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ANALYSIS

GED: Opportunity For A "Second Chance"

The GED testing program began in 1942 as a means to plug back into the educational system returning veterans who had not completed high school, but who were well beyond high school age. The test measured whether the person had mastered certain basic skills which high school graduates would have attained. By earning a GED, millions of veterans were then able to take advantage of the GI Bill. After World War II, the American Council on Education began administering the test. Today, it is available in all 50 states, in many Canadian provinces and in U.S. territories.

PASSING SCORES VARY BY STATE

There is no uniform passing score across the United States. Each state sets its own passing grade for the test, but the GED Testing Service recommends that states set their minimum score at not less than 40 on each test **or** an average of at least 45 on the five GED tests (covering mathematics, writing skills, social studies, science, and literature and the arts). Texas set its minimum passing grade at the Testing Service's recommended level. According to the 1989 GED Statistical Report, Louisiana, Mississippi and Nebraska had the same standards as Texas. Wisconsin had the most stringent standards - requiring at least a 40 on each of the five tests **and** an average of 50 on the complete battery of tests. More than one-half of the states require both a minimum score of 35 on each test **and** a minimum average score of 45 for the battery. In other words, Texas' scoring system differs from most other states in that GED takers can perform poorly on

one or more tests and still be awarded the credential, so long as their average score is at least a 45.

What's Inside

Passing the General Educational Development Test (GED) is the principal option for dropouts who want to re-enter the educational system. The credential can be used to improve job prospects or to make it possible to pursue a post-secondary education. Each year about 70,000 young people drop out of high school in Texas, creating a large pool of people who can benefit from further education. By passing the GED, students earn a high school equivalency diploma and access opportunities generally closed to high school dropouts. Also, many adults in our society have never obtained a diploma. For individuals who do not complete high school, obtaining a GED is a way to remedy the economic and psychological damage caused by dropping out - it is a "second chance."

Since the credentials one holds can close or open the door to a job or further education, and since Texas has a high number of GED holders, it is important to understand who takes the exam, what it measures, and what opportunities the GED provides. To ignore or misinterpret the GED is to underestimate the potential contributions GED recipients can make.

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OTHER 'SECOND CHANCE' OPTIONS

While earning a GED is the most common way to earn a high school equivalency diploma, there are three other options: the external diploma program, home study, and diplomas awarded for attendance.

- The competency-based external diploma program (also administered by the GED Testing Service) often appeals to persons in mid-life or mid-career who have been out of the traditional classroom environment for an extended time period. Test takers are required to demonstrate 64 generalized competencies through life-skill assessment activities. The adult must demonstrate basic skills in reading comprehension, writing, and mathematical problem solving.
- The home study program offers high school credit for a wide variety of correspondence courses from schools accredited by the National Home Study Council.
- Some states offer a type of diploma based only on attendance, regardless of grades earned. Florida, for example, offers a "certificate of completion" to students who have attended the required courses, but who could not maintain a D+ average or who could not pass the state's high school exit exam. While these three other options exist, this article deals exclusively with the GED.

WHAT THE EXAM MEASURES

The GED is revised every few years (most recently in 1988) to ensure that it remains current with what high school seniors know. New versions of the test are given to a representative sample of graduating high school seniors across the country. Subsequently, the test is adjusted so that approximately 30% of graduating high school seniors in the sample would not be able to pass the test. Therefore, critics who contend that GED holders' academic skill levels are poor must necessarily

make the same complaint for at least some high school graduates. The GED is based upon what graduating seniors are expected to know about writing, social studies, science, literature, the arts, and mathematics. The test is multiple choice with the exception of an essay that was added to the writing skills test in 1988 as a means to measure higher-order thinking skills.

THE TEST POPULATION

People who take the GED cite many different reasons for not completing high school. The most common explanation given (in a 1989 GED Testing Service survey) for having dropped out of school was "personal reasons" - cited by 35% of respondents (see Figure 1). Another 19% said they had to support themselves or others. The percentage citing these two reasons changed little from 1980 to 1989.

