

December 22, 2015

Facing Challenges with the New GED Test in Kentucky¹

By Ashley Spalding

Over the years, the state's adult education programs have made great strides in reducing the share of Kentuckians who do not have a high school diploma or GED[®] (General Educational Development) credential. However, Kentucky – alongside many other states – is experiencing a difficult adjustment to the new 2014 GED test. The high school equivalency credential exam was updated to better align it with the college and career ready standards for today's high school graduates. These changes in the test pose challenges as the GED test is now more rigorous, more expensive and can only be taken on a computer. The state has temporarily mitigated the exam's cost, and adult education providers have worked to prepare students to pass the new test. However, the number of GED graduates has declined dramatically. Moving forward, the state should invest in additional strategies to increase Kentucky's GED credential attainment.

Importance of GED Diploma Attainment

The GED diploma is an important step toward employment as well as postsecondary education for many who did not graduate from high school and is important to Kentucky's economic future. In 2013, 360,830 working age (18 to 64) Kentuckians – 13.1 percent – did not have a high school diploma or equivalency credential, ranking Kentucky 37th in the nation on that measure.² In addition, 31,550 Kentucky low-income working families – or 21.4 percent of the state's low-income working families — had at least one parent without a high school degree.³

Increased educational attainment is associated with higher wages, among other benefits. There is a 33 percent difference between the 2013 median annual earnings for a person in Kentucky with less than a high school diploma and one with a high school diploma (\$22,544 compared to \$33,852).⁴

In addition to helping individuals and families, increases in education and associated bumps in income are beneficial to the state's economy. Better educated Kentuckians are more productive, earn more and contribute more in taxes over their lifetimes.

A GED diploma also increasingly serves as a stepping stone to the postsecondary education required by most jobs these days. By 2020, 62 percent of all Kentucky jobs will require some higher education.⁵ Currently just 34.4 percent of adults 25 to 54 in Kentucky have an associate's degree or higher, ranking the state 9th from the bottom on this measure.⁶

Kentucky has made important progress in adult education. The percentage of working age Kentuckians without a high school or GED diploma decreased from 29 percent in 1990 to 21 percent in 2000 and then to 15 percent in 2010.⁷ Recently released data for 2014 shows that the state is now down to 13 percent without this credential.⁸

However, since the new GED test was implemented Kentucky's GED graduation numbers have plummeted – dropping from 7,083 GED graduates in 2013-2014 to 1,663 in 2014-2015. Fortunately there has been some increase in GED diploma attainment in recent months.⁹

The New Test

Since its development in 1942, the GED test has been updated four times. The fifth edition of the test, the 2014 GED, went into effect Jan. 2, 2014. This test includes more significant changes than in the past, reflecting a decade of considerable shifts in educational standards and technology.

The test has been modified to reflect college and career ready standards that now guide high school education in most states. The minimum score needed to pass each section of the 2014 GED is based on the performance of a national sample of 2013 high school seniors.¹⁰ As part of this realignment, the exam includes short answer questions (which were not a part of the 2002 version of the test) and extended responses that require more analysis and depth of understanding to answer. Some of the significant differences in test structure and content are described in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

Selected Differences Between the 2002 and 2014 GED Test

| Aspect of the Exam | 2002 | 2014 |
|---|--|---|
| Test item types | Multiple-choice, essay and grid format questions | Hot spot (students are presented with an image and are asked to select a particular area of it), drag-and-drop, drop-down, short answer, extended response, fill-in-the-blank and multiple-choice |
| Exam format | Pencil and paper | Computer based |
| Assessment | Informed by Bloom's taxonomy | Informed by Webb's Depth of Knowledge model and college and career ready standards |
| Reading and Writing/Reasoning through Language Arts | 3 hours; 90 multiple-choice questions and one essay; each passage in reading comprehension contains 200 to 400 words and 75 percent of texts are literary (poetry, drama, prose) ; written essay response is to write about a familiar subject; in addition to development of ideas and sentence structure, grammar, spelling, etc., writing is scored based on focused main points and clear organization | 90 minutes; number of questions varies ; passages contain between 450 and 900 words and 75 percent of texts are informational (nonfiction and workplace contexts) ; in written responses, test-takers are required to draw evidence from a literary or informational text to support analysis and reflection; in addition to development of ideas and sentence structure, grammar, spelling, etc., writing is scored based on analysis of arguments and use of evidence |
| Social Studies | 70 minutes; 50 multiple-choice questions ; questions are: 25 percent U.S. History ; 15 percent World History; 15 percent Geography; 25 percent Civics and Government; and 20 percent Economics | 90 minutes; number of questions varies; includes an extended response item ; questions are: 50 percent Civics and Government ; 20 percent U.S. History; 15 percent Economics; and 15 percent Geography and the World |
| Science | 80 minutes; 50 multiple-choice questions ; questions are: 35 percent Physical Science; 45 | 90 minutes; number of questions varies; questions are: 40 percent Life Science; 40 percent |

