain from working in teams on community projects.

Recommendation #3: Create new programs and expand existing programs for low-level learners.

Individuals with extremely low skills are poorly served by our GED preparation system as it currently exists. We need a much more robust effort to target and invest in New Yorkers who face a long road before they can attain a GED.

New York City’s current investments in workforce development programs for youth and young adult fail to account for, much less address, the true skill deficiencies of the out-of-school population. The two largest workforce programs serving this group are the Out-of-School Youth (OSY) program, funded through the federal Workforce Investment Act, and the Young Adult Internship Program (YAIP), funded through the city’s Center for Economic Opportunity. Neither program offers sufficient incentives for providers to target young people with low skills, who comprise the large majority of the out-of-school youth population, or to create programming to raise their skill levels.

OSY performance measurements encourage providers to find participants who already have earned a GED or are very close to doing so, a practice derisively known as “creaming.” Instead, the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD), which runs OSY, should require and incentivize its providers to offer comprehensive programs that include literacy development and GED attainment. DYCD should also consider adding funding to include intensive literacy services within OSY contracts. Similarly, YAIP does not offer any basic skills development for its participants, despite the fact that most of those eligible for YAIP need such services. The city must recognize that internships alone will not be helpful to out-of-school youth. DYCD should fund a literacy component to the YAIP, offered either as an intensive “front end” for potential YAIP participants or integrated within the internship program.

Efforts for youth and young adults, such as Community Education Pathways to Success (CEPS), discussed in the previous section of this report, have shown how to serve young people with very low basic skills. The CEPS program model has proven effective in providing intensive literacy and numeracy development for low-level learners. Researchers



have credited CEPS's very strong results—participants have gained an average of 1.5 grade levels in literacy every six months—to the rigorous program model, as well as regular technical assistance from the Youth Development Institute.

For adults, we should require that all adult education contracts awarded specify the level and type of student services, and that programs offering classes for low-level learners have sufficient funding to do so effectively. In addition, those who staff these programs should receive intensive technical assistance to improve their instructional skills; we cannot allow these classes to continue as a “spin cycle” for New Yorkers whose reading and math skills render them essentially unemployable.

Recommendation #4: Expand and leverage existing funding sources.

One common-sense step policy makers can take to enhance GED preparation resources is to connect Title I and II services under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). Currently, Title I workforce development training funds serving New York City residents are controlled by two city agencies: the Department of Small Business Services (SBS) for programs that serve adults 18 and over, and the DYCD for young people between the

ages of 14 and 21. But WIA Title II (literacy and adult basic education) dollars are the responsibility of the New York State Education Department (NYSED), which disburses them across the state without regard to the amount and usage of Title I funding. The result is that organizations that provide literacy and GED preparation with Title II funds have no formal connection to those who do so under Title I, perpetuating an artificial division between the two funding categories.

In reality, there is significant overlap between the two target populations: many of those who utilize public workforce development programs have low basic skills that severely limit their employment prospects and earning power. SBS and DYCD should merge a portion of their funding with NYSED dollars to offer contracts to organizations who can provide adult education services (prominently including GED preparation) that link to careers, as described throughout this report. The New York State Department of Labor should also invest a portion of its discretionary WIA Title I funds—15 percent of the entire statewide allocation—in programs that support basic skills development alongside technical training, or work with NYSED to match these funds with Title II dollars to support more robust programs.

Since many GED eligible individuals may qualify to receive public assistance benefits, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) represents another potential funding source to support basic skills training and GED attainment. At the state level, the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) already has begun work in this direction, committing a small amount of funds in the 2009 fiscal year, and a larger amount in FY2010—resulting from increased federal support through the American Recovery Reinvestment Act and the TANF Contingency Fund—in Career Pathways programs, described in Section II of this report.