However, one response category more than tripled; in 1980 only 6% said they had quit school due to pregnancy or marriage, but 20% gave this response in 1989. The rise in this statistic is alarming for both the young adults involved and their children. As shown in the July 1991 *Analysis* issue, students' SAT scores are positively correlated with their parents' income and education level. The GED may be the best "second chance" option available to high school dropouts, but only 74% of test takers in 1987 passed the test. As the number of young parents with limited education and job prospects grows, a larger proportion of the next generation of students will not be starting from a level playing field.

There was a growing realization among test takers from 1980 to 1989 of the need to further their education. The percentage of people who cited the most important motivation for taking the test as an "Educational Admissions Requirement" grew from 29.1% to 32.8% (see Figure 2). The next most frequent response was employment related.

Test takers in 1989 were asked about their future academic goals: 31% said they planned to attend a two-year community or junior college;

11% planned to enter a four-year university; and 25% planned to enroll in a business, trade or technical school. Thus, 67% of test takers planned to continue their formal education.

AGE OF TEST TAKERS

An important factor to consider is the age of GED test takers. Nationally, the number of candidates between the ages of 18 and 24 declined by 26% between 1980 and 1989. About one-half of this decline, 12.5%, is due to the decrease in the total number of people in the 18 to 24 age group as the baby boomers age. During the same time period, the percentage of students who left the public school system without receiving a high school diploma fell slightly from 14.1% of all students to 12.6%. Therefore, at the end of the 1980s, fewer young high school dropouts were taking the GED. These individuals lost out on opportunities for further education and training which could have propelled them into better paying, more

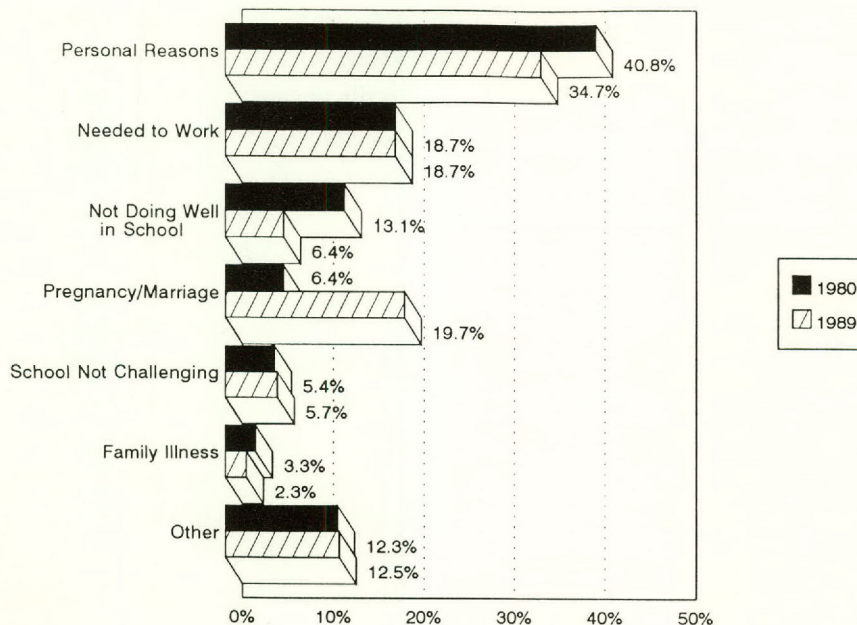
productive work. In 1989, less than 1.3% of the estimated 51 million adults over the age of 18 who did not have a high school diploma took the GED.

The only age-group of test takers which increased in size between 1980 and 1986 was the under-17 category. When the GED was originally developed, it was administered only to non-high school graduates who were at least 22 years of age. Today in Texas, 17 is the standard minimum age requirement, but 16 year-olds may take the test at the recommendation of a state agency which has supervision or custody of the person under a court order.