| | | |
|-------------|--|--|
| | percent Life Science ; and 20 percent Earth and Space Science | Physical Science ; and 20 percent Earth and Space Science |
| Mathematics | 90 minutes; 50 multiple-choice questions ; test-takers can use the Casio fx-260 Solar Scientific calculator for one section; a page of commonly used formulas is provided | 115 minutes; number of questions varies ; test-takers provided a virtual, on-screen Texas Instruments TI-30XS Multiview scientific calculator and calculator reference sheet to use on a portion of items; test-takers can click to see a formula sheet but the sheet does not provide the same information as the 2002 formula sheet |

Source: 2002/2014 GED Test Comparison, Kentucky Educational Television (KET) for 2002 GED information; GED Testing Service for up-to-date 2014 GED information.¹¹

In addition to new skills and somewhat different subject matter, the new version of the GED requires some computer competency. While the necessary computer skills to pass the 2014 GED are basic, they may be challenging for some in need of a GED credential. For instance, in order to successfully complete the exam a test-taker needs to type approximately 20 words per minute.¹²

The 2014 GED test – which resulted from a partnership between the non-profit American Council on Education (ACE), which was historically responsible for the test, and the for-profit company Pearson VUE – is also more expensive than the 2002 version. The new test costs \$120 (\$30 per section) in Kentucky, compared to \$60 for the previous one – although, as described below, so far test-takers have only had to pay a third of the cost.

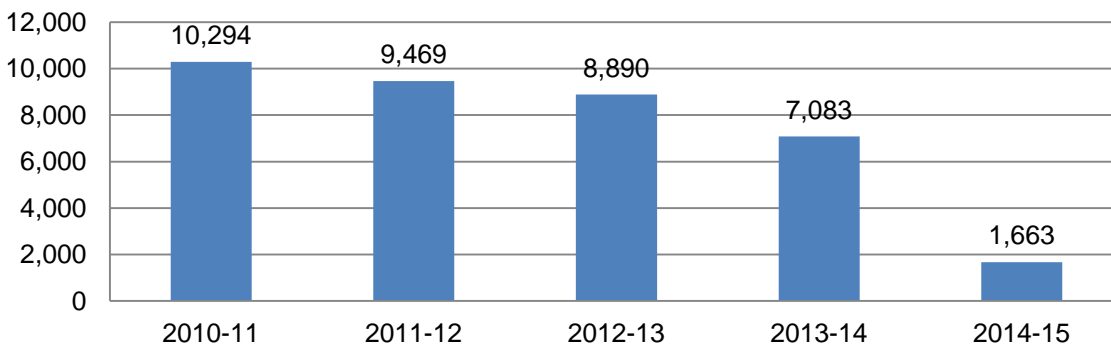
Impact in Kentucky

There is typically a dip in participation after a new version of the GED test is implemented.¹³ But the decline has been more substantial with the 2014 GED test. There was a 33 percent decline in GED test-taking nationally with the 2002 GED test launch, while preliminary national numbers for 2014 showed a larger drop of 48 percent for high school equivalency test-taking.¹⁴

As seen in the graph below, GED diploma attainment rates in Kentucky have been steadily declining in recent years, but the decrease between 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 was a dramatic 76.5 percent.

Figure 2

GED Graduates 2010-2015



Source: Kentucky Adult Education, “Briefing on Kentucky’s Adult Education System,” Aug. 10, 2015.

Meanwhile, Kentucky's GED pass rates are high – more than 80 percent of test-takers pass the 2014 GED.¹⁵ But this is largely because in Kentucky, and some other states, a state regulation requires that in order to take the GED a person must first pass the GED Ready™ test, the official GED practice test.¹⁶ Kentucky does not publish data on the number of students who take the GED Ready test.

Barriers to GED Diploma Attainment

On a national level, possible barriers to GED diploma attainment with the new test that have been raised are: the cost of the test, the new content and skills needed to pass, and intimidation by the increased rigor of the test.¹⁷ These are all challenges a state needs to address in order to better help those without a high school diploma take and pass the high school equivalency exam.

