

Subj: **NVC 010214 Interesting Article on HSE Tests from POLITICO**
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An Interesting Article on HSE Tests from POLITICO

I believe the article below is the first article I've seen (if not the first, certainly one of the few) that notes the Gates Foundation's involvement in the transition of the GED[®].

On a related note: The article ends with a reference to a book to be released next week called "The Myth of Achievement Tests." The full title of this book is "The Myth of Achievement Tests: The GED and the Role of Character in American Life." One of the principle authors is James Heckman – a long-time critic of the GED[®]. It is assumed that it is going to be very critical of the GED and at least by inference, HSE exams in general. I believe the publication of this book will bring his long-standing arguments greater visibility.

Jeff Carter, NAEPDC/NCSDAE Government Relations

Testing companies see cash cow in revamped GED in POLITICO

By [STEPHANIE SIMON](#) | 12/30/13 12:00 PM EST Updated: 12/30/13 6:51 PM EST

<http://www.politico.com/story/2013/12/testing-companies-see-cash-cow-in-revamped-ged-101602.html>

High school dropouts seeking a diploma will soon face a brand new exam system that will demand more skills from them — and yield more profits for testing companies.

The traditional GED exam, administered for more than 70 years by the nonprofit American Council on Education, will be replaced on Thursday by a buffet of options from three testing companies, two of them global for-profit firms. The new exams are all meant to better prepare students for the modern workforce. But they differ dramatically in price, length and — at least initially — in degree of difficulty.

The competitive market, and the exams' new role as profit centers, have injected considerable uncertainty into a system that's proved a crucial path to higher earnings for millions of high school dropouts.

"As with any reform, it's, 'Let's hold our breath and see how it works out,'" said Jonathan Zaff, a vice president of America's Promise Alliance, an advocacy group focused on reducing the dropout rate.

The changes have prompted policy debates in statehouses from coast to coast.

Lawmakers must decide whether to designate one of the three tests as the exclusive path to high school equivalency certificates in their states or to let students choose. They must weigh whether to subsidize exam fees of up to \$120 per student.

Above all, they face the challenge of trying to find funds to supplement the dwindling federal appropriation for adult education in an era in which it's more important — but also more difficult — than ever for dropouts to obtain diplomas. The federal government no longer offers financial aid for college to students without that credential.

Federal appropriations for adult education programs, including GED classes, have been cut four years running. This fiscal year, funding dropped to \$575 million — less than the government spent back in 2005. The result: Adult ed programs now serve barely 1.8 million students a year, down more than 25 percent from the middle of the last decade.

Advocates for GED students say they fear the programs will serve even fewer in 2014 because they will have to spend some of their resources training teachers and buying computers to prepare for the new exams.

"It's going to get ugly," said Marty Finsterbusch, executive director of VALUEUSA, an advocacy group run by and for adult learners. He noted that there are 39 million adults in the U.S. without high school diplomas, and many GED classes already have long waiting lists. "People are trying to better themselves, but you're putting more roadblocks in their way," Finsterbusch said.

The new system may have other unintended consequences, as well. Some analysts fear that states may adopt whichever test proves the easiest in order to boost their graduation rates, in a sort of race to the bottom. Given a choice, of course, individual students will also likely gravitate toward the easier tests, which could negate the value of making the exams more rigorous in the first place.

"Of course that's possible," said Richard Murnane, an economist at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. "It all depends [on] what the incentives are. It's difficult to get them right."

The overhaul shakes up a system that has enormous importance to millions of U.S. residents. In any given year, at least 12 percent of high school diplomas awarded nationwide go to students who earned the credential through the GED. Many are convicts who take the exam in prison. Others are immigrants who take the test in Spanish or French to earn a U.S. diploma, and with it, a leg up in job searches.

The American Council on Education has traditionally updated the exam every decade or so to keep pace with the curriculum of modern high schools. When that process began again a few years ago, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation provided a grant for the council to hire the Bridgespan Group, a nonprofit consulting firm.

Bridgespan advocated a completely new approach: The exam should be given online instead of on pencil and paper; it should demand more algebra and more analytical thinking; it should include more open-response questions and fewer multiple choice. And it should be aligned with the Common Core

academic standards now being rolled out in K-12 classrooms nationwide.