RACIAL AND ETHNIC BREAKDOWN OF TEST TAKERS

A racial/ethnic breakdown of GED candidates in 1989 shows that the overwhelming majority of test takers, 70.4%, were white; 14.2%, black; 11.2%, Hispanic; 1.6%, Asian/Pacific Is-

FIGURE 1
GED CANDIDATES' PRIMARY REASON FOR NOT COMPLETING HIGH SCHOOL



Source: The GED Testing Service

lander; and 2.5%, "Other." Comparing these statistics to those from 1980, the percentage of white candidates has remained nearly constant, with a 0.1% decline. The percentage of black candidates fell about 3.0%. Some of the decline in the percentage of blacks taking the GED may be due to their improved graduation rate. According to the Bureau of the Census, during the decade of the 1980s, blacks' dropout rate declined from 19.3% to 13.8%.

Nationally, there was a 34.4% increase in the number of Hispanics who took the GED from 1980 to 1989; nevertheless, in 1987 more than 44% of Hispanics between the ages of 18 and 24 lacked a high school diploma. If one looks at Hispanic Texans who are 25 years old and older, the figures are even more distressing - 57% lack a high school diploma. Since Hispanics are the fastest growing population group in the state, their lack of educational attainment as a group is a great cause for concern. Only 28% of Texans age 25 and over do not hold a high school diploma. Whites have the highest percentage of graduates with 72%, followed closely by blacks with 69%.

THE GED IN TEXAS

More people take the GED in Texas than in any other state; between 40,000 and 45,000 credentials are awarded annually. For every four regular high school diplomas awarded, one GED

is earned. This ratio is well above average; nationally, one in eight high school diplomas is awarded through the GED program. Almost one-half (49.6%) of GEDs in Texas are awarded to persons age 21 or younger.

THE STATE IN-SCHOOL PILOT PROJECT

With the passage of SB 417 in 1989, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) directed school districts to initiate pilot projects to help potential dropouts obtain a GED. Last year, across the state, there were about 150 programs for those students who otherwise probably would have dropped out of school. School districts that rank in the top quarter in the percentage of students who drop out of school and who have at least 20 dropouts annually are required to conduct these programs. The commissioner of education can grant one-year exemptions to school districts which do not think they are currently able to run a pilot program effectively. Other school districts that are not required to operate a pilot project may request permission from the TEA to do so.

In order for a student to be eligible to participate in the program, there must be no reasonable expectation that the student will graduate, but an anticipation that the student will stick with the program long enough to gain the skills necessary to pass the GED. Another criterion which students must meet to participate in a pilot project is to be able to read at the ninth grade level or higher. Students who need extensive remediation (for example, those reading at the fourth grade level) will not be allowed to participate since there is little expectation that they could quickly gain the skills needed to pass the GED. The student, his or her parents, and a school committee comprised of instructional and counseling staff members all must agree to the student's participation in the pilot project. While the classes are held during the regular school day, many are linked to vocational education or Job Training Partnership Act programs. Therefore, the students spend their days not only enhancing their academic skills, but also developing some job-related skills.