Cost

So far the increased cost of the test has not been a barrier in Kentucky. Kentucky Adult Education (KYAE) has been able to provide test-takers with vouchers that cover two-thirds of the cost of the test (each voucher covers \$20 out of the \$30 cost per section) – making the new GED test even more affordable than the previous version (\$40 out of pocket, versus \$60). The vouchers were purchased through federal Workforce Investment Act (WIA) funds and have been made available on a first-come, first-served basis, with everyone taking the GED automatically receiving one. There were originally 8,500 vouchers in total, but there are very few remaining. In the near future, KYAE will likely provide vouchers for half of the cost of the test.¹⁸

Financial assistance is also available directly from some of the state's adult education programs that have raised funds in the community to help provide scholarships to students with financial need, but these opportunities vary by adult education provider. Additional funds to defray the cost of taking the GED are sometimes available in local communities (e.g., from community based organizations, banks, etc).

The requirement to complete the GED Ready Test prior to the GED has a financial benefit to test-takers. The state currently covers the cost of the GED Ready test (\$11), and more than 80 percent of students who go on to take the GED test pass. This means that most students who pay to take the exam do earn the credential.

Increased Rigor and Computer Skills

Adult education instructors receive professional development to help with teaching the content and skills students need to pass the 2014 GED test. KYAE currently provides considerable professional development offerings that are aligned with College and Career Ready Standards (CCRS); many are specifically targeted to the 2014 GED – covering both test content and technology and other skills needed.¹⁹ Adult education instructors are also required to use technology and digital learning in their classrooms, and some professional development courses focus on this.

In addition to the importance of instructors receiving professional development, teachers who have expertise specific to the content of the new GED test may be more effective. Currently the minimum qualifications for an adult education instructor are: a bachelor's degree in education or a content-related field, with minimum test score requirements – including a 21 composite score on the ACT or 990 on the SAT; a current teaching certificate in the content area of instruction is preferred.²⁰ Adult education programs are responsible for hiring their own instructors, and KYAE has not analyzed how many or what share of instructors meet this preferred criteria.

According to KYAE – largely based on reports from adult education providers – computer skills have not been a barrier to Kentucky adult education students earning a GED diploma as the requirements are basic and are incorporated into adult education classes. However, it is difficult to know if the shift to the computer based test has prevented some Kentuckians from pursuing a GED credential since the test

change. New Hampshire offers an alternative high school equivalency exam with both computer and paper based formats, and 85 percent choose to take the paper based test.²¹

KYAE has implemented an initiative called “GED Express” to help students accelerate their preparation for and passing of the GED test.²² As part of that effort adult education programs are being encouraged to have individuals take the GED Ready test soon after beginning their preparation for the GED. This gives instructors and students a good idea of the specific areas that need to be addressed and how to target instruction and learning and move students more quickly to taking (and passing) the GED. In addition,

KYAE is working with the directors of adult education programs to use more data to guide their approach – for instance, by paying attention to which students have passed the GED Ready test as these students should be moving on to take the GED exam.

KYAE is also optimistic about a new partnership between GED Testing Service and Wal-Mart, KFC, Taco Bell and Southeastern Grocers – called “GEDWorks” – to provide a free program to help interested employees earn a GED diploma.²³

In addition to the test actually requiring new and more rigorous content and skills, the perception that the test is harder can also be a significant barrier. KYAE has done marketing to try to combat this perception, but it reportedly remains a big challenge. Radio ads specifically for the new GED test have included quotes from those who successfully passed the test. These are in addition to continued marketing efforts to recruit adult education students that include flyers, postcards and statewide advertising through the Kentucky Broadcasters Association. Unfortunately due to a tight KYAE budget – having faced round after round of budget cuts since the recession – marketing funds are very limited. The target population can also be difficult to recruit given the complexities of daily life for many low-income persons without a high school diploma. A national survey of GED test administrators has raised the concern that adult education instructors may be among the most vocal about the difficulty of the new GED test, which could have a discouraging impact on students; a recommendation proposed in response to this is that teachers participate in additional professional development to increase their confidence.²⁴

How Other States Are Addressing Barriers

In response to the changes in the GED test, a number of states have opted to use alternative high school equivalency tests that are phasing in increased rigor, may be somewhat more affordable and offer a paper/pencil option. Several states have worked to mitigate the costs of the new GED in other ways as well.

Leading up to the 2014 GED, two new tests emerged – the HiSET (High School Equivalency Test), which is a product of the Educational Testing Service and the Iowa Testing Program, and the TASC (Test for Adult Secondary Credential), which was a product of CTB/McGraw-Hill (it has since been sold to Data Recognition Corporation). As seen in Figure 3, 10 states have dropped the GED entirely; these states are offering the HiSET, TASC or both. Other states are offering one or both of the new exams alongside the GED. Currently 40 states offer the GED test, 14 offer the HiSET and 9 offer TASC.