As with the city’s OSY program, however, the current CP program encourages creaming: GED attainment is the only outcome for which the program offers a cash incentive to providers. These contracts should reward incremental skills gains and allow service timelines that enable providers to put in the long-term work that low-level learners require. Currently, 30 percent of CP funds target young adults, but these programs are not funded at higher levels, nor are they required to include components such as counseling that are more appropriate for young people.

At the city level, TANF-supported workforce development programs are equally ripe for reform. A recent report by Community Voices Heard (CVH), a Manhattan-based organization that advocates around public assistance and other social services, found that the Back to Work program, administered by the city’s Human Resources Administration (HRA) and supported with more than \$53 million per year, has shown dismal outcomes in terms of helping participants build their skills and find work. CVH recommends that HRA restructure its programming to place a greater focus on supporting participants into education and training.⁷² HRA’s \$17 million BEGIN (Begin Employment, Gain Independence Now) program, which focuses solely on building the basic skills of public assistance recipients, does not report its outcomes; but given the track record of programs that are reported, such as Back to Work, outcomes are unlikely to be strong. GED programs, particularly those that bridge to careers or college, are clear candidates for funding redirected from Back to Work and BEGIN.

Recommendation #5: Expand and enhance District 79 of the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE).

While all individuals require basic skills to fully participate in community and economic life, we have a unique obligation to young people who have returned to education on their own volition after they were failed by the K–12 education system. Currently, however, many New Yorkers under age 25 receive educational services funded at or less than one-fifth the level for students in the public schools. The NYCDOE could expand its services to D79 in several ways.

- **Increasing and improving its program offerings,** particularly ACCESS GED; rigorous, full-time programs that offer a range of supports should be the rule, not the exception, in D79. In addition to ACCESS, which is a college-bridge model, D79 should develop programs for high-demand careers (such as green jobs, health care, and information technology) for 16- to 24-year-old disconnected New Yorkers, that provide industry-recognized certifications with integrated GED or intensive literacy programming.
- **Continuing to develop and formalize its relationships with community-based organizations** to provide GED services, so that young people benefit from the strengths of both the NYCDOE (certified teachers, mechanism for accountability) and CBOs (engagement and support).
- **Extending support to programs that serve young adults outside D79**—particularly those in the weakly funded adult education system—by providing teachers, guidance counselors, social workers, and educational materials.
- **Expanding its reach to serve young people through age 24,** from its current cap of age 21. New York City has extremely high numbers of 22- to 24-year-olds who have aged out of eligibility for a high school diploma, but still need support beyond what modestly funded adult education programs can offer. Considering that the NYCDOE was not able to help these young people earn a standard high school diploma, it should find a way to offer them programming with a somewhat robust funding stream.

Recommendation #6: Improve the quality of GED instruction.

GED outcomes will not improve without serious efforts to enhance teacher quality throughout the system. We can begin this work by developing standards and certifications that help train more effective literacy and GED instructors—both new entrants into this field and current teachers looking to take advantage of professional development opportunities. Funding matters here as well: programs must be able to offer sufficient compensation to recruit and retain skilled educators.

- **Develop and certify standards for instruction.** Basic skills and GED instruction require unique pedagogies. Organizations such as the Youth Development Institute and Literacy Assistance Center have worked to develop instructional programs for youth (ages 18 to 24) and adults (25 and older) that could serve as the basis of a standards-development and certification effort, if and when the New York State Education Department is willing to invest in formalizing these programs.
- **Provide professional development.** A crucial component of improving GED outcomes is ensuring that current and future teachers can refine their skills through training. The best professional development is ongoing by nature; all funded adult programs should receive regular technical assistance aimed at improving program design and classroom instruction. In the longer term, NYSED should seek to develop a graduate-level course in GED instruction that eventually could be taught alongside other teaching specializations in education programs at the college and graduate levels.

Recommendation #7: Build more central accountability and coordination.

New York City must set higher expectations around GED outcomes, and then measure progress toward meeting those expectations. The following steps will help establish accountability:

- **Designate and empower an oversight body.** Currently, the Mayor’s Office of Adult Education (OAE) is nominally responsible for coordinating all GED preparation programs.

