

In Today's Economy, How Far Can A GED Take You?

by CLAUDIO SANCHEZ



John Kuntz/The Plain Dealer/Landov

In Cleveland, 2010 GED graduates from the Get On Track program parade down the aisle during their commencement. In today's economy, some experts say, the GED may not be enough to provide "gainful employment."

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Every year, roughly 750,000 high school dropouts try to improve their educational and employment prospects by taking the General Educational Development test, or GED, long considered to be the equivalent of a high school diploma.

The latest research, however, shows that people with GEDs are, in fact, no better off than dropouts when it comes to their chances of getting a good job.

This is raising lots of questions, especially in school districts with high dropout rates and rising GED enrollments.

A Second Chance, But Is It Enough?

The GED was created in 1942 for the U.S. military to test World War II veterans in reading, writing, math, science and social studies. It was in lieu of a high school diploma so that returning soldiers could apply for a job or enroll in college.

Today, the GED is a credential for high school dropouts looking for a second chance.

Josue Benjamin Bolano De Paz is among the 12,000 dropouts in Los Angeles who returned to school this year. He dropped out of high school 10 years ago.

The GED is a credential. Is it adequate for gainful employment and a living

Bolano passed his GED at the Abram Friedman Occupational Center, and then got hooked there on giving people haircuts — but not just any haircut.

"I'm able to do faces in people's heads," he says.

That's right: Bolano can draw Bob Marley, Marilyn Monroe, Malcolm X — anyone you want on a person's head with an electric razor — for as much as \$125.

Bolano says it may not be one of those "21st century skills" some teachers talk about, but he's making a good living as a barber — and none of it would have been possible, says Bolano, if he had not come back for his GED.

"A lot of people try to downsize the GED," he says, "but see, to me, in my opinion, it tells others that at least he has some type of knowledge."

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- Los Angeles Schools Superintendent John Deasy

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In this economy, though, that may not be enough.

"The GED is a credential. Is it adequate for gainful employment and a living wage in the United States of America today? I do not think so," says Los Angeles Schools Superintendent John Deasy. His top lieutenant in charge of adult and career education, Ed Morris, is even more blunt.

"If I were prepared today with a GED, and that's what I had as an 18-year-old, I'd be scared to death of the future," he says.

Morris says employers require so much more than what the GED delivers, which is why some students question its value.

"Truth is," says 18-year-old Juan Valera, "I don't want a GED."

Unlike older dropouts at the Friedman center, Valera can still earn a high school diploma by retaking the courses he failed in high school.

He wants to pursue a degree in criminal justice and eventually join the FBI. But right now, he

says, a GED wouldn't even get him in the door at Burger King.

"Every day when I leave here and I go home, I stop by [Burger King] and ask, 'Are you trying to hire?' " he says. "I bother them."

Let's say they interview two people for the same job, says Valera. "But one has a GED, one has a high school diploma — someone is far more likely to hire someone who has a high school diploma."

'Not As Good As A Diploma'

School's Out: America's Dropout Crisis

Valera's experience has been the same everywhere he has applied — Costco, Walmart, Sears and Best Buy. Companies want a credential that says, "I have the knowledge and skills to handle a job."

And that's where the GED falls short, says Russell Rumberger, author of the book *Dropping Out*.

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"If you look at employer surveys," he says, "the things that employers generally most look for or think are important, especially at lower-end jobs, are the things like perseverance and tenacity,

and those kinds of qualities that are not measured by the GED."

Rumberger, a professor of education at the University of California, Santa Barbara, says a high school diploma means you went to school for four years, did the work, passed the classes and didn't quit. A GED, on the other hand, is a shortcut.

"The GED is better than no credential for a dropout," he says, "but it's not as good as a diploma. It doesn't replace a diploma, in terms of labor market outcomes."

The research also shows that only 1 in 10 GED recipients earns a college degree. Today, this is perhaps the GED's biggest challenge.

"That is why we are making the changes that we are making to the GED testing program," says Nicole Chestang, vice president of the GED Testing Service, the organization that administers the test.

Some critics would like to scrap the GED altogether, but Chestang says that's not going to happen. Instead, in 2014, the GED will morph into two new tests — one that's aligned with more rigorous high school standards, the other more attuned to career and college readiness.

"We are developing a GED test in the future which will point toward more information for employers and colleges and individuals about the basic skills that they have and at what level have they mastered them," she says.

And that would bring the GED back to its original purpose, conceived 70 years ago.

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- Russell Rumberger, author of 'Dropping Out'