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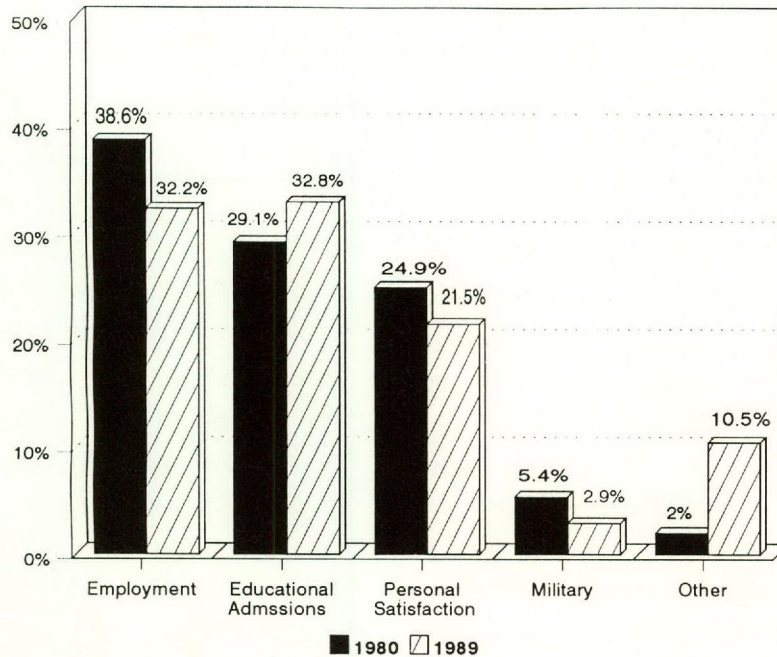
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The pilot programs kept a low profile within the districts when they were initiated because some school administrators feared that too much publicity would only encourage more students to quit attending regular classes and to seek a GED instead. However, the pilot projects are designed to meet specific needs of a particular population of students - those who would otherwise drop out of school. What is initially appealing to these students is that they can set a short-term goal - studying for and passing the GED exam. Student-teacher ratios are targeted at 15:1, allowing for a good deal of individual attention and assistance. The students' responsibility for their success and the depth of their commitment are major points of emphasis within the program. Nothing about the pilot project limits a student's educational opportunities. So long as students are willing to make a commitment to attend classes regularly and to complete the pilot project classes in which they are enrolled, they also may pursue courses which are a part of the regular curriculum. The in-school pilot

project thus provides additional opportunities for young Texans to attain a GED. However, based on a sample of participating school districts, only 60% of the project students have stayed with the program long enough to take the test. Almost all students who remained were successful in attaining a GED.

No comparative studies of GED holders' skills and high school graduates' skills have been made. To accomplish this task, a comparison of a student's performance on the GED and on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) test (the exit exam required by the state for high school graduation) needs to be conducted. Last fall, the TEA considered conducting research to determine how the GED compared to the TAAS test and the Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP) (the exam which college students must pass before beginning upper division courses). However, TEA ultimately decided not to include

FIGURE 2
TEST TAKERS' REASONS FOR TAKING THE GED TESTS



Source: The GED Testing Service

the GED within the scope of the project, and to compare only TAAS to TASP.

THE GED AND THE MILITARY

There is a general perception by the military, some college admissions officers and some employers that the GED is not only a "second chance," but also a "second class" credential as compared to a high school diploma. It is ironic that while the GED was developed for use by the military to ease the transition to civilian life, today the military, in its recruitment of enlistees, does not consider a GED to be equivalent to a high school diploma.

Potential recruits who hold high school diplomas are the most desirable and are placed in the first tier in the selection process. The second tier is made up of people with GEDs as well as all other types of high school credentials. Therefore, someone who received an alternative high school diploma based on good attendance, regardless of grades earned or skill level attained, is lumped together with the GED holder. High school dropouts fall into the third and final tier.

The military bases its preference for high school graduates over GED holders on the fact that GED holders' attrition rate is substantially higher than that of high school graduates. About 40% to 45% of GED holders leave the military before their tour is completed, compared to only 20% of high school graduates. The Department of Defense estimates that the average cost to taxpayers for each individual who leaves the military before fulfilling 30 months service is \$18,400. As the Cold War ends, the military is cutting back on personnel and now can afford to be even more selective in choosing new recruits,

perhaps reducing the few opportunities it has provided for GED holders in the past.

IS THE GED EQUAL TO A DIPLOMA?

Studies have been conducted to compare GED holders' post-secondary academic performance to that of traditional high school graduates, but the data are conflicting. Some studies have found no statistical difference in the performance of the two groups, while others have found that GED holders do not perform as well as diploma holders. Not enough research has been done in this area to be able to draw any definite conclusions. In Texas for instance, colleges and universities do not typically compile statistical comparisons of how GED holders perform academically relative to high school graduates. In 1987, more than one-half of Texas GED test takers stated that they planned to pursue further education. Wide-scale comparative data are needed so that educational institutions can work effectively with this group of students.