Since this office does not control most of the funding for GED preparation, however, OAE has very little power to exercise oversight on GED providers. The mayor should either empower OAE with final authority over all city-based funding for GED programs, or designate another entity to oversee programs and take responsibility for GED system improvement.

- **Set program standards, and provide the support to reach them.** Whatever oversight body is designated should establish a set of minimum program standards that measure intensity (program hours) and quality of services, as well as capacity to support participants’ transitions to college or careers.

B. Create and sustain a true GED system that ensures access.

The previous set of recommendations aims at improving the quality of GED preparatory programming. A second, equally important priority is to make it as easy as possible for all New Yorkers to access skill-building opportunities and advance to higher education, career-track employment, or both.

Recommendation #8: Develop a comprehensive information and referral network.

Each moment an individual decides it is time to pursue a GED is an extremely important one for our city. Simply from a fiscal point of view, that decision sets the stage for the individual to transition from being a net cost to the city treasury, to a net benefit. From a broader perspective, that moment represents a chance for that person to advance toward full participation in the civic and economic life of New York City.

The public sector can provide invaluable assistance in that vital moment by making it easy for the newly determined GED seeker to find a preparation program or a test site. Right now, it could not be much harder. New York City needs a comprehensive database that has information about all GED and basic skills programs in the city, across all funding streams and city and state agencies, including:

- Skill level at which participants can enroll;
- What if any supportive services are available;

- Relationships with local colleges;
- What if any specific workplace skills or trainings are offered; and
- Connections to careers and job placement.

This detailed information should be available through a variety of well-supported and regularly updated channels. An interactive relational database could incorporate a basic assessment option to assess an individual’s approximate level of skill. With that information, the database could assist in determining the appropriate point of engagement with the system—whether to immediately take the exam, enroll in a GED preparatory course, or pursue basic education to raise skills—and finding the program or test site that best fits an individual’s needs. Individuals who need preparation could peruse programs by age, type, schedule, location, and availability. Those ready to take the test could find and reserve a testing time at an available location, and access information about the test (specific categories of knowledge, its duration, etc.) that they might not have already.

Individuals without easy access to a computer should be able to get the information they need simply by picking up a phone and talking with operators who would use the Web site described above on the caller’s behalf. The hotline could link from existing resources, such as 311 and Youthline, whose operators could also utilize the Web site or transfer callers interested in a GED to the hotline.

Recommendation #9: Expand existing referral sources.

Currently, four institutional networks offer fairly comprehensive information about the program options directly under their purview, but have little or no capacity to make informed referrals outside those networks. They are:

- **District 79 Referral Centers.** The New York City Department of Education has opened up one referral center, sometimes referred to as a “hub,” in each borough to advise and refer young people up to age 21 who are seeking their GED. Upon entering the hub, individuals meet with trained guidance counselors who ascertain their interests, conduct a basic skills assessment, and review their educational history. Right now, these centers can only



refer young people back to high schools, including programs run by NYCDOE’s Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation, or to D79-supported GED programs.

These centers have great potential to serve as the front line for youth and young adult reconnection in New York City. They are brick and mortar locations staffed by guidance counselors who have experience working with young people. Their services should be expanded in two ways. First, they should inform students about the broader range of programs run by other city entities that include GED preparation, including the OSY, Career Pathways, and CUNY programs. The centers should also expand their referral services to individuals through age 24, to ensure support to this important but neglected subpopulation within the GED world. New York City should publicize these referral centers through the media in order to attract as many returning youth as possible.

- **One Stops.** The network of Workforce1 Career Centers, known as “One Stops,” represents the front end of the city’s adult workforce development system. All job seekers age 18 and over are eligible for services funded with Workforce Investment Act dollars and offered at One Stops, including information about job openings, short-term job readiness assistance such as help writing a resume, job placement assistance, and grants for vouchers to pay for longer-term job training and skills development.

