



## FAILING THE TEST

New York has one of the lowest rates of GED attainment in the nation. At a time when educational attainment is more important than ever for economic success, the city and state need to develop policies and programs which ensure that more New Yorkers pass the GED and go on to postsecondary education or training.

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# FAILING THE TEST

Every year, nearly 37,000 youth across New York State drop out of high school and join the 2.8 million New Yorkers who are already out of school and lack a high school diploma.<sup>1</sup> In today's highly competitive knowledge economy, where employers in almost every profession are demanding higher levels of educational attainment, these New Yorkers are falling further behind their more educated counterparts and increasingly being relegated to low-wage, dead-end jobs—if they can find work at all. For a very motivated and fortunate few, the GED offers a second chance at success. But for the vast majority of these people, a woefully inadequate system prevents them from attaining their GED and going on to college or career training.

The GED system across the state and in New York City produces two related policy problems. First, not enough people are sitting for and passing the exam. And, second, very few of those who do pass the exam go on to postsecondary education or training. Of the more than 2.8 million people in New York State who are eligible to get their GED, only 1.7 percent takes the exam in a given year.<sup>2</sup> And of those who do sit for the test, only 56.8 percent<sup>3</sup> pass, making New York nationally ranked 49th out of 50 states in the country for GED attainment.<sup>4</sup>

New York City fares even worse, with only 48 percent of people who take the GED exam passing it.<sup>5</sup> Of those in the five boroughs who obtain their GED, only 11.6 percent go on to finish postsecondary career training or college.<sup>6</sup>

Table 1: New York GED Passage Rates, 2010

Location	Testers	Passers	Passage Rate
New York State	49,380	28,054	56.8%
New York City	26,486	12,738	48.1%
Manhattan	5,108	2,367	46.3%
Queens	8,334	3,937	47.2%
Bronx	4,768	2,270	47.6%
Brooklyn	6,984	3,501	50.1%
Staten Island	1,292	663	51.3%
Rest of State	22,894	15,316	66.9%

Source: New York State Education Department

Educators and policymakers on both the state and local levels have struggled to target the causes of these problematic outcomes and find creative solutions to address them. Resource constraints and a new GED exam planned for 2014 are now calling into question an already struggling system and are prompting calls for new policies and best practices. Our research suggests that there are meaningful changes that would produce systemic improvement, but they will require investment and collaboration among state and city officials and educators.

In this policy brief, we evaluate some of the policy and program recommendations that have been offered as models for improving the GED system. Our research was informed greatly by an array of insightful studies about the GED published in recent years, but we also gathered new data about GED policies and outcomes in other states and interviewed numerous state and local policymakers, program operators, advocates, and educators.

Our starting point is that New York's poorly performing GED system is badly in need of reform. Doing so is not only vital for the thousands of New Yorkers who simply lack the skills and educational attainment needed to compete in today's global economy, but it is critical to the future economic competitiveness of the city and state.

While the economy continues to struggle to rebound from the most recent recession, the forecast is even more dismal for those without a high school degree. The unemployment rate for high school dropouts is 14.3 percent, compared to 9.6 percent of those with a high school diploma and 4.3 percent of those with a bachelor's degree or higher.<sup>7</sup> Yet even for those who do find employment, their earnings fall short of what is needed to support themselves or a family. Dropouts earn an average of only \$18,815 annually,<sup>8</sup> a far cry from the average \$31,735 it takes merely to be self-sufficient in New York City.<sup>9</sup> "As a consequence of the recession, we are going to see a greater number of people who are 'disconnected'. The chronic and perennial disconnection of young adults has not been effectively addressed" by the GED system or other programs, observes Lou Miceli, executive director of Jobs First NYC, a not-for-profit organization focused on reconnecting young adults to the economy.

The disparity in earnings between those without a high school diploma and other workers is growing. Whereas the income for workers without even a high school diploma has fallen two percent over the past few decades, earnings of high school graduates has increased by 13 percent.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, income for workers with a bachelor's degree has grown by 34 percent.<sup>11</sup>

Although high school dropouts face enormous individual and financial challenges throughout their lifetimes, the issue is not theirs alone.

