



How the Privatization of "GED" High School Equivalency Degrees Has Created New Roadblocks for the Poor

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Americans think of themselves as highly educated, yet more than 37 million adults – more than one in ten – have not earned high school diplomas. This has dramatic implications for individual lives. Less than half of all adults without high school degrees have jobs, compared to 64% of those with such degrees and 88% of adults with college degrees. Even with prior work experience, many employers require proof of a high school diploma for even the most basic positions, even more so since the recent recession. Adults without high school diplomas who are fortunate enough to have jobs can expect to earn nearly \$10,000 less per year than those with a high school degree, and are much more likely to live in poverty, experience poor health, and end up in prison.

Any way one looks at the social realities, chances to obtain a high school equivalency degree are critical for adults who did not graduate from high school, if they are to flourish in life. For more than sixty years, the General Education Degree – popularly known as the “GED” – has offered such a chance. But current strategies of education reform are handing the GED program to profit-making corporations, and the effect has been to create new educational obstacles for the predominately low-income Americans who have not graduated from high school.

The Realities of General Education Degrees

Obtaining GED degrees improves people’s life chances, but it has never been easy. Individuals who did not graduate from high school usually need significant preparation to pass the GED test, but many of them have not developed sufficient study skills to prepare on their own. GED prep courses (or for those with even less academic training, pre-GED courses) provide instruction designed to prepare students to pass the necessary test, and in the past, public funding has been provided to such programs to support non-high school graduates willing to put in the hard work to get ahead and become more economically self-sufficient. But economic crisis and repeated tax cuts have severely reduced government revenue streams to support GED programs, and conservatives often argue that poor people do not deserve such assistance at taxpayer expense. Even as employers demand improved skills and an increasingly competitive job market spurs more people to try to obtain GED credentials, public funding for adult education programs and GED preparation has been significantly reduced.

Privatizing Reforms Create New Roadblocks

Dynamics in the realm of education reform are also transforming the GED. Ostensibly as part of a national push to “reform” K-12 education, the GED was “privatized” – sold – by the nonprofit organization that previously administered the high school equivalency test as a public service. Supporters of this change argued that the private sector would administer the test in a more rigorous manner that would send a clear message

to students that staying in high school through graduation would be preferable to dropping out and counting on getting a GED later. Beginning in January 2014, the GED became a proprietary trademark of Pearson Vue, a for-profit multi-national corporation heavily involved in all aspects of national education politics and standardized testing. The content of the GED was made more difficult, and other aspects also changed. The test became computer-based and people must now take the test at certified Pearson test centers, paying a fee online that nearly doubled the cost from \$60 to \$120.

These changes have hindered many individuals who hope to prepare for and pass the GED test. The test content is now so difficult that even with preparation, many cannot pass. Preparing for the test now requires access to a computer, but many aspirants do not have such access – and many programs that used to help students do not have a bank of computers. In practice, this means that prep programs can no longer be run at convenient locations in low-income communities. And the requirement that the test itself must be completed at a Pearson-certified center makes it more difficult for many to get to the testing location, especially rural residents without cars. The new electronic format can also become a barrier, because people must become computer-literate even before they prepare to handle the test content. These new barriers hike costs, creating obvious difficulties for low-income people who struggle to afford food or to pay the rent. Many of them find the \$120 fee an insurmountable expense, and online payments can also be challenging for those who lack credit cards or bank accounts. Requiring online payment rather than permitting the use of cash or a money order means that many individuals must purchase single-use credit cards that have a hefty activation fee.

The upshot of the privatizing changes in GED prep and testing is dramatically visible in testing statistics. In 2013, 743,000 people completed the GED test and 560,000 passed. But following the privatization of the GED and the implementation of Pearson's new requirements in 2014, only 248,000 aspirants took the test and mere 86,000 passed! Obviously, these are precipitous decreases in the ranks of test takers and new GEDs. The huge harm done speaks for itself.

Correcting a Wrong Turn

Rather than leading to positive reforms, corporate ownership of the process for certifying high school equivalency degrees has raised still higher barriers for the poor, making it harder for those who have not completed high school to obtain an equivalency diploma as a route to improved employment prospects. In reality, the recent changes are condemning people without a diploma to a life of poverty – and given the correlation between education and health, reducing their life expectancy as well. This means that privatization is more than just a failed reform experiment. It is a moral issue, because a ruse for reform has turned out to make it harder for people to get ahead in life. Meaningful education reform, by definition, should increase access and improve educational outcomes rather than create higher barriers and limit people's options. Basic considerations of social justice demand a change of course for the GED. At this point, an outright reversal of the recent privatization of the GED may not be likely. But citizens and reformers alike need to push for basic changes and demand sufficient public funding and support for adult education programs designed to prepare students. The GED must, once again, become a realistic option for hundreds of thousands of mostly low-income Americans who aspire to a better life for themselves, their families, and the larger community.

Read more in Janet Page-Reeves and Enrique Cardiel, "GED Privatization as a Social Determinant of Health." *Human Organization* (forthcoming).