Figure 3

| High School Equivalency Test/s Offered | States |
|--|---|
| HiSET only | Iowa, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Maine, Missouri, Montana, New Hampshire |
| TASC only | Indiana, New York, West Virginia |
| GED and HiSET | New Mexico, Tennessee |
| GED and TASC | South Carolina |
| GED, TASC and HiSET | California, North Carolina, New Jersey, Nevada, Wyoming |

Source: Barry Shaffer, "The Changing Landscape of High School Equivalency in the U.S.," May 2015, <http://www.clasp.org/resources-and-publications/publication-1/The-Changing-Landscape-of-High-School-Equivalency-in-the-U.S.-Final.pdf>.

Illinois and Colorado will soon offer the HiSET and TASC alongside the GED test, and other states are in the process of considering or preparing to implement changes to the high school equivalency options available.

Kentucky's only high school equivalency option is the GED exam. While KYAE reports they are open to other possibilities, they maintain that at this point the downsides outweigh benefits: The cost difference between the alternative tests and the GED is not significant enough to warrant a switch; the portability of the other tests has not been adequately established (i.e., will employers in states that do not offer these tests recognize the credential); and the content of the alternative tests may not be as aligned with college and career ready standards as the 2014 GED – for instance, KYAE has noted that students preparing for these tests are told they can use the 2002 GED study materials.²⁵ They also point out that these exams are eventually moving to just a computer based format.

The cost of the HiSET and TASC are somewhat lower than the GED test. Before test center and state administration fees, both the HiSET and TASC cost about \$50. Just \$80 of the cost of the 2014 GED test in Kentucky is for the test itself; the remaining \$40 is for its administration.

In addition, the pass rates for the HiSET and TASC in 2014 are actually a little lower than those for the 2014 GED. In 2014 the national GED test pass rate was 63 percent; for TASC it was 62 percent and for HiSET it was 59 percent.²⁶

The availability of a paper/pencil option has been a major factor for states offering an alternative test. Although research has shown that some test-takers perform better on the computer based GED test when the content is the same, the concern is that many low-income adult education students may not have high enough levels of digital literacy.²⁷ There may be other reasons for test-takers to prefer the paper/pencil format as well.

So far it isn't clear whether or not states that dropped the GED test for one of the other tests, or offered multiple tests, are faring better than those that offer the GED test alone. Here is a preliminary look at several states that are utilizing alternative tests:

- In 2014, Indiana replaced the GED test with the TASC. That year 5,508 took the test, and the pass rate was 77.7 percent.²⁸ This is compared to around 9,650 taking the GED in 2012 and 14,350 taking it in 2013 in a push to complete it before the test change; the 2013 pass rate was 79 percent.²⁹
- New York switched to the TASC in 2014. The share of students taking the test who passed it was around 50 percent, which is close to the 53.8 pass rate for the GED test in New York in 2012 (2013 is considered an anomaly since a higher than average number of students tried to take the GED test the year before this version of the test was discontinued). However, more than 43,000 New Yorkers took the GED test in 2012 while only 22,598 took the full TASC in 2014.³⁰
- California, which initially implemented the HiSET alongside the 2014 GED test (and has begun offering the TASC), has seen much lower GED test-taking as well as passing rates than in previous years; 44,000 to 57,000 students have taken the GED test each year in the last several years, with 68 to 78 percent passing – but in 2014 only 20,000 took the test, with 58 percent passing. And only 1,803 students took the HiSET, with 64 percent passing. With the GED test and HiSET combined, the state experienced a drop of more than 35,000 students taking a high school equivalency exam.³¹

At least 12 states charge less than the standard fee for the GED as a result of state-provided subsidies (i.e., a GED test-taker pays \$11.25 per GED modules – or \$45 for the entire battery of tests). Several (i.e.,

Connecticut, New York and Maine) fully subsidize the test for state residents. It is notable that just 6.8 percent of people ages 18 to 64 in Maine do not have a high school degree or equivalency credential and just 9 percent in Connecticut – although it is 12.5 percent in New York.³² These states also have higher shares of adults ages 25 to 54 who have an associate's degree or higher. In Kentucky, 34.4 percent do (ranking Kentucky 42nd in the nation on this measure), while in Connecticut it is 48.1 percent (4th highest in the nation), in Maine it is 39.4 percent (29th highest in the nation) and in New York it is 47.4 percent (6th highest in the nation).

In addition, most states also offer high school credit recovery programming that leads to a high school diploma.³³ This allows local school districts to award high school diplomas to those who make up the credits they need for their uncompleted high school diploma. The Kentucky Department of Education does not have such a program.