Regardless of the lack of academic comparisons between the two groups, GED holders and high school graduates differ significantly from one another in social aspects which must be taken into consideration. For example, a 1986 University of Wisconsin study found that GED holders were more likely to leave the university before completing their studies, although they were not failing their courses when they left. The GED holder was older than the average student, was attending school on a part-time basis, had a family to care for, and was financially self-supporting. The regular college student tended to be younger, receive at least some financial support from his or her family, and have no dependents.

Some employers (in technical fields especially) are finding that neither high school graduates nor GED holders possess the skills to perform front-line jobs.

THE GED AND THE JOB MARKET

Surveys of employers have found that most accept the GED on a par with a high school diploma. A 1987 study conducted by the GED Testing Service compared Florida employers' perceptions of workers with a GED to workers with high school diplomas. Florida is an interesting state to examine since it, like Texas, has an above-average number of test takers and a large minority population. Of the 101 businesses and agencies that responded to the questionnaire, a majority stated that GED holders performed as well on the job as did high school graduates. A majority also stated that GED holders were no more likely to quit work or to be fired than those with high school diplomas. However, these employers stated that GED holders were promoted less frequently than were high school graduates.

A nationwide survey of 643 businesses conducted in 1983 by the American Council on Education's Office of Educational Credit and Credentials found that 90% of the responding companies placed a major or moderate emphasis on educational credentials.

- 57% of the companies were willing to provide tuition reimbursement for employees who did not have either a high school diploma or an equivalency credential, but chose to seek one.
- More than 96% of the companies gave persons holding high school diplomas and equivalency credentials the same starting salary.
- Nearly 97% of the respondents offered the same starting position to both groups.
- 98% said they extended the same advancement opportunities to people holding equivalency credentials as they did to high school graduates.

Employers also were asked what percentage of their employees were required to have attained various education levels. In the companies surveyed: 18% of jobs required less than a high school education; 38% required either a high school diploma or an equivalency

degree such as a GED; 16% required some form of certification beyond the high school level; and 28% required a college degree.

Some employers (in technical fields especially) are finding that neither high school graduates nor GED holders possess the skills to perform front-line jobs. When qualified workers are not available, companies must bear the cost of providing additional training, either within the company or through outside sources. These additional costs, which many foreign competitors with better trained workers do not have to incur, are one factor which hinders the competitiveness of U.S. firms in the global economy.

From the viewpoint of the worker with a GED, it is important to remember that the largest job growth in the 1980s was in the two lowest paying industries - retail trade and services (business, personal and health). People with no education beyond the high school level used to be able to obtain a manufacturing job with good benefits and room for advancement. The jobs that are generally available today to young persons without much work experience and only a GED or a high school diploma are largely low-skill, low-wage jobs without adequate health and pension benefits. Therefore, while it is important for people who have not finished high school to obtain a GED, this goal should not be an end in itself. Post-secondary education, whether academic or technical, may be necessary to achieve a middle-class living standard.

UNRESOLVED QUESTIONS SURROUNDING THE GED

Much is known about the GED, who takes it and why, but a number of important questions remain unanswered.

- Why is the percentage of young people without a high school diploma who take the GED declining?
- How do GED holders' skills and knowledge measure up against high school graduates?
- Does allowing some students to get a GED and to leave the high school environment before other students their age send a

mixed message to students regarding the value of the high school experience?

- For employment and college admissions purposes, should the GED be afforded the same status as a high school diploma?
- Is it fair to deny or restrict access into the military to all GED holders, regardless of each individual's capabilities?
- How well do GED holders perform in post-secondary education?
- Do employers really view the GED as being equivalent to a high school diploma?

The fact that more Texans receive a GED every year than the residents of any other state, and the existence of a large pool of applicants who could benefit from passing the GED, suggest that answers to these questions are needed.

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