

Center for Impact Research (formerly Taylor Institute)
and Women Employed

GED Issues Brief

March 2000

Introduction: Meeting the Needs of Chicago GED Test-Takers

In March 1998 the Center for Impact Research (formerly Taylor Institute), along with Women Employed Institute, published a research report, (*A Second Chance: Improving Chicago's GED Performance*), detailing the low number of Chicagoans each year who either try for or pass the GED examination. GED, which stands for Tests of General Educational Development, is a 7.5 hour- test that enables adults who have not succeeded the first time around in school to obtain a high school equivalency certificate. The GED was developed in 1942 as a response to an emergency—the return of World War II veterans who had not earned a high school diploma before they left to serve their country, and who faced economic hardship as a result.

The report found that only 2.15% of those needing the GED took the test in Chicago in 1996. Chicago's percentage equals the national average, although higher percentages tried for the credential in three cities- Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and Miami. However, only 64% of those who took the GED test passed in Illinois in 1996, ranking the state 42nd worst. Chicago's 46% pass rate considerably lagged behind the state rate and puts Chicago near the bottom when compared with ten major U. S. cities.

In focus group discussions, Chicago adult literacy and job training groups were asked why more adults don't take and pass the GED in Chicago. The groups consistently cited four factors: length and inflexibility of most GED prep classes in Cook County; lack of up-front diagnostic information to help adults decide whether they are ready to take the test; long waits to take the GED test; and low number of accessible GED testing sites in Chicago, with no downtown Chicago site. A January 13, 1998 telephone call to the Cook County automated GED information system revealed that the next open test date at any of the Cook County GED test locations was more than a month away. Of these sites, only three were in the city itself. These were Daley College (75th and Pulaski), Olive-Harvey College (103rd and Woodlawn), and Wright College (Montrose and Narragansett), all sites in far-flung locations difficult to reach for many test-takers. At the closest site, Daley College, the wait was almost four months long.

ISBE Response

The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) moved relatively quickly to remedy many of the problems with the GED test-taking system identified in the research

report. There are now a total of 13 testing sites in Cook County. In addition to the new downtown site at Robert Morris College, the GED test can be taken at Kennedy-King College, Truman College, and at two St. Augustine College locations, one on the southside and the other on the northside of the city. With these additional sites, the wait to take a test now ranges from two weeks to one month.

In addition to freeing up additional funds to make these testing sites a reality, ISBE also allocated funds to enable a marketing program for the GED to be implemented in the fall of 1999, involving public service announcements, bus cards, and printed materials that encourage adults to investigate the GED. The marketing materials refer adults to the Illinois Literacy Hotline, which has also developed a new fact sheet about the GED for callers. The Hotline is encouraging callers to contact a nearby literacy program to receive diagnostic information about their readiness to pass the GED and to obtain GED prep services.

In April 1999, the Educational Testing Service (ETS), which administers the GED in Cook County for the Illinois State Board of Education, took two steps that have directly led to a substantial number of adults recently passing the GED test. First, ETS sent out 4,916 letters to those Chicagoans who had passed the GED but had failed to take the required Constitution test and thus did not have the GED credential. As a result of the mailing, as of October 8, 1999, 1,828 of those had taken and passed the Constitution test and have obtained the GED certificate. In ten percent of the cases, the letters were returned as undeliverable. Thus, about 41% of those receiving the letters obtained their GED as a result of this process.

Next, ETS sent out 19,480 letters to the people who had taken the GED in the past but who had failed to pass all the required sections. These persons may retake sections that they did not pass. When the new GED test is introduced on January 1, 2002, it will not be possible for individuals to retake sections; the entire new test will have to be taken. According to ETS, 2,055 of these individuals have now completed the GED, or about 12% when the returned mail rate is factored in. In 1996, 6,143 persons passed the GED in Cook County. In a few short months in 1999, almost 4,000 individuals have obtained the GED credential, thanks to the efforts of ETS, which plans to repeat the mailings as the date for the new test draws closer.