At least 11 states have a competency based National External Diploma Program (NEDP), which has students demonstrate competencies through assignments completed at home or in the office.³⁴ Kentucky piloted NEDP at one point, but according to KYAE it was discontinued largely due to its expense. The cost of the NEDP varies but is typically more than the GED test.

Kentucky's GED Pipeline

In addition to the challenges to GED attainment in Kentucky discussed so far, it is generally difficult to recruit those without a diploma for adult education. KYAE has had difficulty serving more than four or five percent of those without a high school diploma. There were 15,188 Kentuckians enrolled in adult education in 2014-2015 who were at least 18 years old and did not already have a high school diploma.³⁵ This is just about four percent of the total number of Kentucky adults without a high school credential. This is not a new phenomenon; in 1999 participation by this target population was around five percent.³⁶

With the new GED test, there has been some decline in adult education participation, but there is even more of a decline in the share of participants who seek – or are ready – to take the GED test. In 2015, 25 percent of Kentucky's adult education students were academically below the 6th grade level, and 39 percent already had a high school diploma (it is understood that most were using the adult education courses to help with developmental education issues they were facing in college).³⁷

KYAE has suggested that the low GED diploma attainment rates need to be considered within the context of a decreasing number of Kentuckians in the "pipeline" to take the test. For instance, currently nearly half (47 percent) of working age adults without a high school credential are ages 45 to 64, which may not be an optimal time for going back to school or starting a new career.³⁸ At the same time, there is still a large number of Kentucky adults without a high school diploma who are not near retirement age. Around 191,000 Kentuckians without a high school diploma are 18 to 44; over 212,000 were ages 25 to 54 in 2013.³⁹

KYAE has emphasized other reasons: Many without a diploma in Kentucky are hard to reach, including they typically have more health problems (i.e., hearing, cognitive and/or vision difficulties) and are more likely to have a disability – 33.2 percent of Kentuckians 18 to 64 without a diploma – which may prevent them from working.⁴⁰

In terms of a somewhat depleted pipeline, KYAE has also noted that there was a surge of GED test-taking and credential attainment in the later part of 2013, when the state offered the GED test for free for a period leading up to the 2014 GED exam.⁴¹ In the six months prior to the 2014 GED test, about 6,700 students earned a GED credential – compared to the same six month period the previous year, which was just 3,700.

There are also often more complex reasons Kentuckians without a high school diploma may not participate in adult education. KYAE (then the "Kentucky Department for Adult Education and Literacy") commissioned a 1999 study of why Kentucky adults without a high school diploma did not participate in adult education programs and the reasons included the GED diploma not being considered an

appropriate goal by many under-educated adults as well as adult education programs directly competing with everyday priorities of work, family and community responsibilities.⁴²

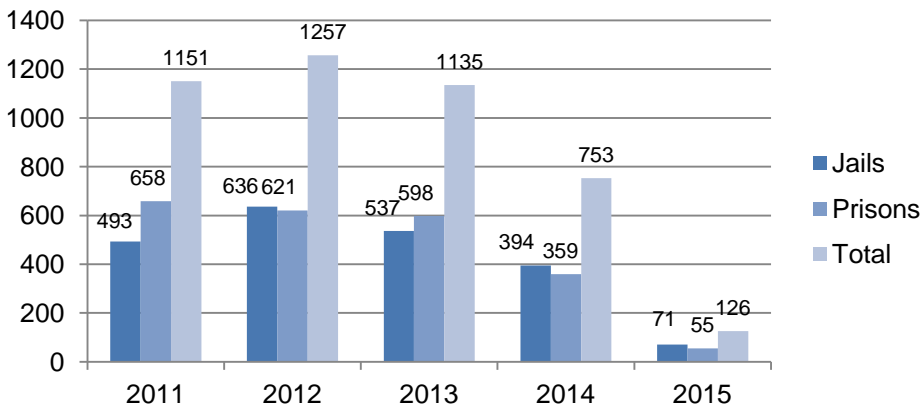
Unique Challenges Faced in Correctional Settings

Inmates in Kentucky’s prisons and jails have faced even greater barriers than those enrolled in adult education outside of correctional settings. Among the issues are the logistics of preparing students for the GED test and administering the exams with the new computer based format. These are in addition to difficulties inmates already faced in attaining a GED prior to 2014, including inmates being transferred or released before successfully completing the test.

Figure 4 details the drop in GED graduates in the state’s jails and prisons in fiscal years 2014 and 2015.

Figure 4

Department of Corrections GED Graduates 2011-2015



Source: Kentucky Department of Corrections.

