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Will updated GED test help or hurt students?

By: Mike Vitez | December 22, 2013



Samantha Mondesir takes the social studies part of the GED at the Harambee charter school. Many students have rushed to take the test before it is replaced. (MICHAEL BRYANT / Staff Photographer)

The GED test - the high school equivalency exam taken by 770,000 people every year - will be updated for only the fifth time in its 70-year history, beginning Jan. 1.

The test will be harder, different - with more writing - probing not only what students know, but making them apply it.

The idea is to better prepare adults for today's workplace and colleges and give the test more credibility. The cost rises from \$70 to \$120, and it will be on computer only.

Few argue with the intent, but many experts fear thousands, especially older Americans, will have little hope of passing the new test, derailing any chance they have of building a better life.

Two alternatives to the new GED test have been created by competitors, and New Jersey opted this month to permit all three tests. Pennsylvania is sticking to the new GED and reviewing the other two.

What is beyond doubt is that the old GED will disappear. And the change has set off a mad rush across the region of people trying to pass all five parts of the exam before it expires. Even if a person has passed four parts, he or she must begin anew after Jan. 1.

Alicia Mason, 20, was the first one at the Community College of Philadelphia testing center on Dec. 15, the last day GEDs were offered there this year.

The test started at 9 a.m. She was there at 7.

"I had to drop out of high school because my dad had diabetes," Mason said. "He needed somebody to take care of him."

Her father died, and she decided to pursue a GED. She passed the two language arts sections, science, and social studies, but failed math twice.

"I feel so much pressure," she said. "If I don't pass this time, I have to watch my scores get erased."

The Mayor's Commission on Literacy said there were up to 10,000 in Philadelphia alone like Mason, with the test partly done.

"I'll be devastated if I fail," added Mason, who is working at Walmart and Saxbys Coffee, but who dreams of college and becoming a teacher.



Alicia Mason, 20, waits to take the test on the last day it was given at the Community College of Philadelphia. Afterward, she felt "numb" but passed. (MICHAEL VITEZ / Staff)

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Until the last minute, she sat plugged-in with earbuds, listening to Katy Perry's *Roar* - "stuff to get your mind going, keep the bad thoughts away."

In she went.

Testing centers at area colleges are closed for the year. A few Philadelphia sites have added dates to meet demand.

"It's been crazy, insane," said Makeeda Holley at the District 1199c training center on South Broad Street, which is testing through Dec. 29.

Robert Allen, who runs a GED training and testing site at the Harambee charter school in West Philadelphia, said he was thinking of continuing to offer tests through Dec. 31, but would stop on the 30th for safety.

"People are very emotional," he said. "I don't want to put my school at risk, or my employees. If they don't get results they want, you don't know what's going to happen. People get so nervous."

Gloucester County College added testing sessions, "and we still had to turn away a lot of people," said Glenn Shockley, chief GED examiner. "I feel bad about the people we weren't able to help."

Burlington County College ordinarily gives 20 to 30 tests in December.

This month, it gave more than 300.



Edwardo Valentin, 23, took the test because he wants to attend an auto mechanic institute and, ultimately, to open his own shop. (MICHAEL VITEZ / Staff)

"Oh man, have we been overwhelmed," said associate dean Sharon Rogers. So many candidates. So many stories.

Edwardo Valentin, 23, was second to arrive at Community College of Philadelphia on Dec. 15.

Why had he dropped out?

"My dad got locked up," he said. "My mom left for a while. I had to take care of my sisters. Once my mom came back, I was messing around in the streets."

He now has two daughters and a job at Billy Doc's Diner in Juniata Park, where he works long days for \$8 an hour and "no room for nothing" when it comes to advancement or higher pay.

"I want to get a better life for my kids," he said. "A life I didn't have."

He hopes to attend an auto mechanic institute and to open his own shop one day. But all his dreams begin with the GED.

Robert Dill, 56, was shot twice as a young man, his car firebombed. But converting fractions to decimals is killing him now.



Robert Allen, who runs a GED training and testing site at the Harambee charter school, explains the test to Ivan Pleshinec. MICHAEL BRYANT / Staff Photographer

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He has worked as a hotel housekeeper for decades. "My pay would be better if I had my paper," he said.

He still needs to pass math and writing, with the last test on Monday.