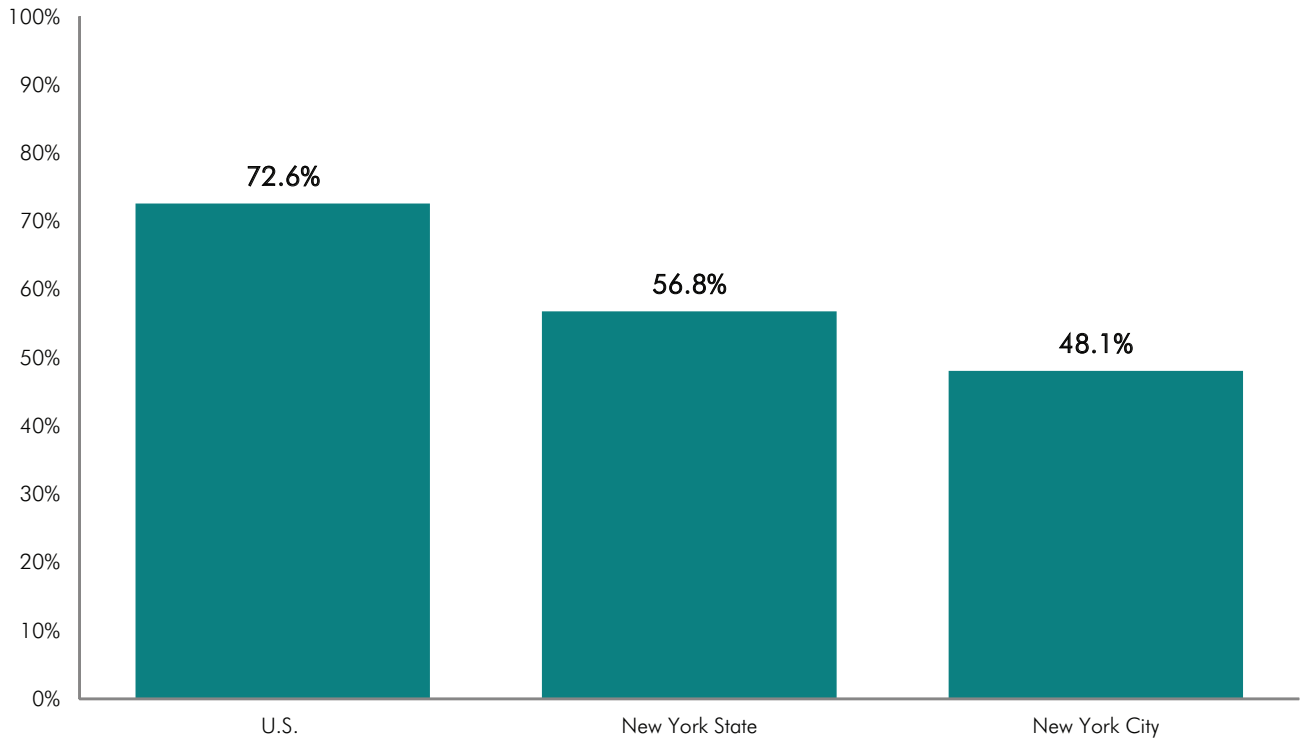
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There are also significant costs to the city and state as a result of such a poor performing GED system. According to the Community Service Society, a New York City based nonprofit that advocates on behalf of low-income New Yorkers and has authored studies about the GED, each person who does not complete high school or the GED costs the city \$135,000 more than they pay in taxes over their lifetime.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, those who finish high school pay over \$190,000 more into the city treasury than is expended on their behalf.<sup>13</sup> Thus, a high school degree or GED is worth \$325,000 to the city.<sup>14</sup>

With New York City having one of the highest concentrations of people lacking a diploma, the economic impact is staggering. There are approximately 1.6 million New Yorkers throughout the five boroughs who lack a high school diploma, more than half the statewide population of people lacking a diploma.<sup>15</sup> This could amount to over \$500 billion potential lifetime earnings lost after dropping out of high school. Fully 29 percent of the working age population in the city lacks a high school diploma, a clear and unsustainable failure of New York's educational system.