New Issues

In response to the research report, ISBE rightly pointed out that some states require a pre-test before an individual is allowed to take the entire GED test battery. This pre-test is a factor that strongly affects the state pass rate. For this reason, the Center for Impact Research embarked on further research to identify state practices like the pre-test that might assist adults in passing the GED test in greater numbers.

This GED Issues Brief focuses on innovative state practices that we think are worth considering in Illinois. During the fall of 1998 and continuing through the summer of 1999, Center for Impact Research staff talked with representatives from state departments of education as well as city testing representatives from all over the country. Our research was not intended to be exhaustive. For example, four states were not willing to talk with us, and some state administrators were willing or able to give the survey more time than others. We

followed every lead we thought would be productive.

With so many jobs in today's economy requiring a high school degree or the GED, we believe it is important that we all continue to focus on making GED diagnostic information, GED prep classes, and the test itself accessible to adults. It is our hope that the information in this Issues Brief will serve as a catalyst to keep the conversation going about how to make that possible in Chicago.

This Issues Brief will consider three issues:

1. ***Test segmenting:***

In Illinois, most GED test sites offer the 7.5-hour test all at one sitting, or in two parts, on two consecutive days. Elsewhere test-takers may take the test in one segment at a time or

in other combinations. Does this practice encourage adult learners and increase the GED pass rate?

2. ***Testing sites:***

In some states and cities, in addition to established GED test sites, the test may be transported to locations upon demand for test administration. Does this practice, which increases accessibility, cause problems with test security and other administrative hassles?

3. ***GED pre-tests:***

Several states require the passage of a pre-test before taking the GED. Is this a good idea?

We will consider each of these issues in turn.

1. Test Segmenting

The American Council on Education, (ACE), the national organization that produces and governs the administration of the GED test, does not require that the test be taken all at once, or in any particular number of segments. There is no ACE policy on this; policy on segmentation is left up to the states.

The GED test consists of five segments and an essay. The segments include multiple-choice tests on writing skills (75-minute test), social studies (85-minute test), science (95-minute test), interpreting literature and the arts (65-minute test), and mathematics (90-minute test). Test-takers are allowed 45 minutes to complete the essay. It therefore takes 7 hours and 35 minutes to complete the entire test.

In Cook County, the sites offer the test all in one day, or in two parts, on two consecutive days. This policy is not set by the Illinois

State Board of Education, but by the local test administrator, which in Cook County is the Educational Testing Services (ETS).

In the remainder of the state of Illinois, the regional offices of education determine how the GED test is administered. Most regional offices of education (32 of the 42, or 76%) offer the test in either an all-day format or in two parts.

Four regional offices of education in Illinois enable test takers to determine how they take the test, and allow people to take as few or as many segments as they choose. One site administrator said that the regional office offered it this way because administrators there had seen lower performance when testers took the test all at once. Another regional office offers five different time slots during the day. A test taker can then take a segment of the test at any or all of the five time slots.

Our research shows that of the 45 states we were able to survey, 11 states offer the test in only one or two parts.

Thirty-four of the 45 states (or 75 %) offer some form of segmentation. Ten of these states allow individual sites to offer the test in anywhere from one to three parts.

Twenty-four states leave test administration completely up to the local sites. Fourteen of these 24 offer enough options—through numerous test dates, times and convenient locations—so that the individual taking the test can choose how he (she) would like to take the test.

Most of the states that offer the test in segments prefer that test-takers take the entire GED battery within a month; however, some states do not enforce a time limit.

When we spoke with state GED administrators that do offer segmentation, they talked about the difficulty of sitting for such a long test when taking it all at once. They also stated that it was easier to find

sites that can administer the test in parts rather than all at once. Only one state reported that segmentation posed more of a security risk than administering the test all at once. The other administrators believed that people perform better when taking the test in parts. In some states, adults needing encouragement to continue may take those segments that they are most comfortable with first. Ending the “grueling ordeal,” in the words of one administrator, of the daylong GED test may assist many adults in ultimately passing the test.