"It will be very discouraging if I have to start over," he said. "If I was a young man, I might say, 'No, that's it.' But from these years and all, I'll start over. I'm not a failure."

Nyasha Ellis, 19, was in foster care and in so many high schools the system lost track of her credits. She passed her GED last week and has begun reviewing the courses at Community College of Philadelphia.

Vanessa Gardner, 58, of West Oak Lane, teaches preschool. Her employer wants her to get a GED and a certification beyond that. She has one part left to pass. "Going back to school, it was rough," she said.

The General Educational Development exam - GED - was created in 1942 to help veterans continue their education. It was last updated in 2002.

"We need employers and colleges to understand that when somebody comes to them with a GED credential that they can expect the same level of skills and knowledge as someone coming from high school," said Nicole Chestang, executive vice president of the GED Testing Service in Washington.

The new test will shrink from five parts to four. Two language-arts sections will be combined. The standard essay - topic paragraph, three supporting paragraphs, concluding paragraph - will be eliminated. Students will write on all parts.

"In the current test, we evaluate what you know," Chestang said. "In the new test, we're going to test how you apply what you know in a real-world context."

Some fear offering the test only on computer will be a liability, especially for older people. Chestang said evidence shows otherwise, that people make fewer mistakes.

The GED started being available on computer this year, she said, and "we delivered 7,000 tests on computer so far in Pennsylvania. Of those folks, we've moved from a 70 percent pass rate on paper to a 91 pass rate on computer."

The new test is based on what this year's high school graduates know, she said, asserting that anyone prepared to pass the 2013 test should be able to pass next year's exam.

But those in the field don't see it so positively.

"The students are going to be lost," said Allen, who runs the testing center in West Philadelphia. "I understand what the employers say, the skill level needs to be up. But students are just not going to be ready. Changes take time. First of all, we have to learn the content before we give it to the students, and that's going to take training."

In Philadelphia, on average, 14,000 high school students drop out annually, and only 1,600 adults pass the GED a year.

"We are not moving in the right direction," said Judith Renyi, executive director at the Mayor's Commission on Literacy.

The new test will "require a much more sophisticated ability to read complex text and respond to it," she said. "The readings and writings are much more subject-based. Read complex documents in history and draw historical conclusions."

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"This is at a much more sophisticated level of critical thinking and problem-solving than in the past. I don't know what the pass rates are going to start looking like come January."

Another critic, Bonnie Kaye, has been teaching GED prep classes for 28 years, running her own prep center in Northeast Philadelphia for seven years.

"There will be virtually no chance for most high school dropouts from Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Chester, and other urban cities to ever obtain their high school equivalency diploma," she wrote to area legislators. "This will stop their moving ahead in training and employment and force them to stay dependent on the various government systems that continue to drain the state's resources and finances."

In response to the computer-only and more-expensive GED, McGraw-Hill and the Educational Testing Service have created versions of a high school equivalency exam. New York state decided to drop the GED and go with McGraw-Hill's Tasc, and New Jersey's Board of Education this month approved all three vendors, so students can choose among three tests.

Each center decides which test to offer, or all three. "We've been so busy finishing out this year that we haven't had a chance to look," said Rogers at Burlington County College.

Laura Elston, supervisor for adult education at Cape May County Technical School, said it would begin with McGraw-Hill's test. The school will allow paper exams, which will cost \$92.

Regardless of which test New Jersey students pass, they will get a high school diploma.

Pennsylvania's Department of Education has asked ETS and McGraw-Hill to submit proposals, but state law specifies only the GED can be offered, a spokesman said.

If the state wanted to drop the GED or offer alternatives, it would require a regulatory change that could take six months to a year, the spokesman said.

Alicia Mason, the first student at the Community College of Philadelphia site on Dec. 15, thought the math test went well. She was one of the first to walk out.

She "just felt numb" when she left, and prepared herself for the worst. She made lunch and "tried to find other things to do, because I wasn't ready to look at my score."

But, finally, she went online in midafternoon. She needed a 410. She got 420.

"I seriously couldn't breathe at that moment," she said. "I fell into my boyfriend's arms, and I cried. I couldn't believe I passed the GED."

Edwardo Valentin wasn't so fortunate.

He failed but vowed to try again.

"If you give up out here, you're not going to make it," he said. "There's always a next time."

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