As is evident in Figure 4, prior to the introduction of the new test, GED graduation rates were relatively consistent. The drop from 2013 to 2014 was steep – and even steeper between 2014 and 2015, although this drop is actually only a little greater than for the state as a whole – 83 percent, compared to 77 percent for the state.⁴³ Fortunately, GED diploma attainment in Kentucky’s prisons and jails is on the rise.⁴⁴

Many of the challenges have to do with the computer based aspect of the test. The GED Testing Service did offer states the option of applying for “Transitional Waivers” to enable correctional institutions to continue testing on paper for up to a year or more as they transitioned to the computer based test, but Kentucky did not apply for such a waiver. The reasoning was that it would be better to go ahead and move forward with the inevitable change in the test.

Prior to the 2014 GED test, exam administrators called GED Test Examiners came to the state’s prisons and jails. Now, with the computer based test, prisons and jails have three options: 1) become a Pearson VUE testing center; 2) transport inmates to a correctional facility that is a Pearson VUE testing center or contract with a public Pearson VUE/GED Testing Center; or 3) become a mobile site, which means that a proctor comes to the jail to administer the test.⁴⁵

All of the state prisons (except the privately owned one) became official testing centers, which involved purchasing computers that met certain requirements, loading the necessary software on the computers and establishing a qualified proctor/test administrator at each site. GED tests are downloaded on an

administrative computer and transferred to student computers through a network since prison inmates' computers cannot have access to the internet. However, even though this infrastructure was established by Jan. 2014, there were difficulties getting the software installed and the technology involved in test administration running smoothly. The state's prisons were unable to offer any GED testing for the first five months of calendar year 2014.⁴⁶ Technological problems continue to come up that often make it difficult to offer exams as scheduled, and correctional settings do not have the flexibility an adult education center might have to make adjustments when things don't go according to plan.

Meanwhile, local jails were overall very slow to make the new GED test available to inmates. A major issue is that because jailers are elected local officials, rules and requirements vary from facility to facility. Although all full-service jails must provide access to adult education, its availability varies significantly — for instance, adult education may be offered for six hours a week in one jail and two full days a week in another; some jailers allow inmates access to the internet for GED Ready testing; and some jails didn't even have facilities sufficient for paper testing. While the state prisons became testing centers themselves, most of the local jails did not go this route (although some of the larger jails that have historically had a lot of GED diploma earners did become testing centers) — and some jail inmates did not have access to testing. To respond to this and other technology issues, the state's Department of Corrections (DOC) and KYAE formed a work group on adult education and corrections for a three month period in early 2015 to provide recommendations to KYAE and DOC leadership.

Not having access to internet also limits the GED test preparation materials inmates (and instructors) can utilize. Inmates have access to some paper study materials, but adult education students outside of correctional settings benefit from a range of on-line test preparation options, including practice tests that assess which specific areas/skills a test-taker will need to strengthen before taking the GED Ready test. The GED Ready test itself provides students with such feedback, but the DOC has been limiting access to just those who will likely pass according to certain criteria such as word processing skills; this has to do with the cost of the 2014 GED Ready test being greater than the previous 2002 Official GED Practice Test. Recently, however, the DOC expanded access to the GED Ready test; part of the reason was that even when students do not pass it, they gain the important specific feedback about what they need to work on.⁴⁷

It has been challenging for the DOC to cover the new costs associated with the 2014 GED. For instance, in addition to setting up computer labs in the state's prisons, additional staff time/persons have been needed to administer the test as well as maintain the computers and trouble shoot the inevitable technical problems that come up with computer based testing. To compound these resource issues, potential savings are lost with the decline in GED test pass rates in Kentucky's correctional settings. Each inmate who earns a GED credential gets 90 days of "good time credit" — meaning he/she will be released 90 days early. Each 90 days of good time credit awarded ends up saving the state an estimated \$34 a day (this cost estimate is very conservative as it is based on the cost of housing an inmate at a jail rather than a prison, which is more expensive). Such savings have declined from over \$3.5 million in 2011 to just \$385,560 in 2015.⁴⁸

It is critical that Kentucky's inmates have the opportunity to earn a high school equivalency diploma. Education can help to reduce recidivism — the return of inmates to jails or prisons after release — by enabling more employment opportunities, for instance.⁴⁹ In Kentucky, around 30 percent of inmates are re-incarcerated within two years of release.⁵⁰ The issue of GED test access is also particularly important in correctional settings as there is a robust pipeline of Kentuckians who want to earn a GED diploma.⁵¹