Certainly, with so many states allowing greater segmentation, Illinois test-takers are at a disadvantage. Our preliminary statistical analysis (before the introduction of demographic controls) indicates that those states that offer the test in greater numbers of segments have—on average—a higher pass rate. We recommend greater experimentation with test segmentation at selected test sites in Cook County within the next year.

Table 1: Comparison of Cities
How Chicago’s administration and accessibility compares to other major cities:

City	Fee	# of Sites ¹	Length of wait to take the test at each site ²	How test is administered
Chicago, IL	\$25	7	2 weeks to 1 month	over 1 or 2 days
Boston, MA	\$46 to \$50	3 + T	no wait	over 2 or 3 days
Cleveland, OH	\$0 or \$42	16	1 month	over 1 to 3 days
Detroit, MI	\$25	3	several months	in segments
Houston, TX	\$41	15	less than 1 week	over 2 days
Indianapolis, IN	\$30	9	no wait to 2 weeks	over 2 days
Los Angeles, CA	\$46	1 + T	1 week	in segments
Miami, FL ³	\$32	3	no wait	over 2 days
Milwaukee, WI	\$47 ⁴	3	2 to 3 weeks	in segments
New York, NY	no fee	12	1 to 2 weeks	over 2 days
Philadelphia, PA	\$35-\$40	4	1 to 4 weeks	in segments
St. Louis, MO	\$27	4	2 weeks to 2 months	over 2 days
St. Paul/Minneapolis, MN	\$45	3 + T	no wait	in segments
Seattle, WA ³	\$40	14	2 weeks	in segments
Washington D.C.	\$30	1	2 weeks	over 1 day

¹number of sites is not an indication of how often test is given in each city--this is difficult to determine. Those numbers with “+T” written next to them indicate that these sites administer several transportation sites throughout the city.

²the wait represents average waits for individual sites, not the wait throughout the city

³this represents information about city and surrounding county.

⁴this is the fee at main site; it does not necessarily represent the fee at all city site

2. Number of Test-taking Sites

In our survey of GED testing sites in Illinois, we found that most are operated by either the regional office of education or by a junior or community college. Only a handful of sites are operated by other organizations, such as vocational centers, adult education centers, public schools, or four-year colleges. Public schools are those neighborhood-based entities that are the most accessible to low-income test-takers.

The American Council on Education allows many different types of entities to qualify to become GED testing sites: high schools, community colleges and universities, military installations, VA hospitals, and correctional institutions. (see box on page 6: ACE Policy and Procedures for Establishing and Operating GED Testing Centers, 4.1-1).

We have found that in states other than Illinois, a great many different kinds of organizations operate as testing sites, which increases accessibility for adult test-takers.

We encourage ISBE and ETS to continue to increase accessibility of the GED test through an expansion of Cook County test sites. We recommend accomplishing this expansion by contracting with educational institutions other than community colleges, such as those listed on the following page.

Transportation Sites

In addition to increasing accessibility through additional types of sites, several states expand the number of eligible sites by establishing what the American Council on Education calls “transportation sites.”

According to the Council, “Contracts may be amended to permit transportation of the GED tests to alternate sites with the prior

written permission of the GED administrator and the GED testing service. Transportation addenda are intended to allow test batteries only...to be transported to local jails, hospitals, and job corps sites, as well as to educational institutions where low volume does not justify establishing a GED testing center, but where needs for GED testing are not being met.” (ACE Policy and Procedures for Establishing and Operating GED Testing Centers ACE, 4-3.1.2)

Although in Illinois this type of site is used to administer the test in prisons, it is not deployed to bring the test to remote areas that do not have easy access to public transportation.

California, Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Massachusetts, Montana, and West Virginia all make wide use of these types of sites. Colorado has 72 transportation sites in the Denver area. Including transportation sites, Iowa has from 165 to 200 testing centers. Other states use transportation sites to varying degrees. None of the states that use extensive transportation systems reported added security problems that result from this type of site.

Boston operates 40 transportation sites and Los Angeles 15. One of the main St. Paul/Minneapolis sites administers eight to ten transportation sites. Washington, D.C. has recently undergone major administrative changes and plans to establish several transportation sites in areas where residents have never had easy access to the test.

We recommend that the ISBE and ETS establish a pilot transportation program in the Chicago area by linking an existing site to at least five more remote sites.

ACE Policies and Procedures for Establishing and Operating GED Testing Centers

4.1-1 Where GED Testing Centers May be Established

Policy: Upon authorization by the state, provincial, or territorial GED Administrator or the appropriate GED Administrator for correctional institutions, the GED Testing Service shall establish an official GED Testing Center at the following:

- A. Public high schools operated by local, state, territorial, or provincial-level school systems or agencies;
- B. High schools and postsecondary education institutions accredited by an agency recognized by the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA) or accredited by the state or provincial education agency;
- C. State, provincial, or territorial ministries or departments of education;
- D. Military installations overseas or in the United States as approved by the Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support (DANTES);
- E. Other military installations located in the United States;
- F. Foreign countries, VA hospitals and centers, federal correctional and health installations;
- G. State, provincial, or territorial prisons which have established a school inside the prisons as part of their overall rehabilitation program; and
- H. Other installations and agencies upon special authorization by the Commission on Educational Credit and Credentials

States, provinces and territories may have additional requirements for the establishment of centers.

Transportation Sites Spotlight: Massachusetts

Each of the 33 testing sites in Massachusetts has at least one transportation site associated with it. People who administer the transportation site are authorized to transport the materials the day of a test and to hold the materials for just one night. They then return the materials to the main site for processing. One of Boston's main sites administers 40 transportation sites within the city limits. This allows the main site to reach those in areas not easily accessible to public transportation. The Boston transportation sites include such facilities as schools and hospitals. Since the current Boston GED examiner has been involved with the program (she came on staff four years ago), there have not been any security problems with these sites.

3. GED Pre-Test

Because Illinois does not require a GED pre-test before taking the GED exam, or mandate that test-takers enroll in a GED prep course as a prerequisite, clearly many

test-takers in Illinois are not really prepared to pass the test. There are several states that currently require or encourage the taking of a pre-test (see table 2).

Table 2: Pre-tests

State	Policy regarding pre-test	Pre-test Used	1998 Pass Rate	Rank by Pass Rate
Delaware	requires pre-test, charges \$20	Official GED pre-test	76.2%	22
Iowa	requires pre-test	CASAS ECS-130	95.3%	3
Kansas	requires pre-test	CASAS ECS-130	83.2%	15
Kentucky	requires each tester to take some portion of pre-test	Official GED pre-test	71.9%	34
Louisiana	requires pre-test	CAT or TABE, moving to official GED pre-test	75.0%	27
Maine	requires pre-test	Official GED pre-test	97.1%	2
North Carolina	requires pre-test	TABE, official GED pre-test, or CASAS ECS-130	85.1%	11
Ohio	encourages pre-test; actual test is free with passing pre-test score	Official GED pre-test	76.1%	23
South Dakota	encourages pre-test	Official GED pre-test	86.0%	8
Texas	encourages pre-test	Official GED pre-test	66.5%	39
Wyoming	encourages pre-test	Official GED pre-test	94.6%	4

Several standard tests are used as GED pre-tests, including the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE). The official GED pre-test is a test constructed by the American Council on Education. It tests the same material as the actual test in about half the time (over 4 hours). A few states are using a pre-test that is short enough to limit the threat of added work for administrators, and yet relevant enough to provide a good indication of whether or not someone is ready to take the test. This is the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) Form ECS-130, a pre-test that takes less than an hour to complete (see spotlight on page 8).