One Stops represent another brick-and-mortar opportunity to provide in-person information to those who need to develop their skills and get a GED. Currently, however, One Stops have minimal formal connections to adult literacy and GED services, and few offer differentiated services or counseling to younger customers. The database described above could serve as the tool for One Stops staff to make referrals to education programs.

- **HRA Job Centers.** New York City operates a network of job centers, where individuals can apply for and receive public assistance benefits as well as job placement assistance. As with One Stops, these centers should serve as another location for potential GED students to access in-person information and referrals into GED preparation programs.
- **Libraries.** Public libraries across the five boroughs already serve many individuals through their own education initiatives. These sites can serve as points of reference and connection to more rigorous transition programs.

Beyond facilitating access to GED programs—a key step to capitalizing on students’ desire to re-engage—the city should develop an instrument to match the interests of prospective GED students with the availability and strengths of different programs within the preparation system. Programs that support transitions to work or contextualized instruction, perhaps through partnerships with potential employers or community-based business associations, could be distinguished from programs that focus on transitions to higher education.

Given that CUNY programs offer the strongest connection to college, students interested in postsecondary education should have an easier path into these programs. The students we spoke with at CUNY Lehman College did not have a generalized interest in postsecondary education—they were just seeking a strong GED program. Unable to specialize solely on college transition, Lehman’s adult education center has created a “mini-system” within its own programs. Lehman offers sequential classes to a broad range of students, from the lowest-level learners to those about to take the GED and with interest in attending college. As many students will spend

considerable time in low-level classes, it is not clear that this is the best use of limited CUNY resources. A robust network of referrals would help each organization maximize its strengths and derive the most value from its resources and programs.

Recommendation #10: Improve processes for GED testing.

One characteristic result of the inadequacies of our system for GED testing is that, although students often have difficulty securing seats to take the exam, as many as half of all testing slots go unfilled on test days. Jacquie Cook has conducted an in-depth investigation of our testing infrastructure and asserts that improving our testing system alone would lead to significantly better passage rates.⁷³ We echo her recommendations, which include:

- Improving test-takers’ exam readiness. Ways to accomplish this include a) requiring and incentivizing the use of the Official Practice Test, which serves as a predictor for exam performance; and b) developing a print and online curriculum module that better prepares students for the test-taking experience.
- Improving test-site administration. An oversight body can make progress on this front by requiring closer linkages between preparation programs and test sites; expanding testing options and administrations; and providing professional development to examiners.
- Improving testing infrastructure. Key steps include formalizing and supporting the testing network and developing an easily usable and accessible information system for test-takers and preparation service providers.
- Increasing the resources and capacity of the testing system. Cook calls for an additional state investment of \$6.1 million annually to provide more sites, better-trained staff, and more robust administration.
- Developing mechanisms designed to continually improve the testing system. Consistent oversight and ongoing research will sustain officials’ focus on this important area, and facilitate further improvements.

ENDNOTES

1 In this sense, we refer to the GED system in the same way most prospective GED candidates do: not in reference to just the GED test, or the exact skill level of eligible candidates, but in reference to the efforts of individuals without diplomas to build and certify their basic skills as they seek to advance in their lives. However, many individuals in programs to build their basic skills are nowhere near ready to take the GED exam, as this report will discuss.

2 Data taken from CSS analysis of the Current Population Survey (CPS) and American Community Survey (ACS, 2007). This figure of nearly 1.1 million may represent a low estimate of this population. Another data set, the Decennial Census, has traditionally found much higher numbers of individuals in New York City. In 2000, the Census found 1.6 million New Yorkers without a diploma, whereas the CPS found only 1.2 million. It is possible that the CPS and ACS, which collect data through population samples, unlike the Census, which collects information directly from every household, are systematically undercounting this population.