Increasing Kentucky's GED Diploma Attainment

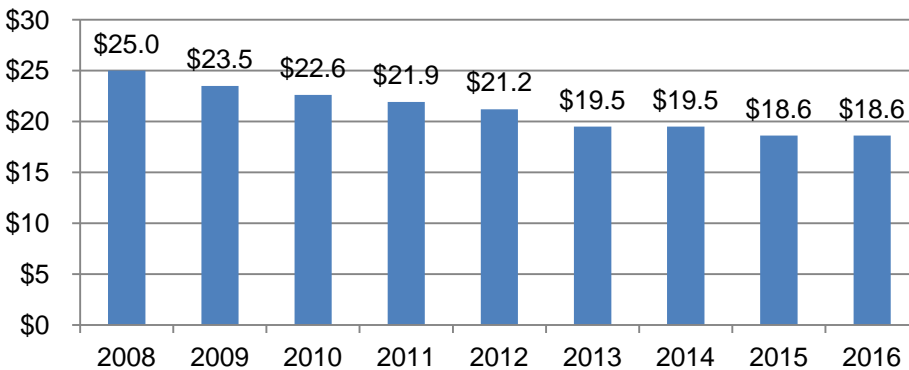
Kentucky has made some great gains in adult education, but the recent decline in GED diploma attainment with the implementation of the new test is concerning and needs to be further addressed for the future well-being of the state. Here are some ideas for actions that could be taken as Kentucky continues to navigate the still relatively new terrain of the 2014 GED:

Prioritize Adult Education in the 2016-2018 State Budget

The state is facing a very tight situation with the upcoming 2016-2018 budget, but it is important that adult education be a priority. Unfortunately KYAE – alongside most other areas of the state budget – has experienced cuts in recent years. As shown below in Figure 5, General Fund appropriations to KYAE for 2016 are now just \$18.5 million, down from \$25 million in 2008, which is a 26 percent drop even before adjusting for inflation. Meanwhile, there have been some new costs associated with the 2014 GED test – for instance setting up testing centers, which require computers with specific software and hardware requirements.

Figure 5

Kentucky Adult Education Appropriations (In millions)



Source: *Kentucky Adult Education*.

In order for the state to more successfully navigate the new GED test in some of the ways described below (i.e., data collection, professional development for instructors, supports for adult education students and increased marketing efforts), KYAE needs to be adequately funded.

Collect and Report More Data

KYAE reports regularly on GED diploma numbers and other educational attainment goals; however, providing additional relevant information would be helpful for comprehending and addressing these numbers and the bigger picture of how the state is doing. Data on test-taking and passing by geographic location and demographic category (i.e., age, race/ethnicity) would be helpful to policymakers and analysts, for example. It would also be good to compile and report data on students’ progression toward a GED diploma – i.e., length of time preparing, grade/academic level when started, etc. – in order to better understand where students are leaving the pipeline. Some reporting of GED Ready test data could also be useful.

KYAE should also collect data from students and instructors on their experiences preparing for the new GED test (i.e., in terms of test content and any issues related to computer literacy). For example, KYAE could implement a survey or focus groups. CLASP published some useful findings from a survey of state adult education program administrators who spoke to the experiences of instructors and students with the new GED test, but it is important to get more first-hand information.⁵² An example would be the qualitative study commissioned by KYAE in 1999 to understand the motivations and obstacles that influence educational decision-making among those who have not attended a GED or literacy program or who have not reached their educational goals.⁵³

KYAE emphasizes the importance of highly qualified instructors given the increased rigor of the test, and a survey of adult education programs (or other means of compiling this information) could give a better idea of the qualifications of the state's instructors. A survey of instructor salaries – which are not set by KYAE – would also be useful as adequate compensation is often tied to recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers. Such data could inform future guidelines for hiring instructors. In addition, adult education instructors could be surveyed about what professional development opportunities would help them better prepare students for the exam.

There are some good examples of adult education advocacy organizations using surveys to identify and address issues. For instance, Minnesota's Literacy Action Network implemented a "Professional Issues Survey" of the state's adult education professionals in 2012; analysis of the survey identified the need for more statewide trainings on Adult Basic Education assessments and more instructional resources, including around digital literacy – as well as ways their organization could help to address these issues (i.e., develop and offer trainings, provide outreach to programs about existing resources).⁵⁴ The group also surveyed state programs about salaries and benefits in 2009 so that programs would know how they compare to others in the state in terms of compensation.⁵⁵

Provide Additional Professional Development Opportunities

Additional resources for professional development could be used to further enrich KYAE's offerings by bringing certain premier, nationally recognized professional development experts to Kentucky to work with the state's adult education instructors and other staff.