The council didn't have the money for such a dramatic rewrite, so it decided to team up with testing giant Pearson to create a joint venture known as the GED Testing Service, according to CT Turner, a spokesman for the venture.

Many experts agree with the consultants: The old exam wasn't working for students. GED holders do earn more, on average, than high school dropouts. But getting an equivalency degree has not been an effective springboard into the middle class. While 65 percent of those taking the GED say they plan to enter college, just 35 percent actually enroll — and just 12 percent earn any kind of credential, including a technical certificate or an associate degree, Turner said.

"The bottom line is, it can't just be about checking off a box that you've obtained your high school equivalency degree," Turner said. "We actually need to prepare these people for life."

But such an extensive reworking of the exam would be pricey — the consultants estimated \$40 million.

Turner declined to say how much money Pearson has spent revising the exam or how much revenue it expects the new GED to generate. But the proceeds could be considerable. About 700,000 students take the GED each year. The joint venture set the testing fee at \$120 for the full battery of exams covering math, language arts, science and social studies. Retests can cost \$30 per section. Part of the fee goes to the testing centers, which must be certified by Pearson but can be owned and operated by local school districts or community centers.

Officials in several states expressed unease about one company monopolizing the high school equivalency market and urged other testing companies to jump in.

So publishing conglomerate CTB/McGraw-Hill came up with its own version, dubbed the TASC. Nonprofit testing company Educational Testing Service will administer yet another model, the HiSET, which is shorter — six hours, compared with at least seven for the others. Both rivals to the GED are priced at around \$50 for the full battery and include some free retests for students who fail the first time around. (The actual price to students for any of the tests varies widely, as some states subsidize the exams while others tack on extra fees.)

CTB/McGraw-Hill declined to release specific figures on its investment, but Mike Johnson, national manager of adult education sales, said the new exam would be "a significant part" of the company's revenue in years to come.

Pearson hopes the new exam will demand enough of students that once they pass the GED, they are less likely to need remedial classes in college. The company also aims to give GED students a nudge by directing them to a career advisory website that peppers them with questions about their academic skills, their personal strengths and their job preferences, and then spits out a list of recommended careers — everything from choreographer to hotel manager to fire department supervisor. In time, Pearson hopes to fine-tune the website so it can advise students on job openings and training programs in their hometowns.

The other companies' high school equivalency exams are also meant to be more rigorous, but they will phase in tougher questions over the next three years rather than jolting students with an exponentially harder exam all at once.

Ben Morrison, who runs GED classes for young adults with criminal records in Lowell and Lawrence, Mass., said he is encouraged by what he sees of the new exams.

Pearson's new math sections require less memorization of facts and formulas and more real world problem solving, he said. Morrison is particularly delighted by the new reading comprehension sections, which focus on nonfiction texts, including material students are likely to find in the workplace. The old GED invariably included passages of literature from the likes of Charles Dickens and Robert Frost; Morrison said he had a tough time getting his students to buckle down on those passages because they seemed so irrelevant to their lives.

"I guess you could consider the literature timeless, but I'm not sure what they were testing in terms of the students' ability to function day to day," said Morrison, who directs the GED program for United Teen Equality Centers. The new focus on workplace texts, he said, should help his clients see value in their studies.

Critics, however, say they're skeptical that even a revamped GED will provide much value for high school dropouts. In a book coming out in January, economists at the University of Chicago argue that most people who earn a GED see little practical benefit. While the test may force them to brush up on their academic skills, GED classes don't necessarily build noncognitive skills — such as persistence and curiosity — essential for success in life, said Tim Kautz, a Ph.D. candidate at the university and a co-editor of "The Myth of Achievement Tests."

"I'm not sure," Kautz said, "that the way they're trying to make the test harder will fix that."

CORRECTION: An earlier version of this story misstated some aspects of Pearson's involvement with the new GED test. Pearson does not own and operate all GED testing sites and is not marketing test prep products. The price for the new exam was set by the joint venture between Pearson and the American Council on Education.

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