3 There is no existing data set that provides a completely accurate assessment of skills levels, but support for this estimation comes from various sources including: Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation, New York City Department of Education, “Summary Findings of Research and Development Work on Over-age Under-Credited Youth in New York City,” October 25, 2006 (this report notes that most students who leave high school are more than two years behind in the literacy and math skills); statistics from the NYC Mayor’s Office of Adult Literacy, which show that only 7 percent of the 70,000 people enrolled in adult education courses in New York are at the GED preparation level, with the remaining 93 percent in Adult Basic Education or English as a Second or Other Language classes.

4 Presentation by Paul E. Harrington, Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University, to the New York City Dropout Summit, March 6, 2009. These figures are based on 2005–07 data from the American Community Survey.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Anthony Carnevale et al, “Impact of Stimulus Package on Employment Distribution by Industry,” Georgetown Center for Education and the Workforce, March 2009.

10 The New York City Commission on Economic Opportunity, “Increasing Opportunity and Reducing Poverty in New York City,” report to Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, September 2006.

11 The table is based on CSS analysis of data from the 2007 American Community Survey.

12 CSS analysis of the 2007 CPS and ACS.

13 In 2007, African American (47 percent) and Latino (43 percent) students graduated at far lower rates than Whites (69 percent) and Asians (71 percent). New York City Department of Education, “Graduation Rates: Class of 2007,” August 11, 2008.

14 Children First has included, among other initiatives, a focus on accountability, standards, and testing, with the goal of ending “social promotion” at the elementary and middle school levels and increasing requirements for high school graduation. Children First’s other efforts include changes to the funding process intended to ensure that funds are distributed to schools in a more equitable manner and the creation, particularly at the high school level, of hundreds of new (mostly small) schools to replace older (mostly much larger)

schools. Through the Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation, NYCDOE has significantly increased the number of options for young people who are “over-aged/under-credited” and have fallen two years off-track during high school. This includes the creation of specialized day and evening schools for older students, ages 17–21.

15 “Graduation Rates: Class of 2007,” New York City Department of Education, August 11, 2008. There is also an analysis of graduation rates and the dropout population in Helen Zelon, “Exit Strategy: Sizing Up New York City’s Dropout Challenge,” City Limits Investigates, Winter 2008. It is also important to note that in New York City, students “age out” of high school diploma eligibility at age 21.

16 Ibid.

17 The Literacy Assistance Center reports that students in non-school-based education programs are 47 percent Latino, 28 percent African American, 15 percent Asian, and 9 percent White.

18 For a comprehensive history of the GED movement and the test’s development, see Quinn, “An Institutional History,” University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Employment and Training Institute, Milwaukee, WI, 1990.

19 Statistics from the NYC Mayor’s Office of Adult Literacy, which cites that, of the over 12,000 16–24 year-olds that receive adult literacy services, 43 percent were in Adult Basic Education/pre-GED classes, 46 percent in English as a Second or Other Language classes, and only 11 percent in GED classes. These statistics do not differ significantly across age groups; recent dropouts have generally the same skill-level distribution as older adults.

20 Interview with Dr. Bruce Carmel, deputy executive director, Turning Point, July 14, 2009.

21 Interview with Evelyn Fernandez-Ketcham, executive director, New Heights Neighborhood Center, November 18, 2008.

22 GED Testing Service Research Studies, “The Literacy of U.S. Adults with GED Credentials: 2003 NAAL and 1992 NALS,” American Council on Education, 2007.

23 Richard J. Murnane and Frank Levy, “Teaching the New Basic Skills: Principles for Educating Children to Thrive in a Changing Economy,” 1996.

24 Andrew Sum, Irwin Kirsch, Kentaro Yamamoto, “Pathways to Labor Market Success: The Literacy Proficiency of U.S. Adults,” Educational Testing Service, October 2004.

25 John Tyler; Richard Murnane; John Willett, “Estimating the Labor Market Signaling Value of the GED,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 115, No. 2, May 2000.