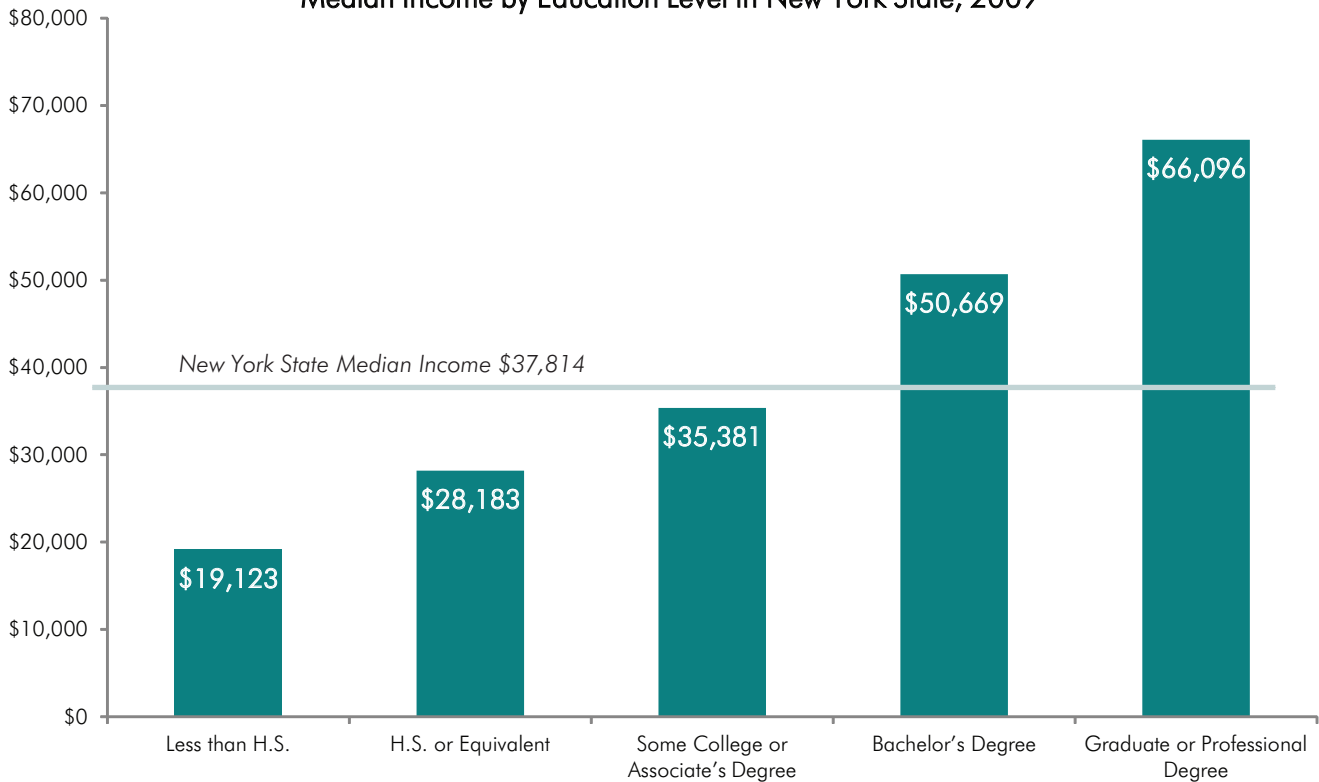
All of this makes it clear that city and state officials need to focus more attention and resources on building up the skills of New York's population so that more New Yorkers have the opportunity to obtain middle income jobs and more New York employers have access to the skilled employees they need. One good place to start is by repairing our failing GED system.

### GED Passage Rates, 2010



Source: 2010 GED Testing Program Statistical Report and the New York State Department of Education

### Median Income by Education Level in New York State, 2009



Source: 2009 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, U.S. Census Bureau

## NEW YORK'S GED SYSTEM TODAY

The GED was first established in 1942 to help returning WWII veterans finish high school and transition back home into the workforce. Within five years, New York began offering the GED to any civilian who sat for and passed the exam. During its nearly 70-year history, 17 million people in the U.S. have received the GED credential. It is now widely accepted by both colleges and employers, with 97 percent of colleges accepting the GED for admission and 90 percent of employers considering it the same as a high school diploma.<sup>16</sup>

Despite its long history and wide acceptance, the GED system today in New York and nationally needs significant improvement. Not only are too few people earning the GED credential, but even among those who do, many of them are not college ready. Both of these issues stem from a basic fact: many young adults in New York are not equipped with the basic reading, math and writing skills needed to succeed on the GED exam, to go on to college or effectively compete in the workforce.

In New York State, fewer than half of high school graduates are college ready and in New York City that number drops to a paltry 23 percent.<sup>17</sup> According to the City University of New York (CUNY), 78 percent of their incoming students—whether they have a traditional high school diploma or a GED—require some form of remedial instruction. Students who leave high school without their diploma face a similar situation; many are not proficient enough in these basic skills to sit for the GED exam. Exacerbating this issue is the high number of GED test takers who are walk-ins. In New York, two-thirds of test takers are walk-ins, meaning they have not taken a preparatory course or come from a program before sitting for the test.<sup>18</sup> It is widely understood that a widespread lack of basic skills and high portion of walk-in test takers have contributed to New York State's and New York City's very low GED passage rates. The Community Service

Table 2: GED Passage Rates for Testers with and without Preparation, 2009

	New York State	New York City	Rest of New York State
Preparation	66%	60%	70%
No Preparation	44%	36%	54%
Overall	53%	43%	63%

Source: New York State Education Department

Society recently reported that the single biggest reason New Yorkers are not obtaining their GED and going on to successful careers “is their lack of basic skills.”<sup>19</sup> Their report portrays a disjointed and underfunded system meant to help people build these skills and prepare for the GED and postsecondary training or education. Additionally, the Board of Regents in New York has written “the most significant factor in determining student success on the GED Test is preparation.”<sup>20</sup> GED statistics support these conclusions. Students who report taking a practice test or some form of preparatory instruction pass the test at a rate of 66 percent, compared to only 44 percent of test takers who report no similar preparation.<sup>21</sup>