Increase Supports for Adult Education Students

As described previously, Kentuckians without a high school diploma or GED credential often face challenges in their daily lives that can prevent them from attending adult education classes and taking and passing the GED test – including financial pressures, health problems and family responsibilities. Providing supports for adult education students can help keep them on track to earn a GED diploma. For instance, Jessamine County's adult education program provides an academic advisor who follows up with students about their adult education needs and goals and can help connect students to various resources (including SNAP food assistance, etc.) that can help resolve potential barriers to taking the new GED test. A survey of supports in the state's adult education programs – including childcare – would help to identify what may be working/needed across Kentucky. Such supports are likely especially critical for those potential GED test-takers who are especially hard to reach.

Increase Marketing Efforts

KYAE has done some innovative marketing – including partnering with social service providers and businesses – but it should boost its efforts given the recent challenges in GED credential attainment.⁵⁶ These efforts should be informed by market research in order to have the fullest impact on those who are the most difficult to reach.

Formally Study Alternative Tests/High School Equivalency Options

KYAE has been evaluating the alternative high school equivalency tests in a number of ways: The vice president for adult education co-chairs a national high school equivalency work group that includes members in states where HiSET and TASC are being administered; KYAE also hosted a focus group with adult education providers to discuss all three tests in Spring 2015. However, the state could further benefit from establishing a formal study group to collect and systematically analyze data on the implementation of all high school equivalency options – including TASC, HiSET and offering multiple tests – and provide recommendations. This is a good time for such a study, now that states have up to two years of experience with the alternative tests. States that offer multiple tests will be particularly interesting to examine in that they take more of a "no wrong door" approach to high school equivalency. Credit recovery options and the NEDP should also be explored in the current context.

Study Strategies for Recruiting and Retaining Hard to Reach

KYAE should conduct or commission a study on strategies for reaching those without a high school diploma who are difficult to recruit to adult education classes, building on the 1999 qualitative study on this population in Kentucky. Such a study would look for examples of successes in reaching and retaining these students in other states. Understanding how to engage this population/s is a critical part of improving GED diploma attainment in Kentucky, and this study would inform marketing and adult education program design.

Keep Working to Improve Access for Inmates

The DOC has been able to work out some of the technical and logistical issues involved in implementing the new GED. However, there is still room for improvement – especially given the consistent interest in adult education in the state’s inmate population. Greater state investment in inmate education as a whole would help to increase GED attainment and have a positive impact on the state.

Some states – like Ohio – did not see as substantial a decline in the number of GED credentials earned in their correctional system; in 2013 there were 2,121 GED diplomas earned, and in 2014 there were 1,754.⁵⁷ It is important to note that Ohio accomplished this without a transitional waiver to allow for paper/pencil testing. Kentucky should reach out to such states to learn what led to their success.

Invest in Career Pathways

KYAE has identified career pathways as a strategic approach for promoting GED diploma attainment – as well as higher education more broadly– for Kentuckians without a high school diploma.⁵⁸ Such an approach moves students quickly through adult education and GED diploma attainment and into college coursework and credential attainment in high demand fields. It could attract more Kentuckians to earn a GED credential as they would see it as an important stepping stone to a better career. Once a leader in career pathways, Kentucky would benefit from a recommitment to – and further investment in – this approach.⁵⁹

Implement Sustainable Financial Assistance for Test-Takers

It was a great move to use federal WIA funds for vouchers to cover the majority of the cost of taking the GED test, to prevent finances from being a barrier to GED diploma attainment in Kentucky. The state should look into subsidizing some or all of the cost of the GED test on a more permanent basis. In the meantime, it would be greatly beneficial if KYAE could continue to provide vouchers to cover the majority of the cost of the test, either through the current revenue source or a new one.

Conclusion

The 2014 GED test has brought with it challenges. GED graduation numbers are extremely low for this past year, and even with an uptick in recent months, the state has a lot of work to do to meet its adult education goals. GED diploma attainment is a critical part of increasing educational attainment in Kentucky, which is important to individuals’ ability to make ends meet as well as improving the state’s economy and reducing rates of recidivism. Strategic investments to increase GED graduates would be worthwhile and should be taken up by lawmakers, KYAE and the state’s DOC.

¹ The Kentucky Center for Economic Policy is a non-partisan initiative that conducts research, analysis and education on important policy issues facing the Commonwealth. Launched in 2011, the Center is a project of the Mountain Association for Community Economic Development (MACED) and is a member of the Working Poor Families Project, a national initiative funded by the Annie E. Casey, Ford, Joyce and Kresge foundations that advances state policies in the areas of education and skills training for adults; economic development; and income and work supports. Visit KCEP’s website at www.kypolicy.org.

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