26 Interview with Tom Healy, U.S. Track and Field Hall of Fame, April 1, 2009.

27 Interview with Randolph Peers, executive director, Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow, October 30, 2008.

28 The New York State Department of Labor’s Web site provides a “Value of Education Calculator,” which shows the increases in earnings that come with higher levels of education:
<http://www.labor.state.ny.us/workforceindustrydata/cen/calc1.asp?reg=fin>.

29 Carnevale and Desrochers, 2001.

30 John Tyler, “What Do We Know About the Economic Benefits of the GED: A Synthesis of the Evidence from Recent Research,” Brown University, 2001.

31 John Tyler, “So You Want a GED? Estimating the Impact of the GED on the Earnings of Dropouts Who Seek the Credential,” National Center for Adult Learning and Literacy, 2002

ENDNOTES CONTINUED

32 Harrington presentation.

33 Various studies, including those by William Julius Wilson, have found that communities that are defined by participation in the labor force are considerably strong in other areas of well-being.

34 Harrington presentation and 2007–08 CPS data.

35 Data for the United States and New York State comes from the American Council on Education's "2007 GED Testing Program Statistical Report." New York City data was provided by the New York State Department of Education.

36 Interview with JoEllen Lynch, former Executive Director, NYCDOE Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation, November 3, 2008.

37 "College Readiness of New York City's GED Recipients," report of the CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, November 2008.

38 This information was provided by the Literacy Assistance Center (LAC), which collects data for New York City. These figures do not include the approximately 13,000 students in the youth-oriented programs of District 79 of the New York City Department of Education. LAC does not collect data for these programs.

39 The figure of 70,000 tests does not imply that 70,000 individuals took the test. Due to poor administration procedures, only about half of the individuals scheduled to take tests show up on the test day.

40 Jacqueline L. Cook, "Our Chance for Change: A Four-Year Reform Initiative for GED Testing in New York City," June 2008.

41 This figure includes District 79 and other adult education, ESOL, and GED programs.

42 Interview with Cami Anderson, superintendent of District 79, New York City Department of Education, October 31, 2008. Although D79 serves approximately 13,000 per year, they report a capacity to serve approximately 6,000 at one time. Poor retention leads to greater overall numbers.

43 It is difficult to estimate a cost-per-participant, but District 79 serves approximately 13,000 per year with a budget of approximately \$62 million, an average of nearly \$4,800 per student.

44 According to data provided by the New York State Department of Education, 87 percent of youth in the OBT program passed the GED exam in 2007.

45 As legislated by the federal Workforce Investment Act (WIA), participants must be low-income and have a recognized barrier to success, including low academic skills, having left high school before completion, or involvement in the foster care or criminal justice systems.

46 Peers interview.

47 Interview with Leslee Oppenheim, Director of Language and Literacy Programs, City University of New York, February 9, 2009.

48 We spoke to three organizations that have both DOE and non-DOE teachers. On average, DOE teachers earned a base salary of \$55,000 in their first year alone, while full-time, non-DOE teachers earned approximately \$40,000 on average, across many years of experience.

49 Interview with Derrick Griffith, Principal, CUNY Preparatory Transitional High School, January 13, 2009.

50 Interview with Robert Zweig, Principal, District 79, New York City Department of Education, October 31, 2008.

51 Interview with Peter Kleinbard, Executive Director, Youth Development Institute, October 20, 2008.

52 The Adult Literacy Education Core Curriculum (ALECC) is a professional

development program consisting of seven sessions totaling 24 course hours, supplemented by Internet-based discussions and assignments.

53 Some support for coordination does exist within specific funding streams. The New York State Education Department (NYSED) does fund Regional Adult Education Networks (RAENs) to provide technical assistance to NYSED-supported programs. The Literacy Assistance Center receives this contract in New York City—their activities generally consist of quarterly meetings for program staff at different levels on relevant topics (http://www.lacnyc.org/nysprojects/RAEN_workplan_05-06.pdf).