Requiring GED pre-tests would certainly raise the Illinois GED pass rate. The pass rate, however, is not the issue. Are pre-tests helpful to adults? Would the availability of a pre-test that was not mandatory encourage more adults to become involved with GED preparation? Would an available pre-test make the GED more accessible in Illinois for those adults who most need it as an employment credential? We recommend that the ISBE, together with local community-based-organizations, undertake a serious discussion of the pros and cons of an available, non-mandatory pre-test, perhaps testing the concept on a pilot basis.

CASAS ECS-130 Spotlight:

The Form 130 was developed by the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS). CASAS is a not-for-profit organization that provides learner-centered curriculum management, assessment and evaluation systems in education and training programs throughout the public and private sector. Approved by the U. S. Department of Education, it has implemented programs throughout the United States and abroad, and plays a significant role in many state adult basic education programs. Currently both Iowa and Kansas require the use of CASAS Form ECS-130 as a GED pre-test. Seven states mandate the use of CASAS materials in their adult education programs. They are California, Connecticut, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Oregon and Washington. Several other states have incorporated CASAS materials into one or more state programs (such as adult education, human service, and workforce development programs). Aside from those states that require the pre-test, others use the CASAS pre-test within their adult education programs. They are Colorado, Indiana, Massachusetts, New Mexico and North Carolina.

The Form ECS-130 is a 24-page test that assesses reading and math skills. It takes less than one hour to complete. A study conducted by Carol Bakken in 1995 compared the performance of incarcerated male youths on CASAS ECS Appraisal Form 130 with their performance on GED practice tests. Reading and math scores were found to be significant predictors of performance on all five GED subject tests as well as the overall GED test average.

Marketing

Our survey revealed that very few states actively engage in marketing activities geared to encourage people to take the test. Continuous marketing of the GED test would serve to increase its accessibility and we encourage ISBE to make funds available to experiment with various marketing strategies.

Marketing Spotlight:

Alaska GED Marathon

Fairbanks, Alaska is one area of Alaska that gets dark most of the time during winter. GED Administrator, Eileen Baughn, has come up with a way to encourage people to take the GED. During the week of the winter solstice, her site administers the “Winter Solstice GED Marathon.” This marathon lasts two long days, and offers door prizes and free food and desserts to test takers. Ms. Baughn advertises the marathon long before the test, and waives the usual preregistration and prescreening. Almost all of the people who come for the marathon are people who have not been involved with GED preparation, and among those who take the GED during the marathon, the pass rate is 96 to 97%. Other sites in Alaska are beginning to think about starting a marathon at their locations.

Nebraska Free Days

In Nebraska, several sites offer free days of GED testing. Site administrators say that the free testing provides many people with an incentive to take the test. Some sites can no longer offer these days due to fee increases; however, when they did offer the free testing, they had many more people in attendance than usual.

Spotlight on Iowa

We found one state that seemed to be ahead of the others in almost all aspects of our survey:

Iowa (which has one of the highest pass rates, at 95.3% in 1998) is a state that has dedicated numerous resources to its GED program, and provides an example of a good overall, student-focused GED program. Potential test-takers take the CASAS Form 130 test in order to determine whether they need more preparation and which sections of the GED they might need to work on. Iowa then provides a method of “staggered testing” for its GED applicants. People take the sections that they are strong in first. They then go back and prepare for those sections in which they are weak. In Iowa, the testing sites and GED preparation providers work closely together in order to make sure that people are test ready.

Including transportation sites, Iowa has from 165 to 300 testing sites. They are located at a variety of facilities. The Iowa Department of Human Services sends a list of welfare recipients who lack the GED or high school diploma to the GED office. The list is broken down by district and sent to local GED examiners. A recruiter then contacts each welfare recipient on the list to inform him or her about how to obtain the GED. Finally, Iowa is one of a few states that has begun to develop a basic skills certificate in order to serve those for whom obtaining a GED is too difficult.