54 Alan Zuckerman, "The More Things Change, The More They Stay The Same: The Evolution and Devolution of Youth Employment Programs," National Youth Employment Coalition, 2002.

55 New York City's Mayoral Office on Adult Education used to fund the Literacy Assistance Center to operate a Literacy Hotline for such purposes, but this funding was discontinued several years ago.

56 Data provided by the New York State Education Department.

57 Test site locations in New York City can be found on the NYSED Web site.

58 Cook, 2008.

59 Ibid.

60 Duncan Chaplin, "GEDs for Teenagers: Are There Unintended Consequences?," The Urban Institute, 1999. Also, John Mark Summers, "More Harm Than Good? Restricting Teenagers' Access to the GED," Urban Appalachian Working Paper, November 19, 2002.

61 This report uses data gathered at three focus groups with students in GED programs. Focus groups were conducted at New Heights Neighborhood Center on November 2, 2007; The Door on March 13, 2009; and Lehman College on March 24, 2009.

62 Focus group at New Heights, November 2, 2007.

63 Patricia B. Campbell and Jennifer L. Weisman, "Final Evaluation Report: Community Pathways to Success (CEPS)," Campbell-Kibler Associates, September 2008.

64 CUNY Prep reports that 80 percent of its students who sit for the GED pass the exam.

65 "The GED Bridge Projects," LaGuardia Community College, City University of New York, Fall 2008.

66 Interview with District 79 staff, October 31, 2008.

67 "Increasing Student Achievement for Basic Skills Students," Research Report No. 08-01, Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, January 2008. Washington has more recently developed an I-BEST program for young adults, specifically (ages 18-24), with little results to report as yet.

68 Cook, 2008.

69 Interview with Jim Marley, Vice President, Good Shepherds Services, December 8, 2008.

70 The Workforce Alliance, "Toward Ensuring America's Workers and Businesses the Skills to Compete," February 2009.

71 Peter Edelman, Harry J. Holzer, and Paul Offner, "Reconnecting Disadvantaged Young Men," The Urban Institute, 2006.

72 Alexa Kasdan and Sondra Youdelman, "Missing the Mark: An Examination of NYC's Back to Work Program and Its Effectiveness In Meeting Employment Goals for Welfare Recipients," Community Voices Heard, November 2008.

73 Cook, 2008.

Methodology & Acknowledgements

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The authors of this report collected and analyzed information from various sources. These include:

- A review of existing literature on the history of the GED, as well as analysis of scholarly literature analyzing the relationship between the GED and basic skills attainment with positive outcomes in employment, earnings, and higher education.
- Quantitative data about GED students and test-takers.
- Interviews with acknowledged leaders among researchers, service providers, administrators, and employers. These included:
 - Cami Anderson and Robert Zweig, New York City Department of Education
 - Jacqueline Cook, consultant
 - Peter Kleinbard, Youth Development Institute
 - Jim Marley and Fernando Tinio, Good Shepherd Services
 - JoEllen Lynch, New York City Department of Education
 - Evelyn Fernandez-Ketcham, New Heights Neighborhood Center
 - Randy Peers and Emily May, Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow
 - Christie Love, Advocates for Children
 - CT Turner, American Council on Education
 - Tom Orsini, New York State Department of Education
 - Leslee Oppenheim, City University of New York
 - Paul Wasserman, City University of New York
 - Derrick Griffith, CUNY Preparatory Transitional High School
 - Bruce Carmel, Turning Point
 - Samantha Lombardi, Williams Lea
 - Tom Healy, U.S. Track and Field Hall of Fame
- Focus groups with GED students within three programs: The Door, CUNY Lehman College, and New Heights Neighborhood Center, selected for the diversity of age and demographic of the students they generally serve. The Door serves out of school youth and young adults in partnership with New York City Department of Education District 79. CUNY Lehman College serves an adult population from within the CUNY adult education infrastructure. New Heights is a community-based organization that serves out-of-school youth and young adults without NYCDOE partnership.
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