Although better preparation is broadly accepted as the most effective means for increasing the rate of students who pass the test, there is some disagreement about the policies and practices to achieve this goal. Early in 2011, the Board of Regents announced two recommendations for improving the GED pass rate in New York. First, they indicated students should be required to take the Official Practice Test (OPT) or similar tool to demonstrate their degree of readiness for the exam. Second, they recommended that the state begin charging a fee to test takers. In their estimation, both measures would reduce the number of walk-in test takers and encourage students to come to the test once



they are prepared. As they argued, numerous states require the OPT and all but four states charge a fee for the exam. Implementing these policies in New York, they believe, would not only increase preparation for the exam but would also alleviate some financial burden on the state by reducing the portion of test takers who fail the test and never return and by raising revenue through the fee.

Some in the education field have publicly opposed the Board of Regents recommended policies, saying they are a blunt instrument aimed at a system that requires greater support. Rather, they propose expanding instructional programs, including basic literacy and adult education programs; enhancing the quality of programs available; and building on promising models of instruction. Yet many of these recommendations have come with calls for increased funding from

in the GED world, the announcement came at a critical and challenging moment. “Here we are faced with the second lowest pass rate in the nation, 67 percent walk-ins, and based on a test that has a lower standard,” says Kevin Smith, deputy commissioner for Adult Career and Continuing Education Services at the New York State Education Department. “And then in two years’ time, we’re getting geared up to an exam that is computer-based only and has a much higher level of rigor. We have a huge transition ahead of us.”

These anticipated changes have intensified the conversation locally about how to prepare students to take the GED and ensure their future career success. Yet even several months after the GEDTS announcement, consensus as to how to achieve this does not seem any easier or closer. Some have begun planning for the 2014

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the state, which in recent years has whittled away GED funding to help balance the budget.

In the midst of this statewide conversation about how to improve the GED system, the GED Testing Service (GEDTS), the national organization that creates the exam, announced its plans to unveil a new test in 2014. This test would have several new features. It would be more difficult, so that students who pass are not only demonstrating high school equivalency, but also college and career readiness. It would be computer-based only, as opposed to the paper-based system currently in place. It would be offered only in English and Spanish, no longer in French. And, it would cost more to states who lease the exam from the organization. For many

test: the New York State Education Department has created an internal working group, New York City agencies have formed a task force and the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy, an Albany-based policy research and advocacy organization, has begun convening experts from around the state. However, not all stakeholders yet agree on the best practices and policies to improve the GED system and prepare for the 2014 test. To provide some insight into this discussion, we conducted research about several policy options for reform: requiring a fee for the test, requiring a practice test and scaling specific models of instruction that offer some promise for improved GED and college preparatory instruction.

## REQUIRING THE OFFICIAL PRACTICE TEST

The GED Testing Service (GEDTS) publishes an Official GED Practice Test (OPT) that people can take to assess their strengths and weaknesses and prepare them for the actual GED exam. The OPT mirrors the content and format of the GED exam, but only takes about half as long to complete. There is considerable evidence that those who take the practice test do better on the GED, yet only a small number of New Yorkers take the OPT.

Some state-run adult education programs do require students to take the OPT. For instance, individuals taking adult education courses funded by the New York State Education Department (NYSED) must take the OPT and attain a certain score before their program can refer them to the GED test. Additionally, students enrolled in classes funded by the state Employment Preparation Education (EPE)<sup>22</sup> program must take the OPT and attain a certain score, which is slightly higher than the score required by the other NYSED-funded adult education programs. Unfortunately, the student population in these two types of programs in New York represents a small minority of all 46,000 GED test takers statewide. Among all test takers, approximately two-thirds are walk-ins who likely have not gone through any type of preparatory program or OPT. In an average year, half of these walk-ins will fail the test, contributing to New York's abysmal GED attainment rate.

Recognizing these issues and to help raise the state's passage rate, the New York State Board of Regents this year proposed the state require all GED test takers to first sit for the OPT. Specifically, the Board instructed NYSED staff to "develop viable strategies to promote test readiness and to require that GED test candidates demonstrate test readiness as a condition for taking the GED Test."<sup>23</sup>

Many of the people we interviewed for this report and some of the recent literature we reviewed suggest the Board of Regent's recommendation could improve GED system

outcomes, if it is well executed. Nicole Chestang, executive director of the GED Testing Service (GEDTS) says that requiring a practice test statewide would likely improve the GED test passage rate and help individual students better prepare for the exam. "It has been demonstrated that in those jurisdictions that have a requirement for a practice test that also correlates to higher passage rates," says Chestang. "In New York, because there are no barriers to entry, no OPT requirement, no cost, no anything, people can decide to get up and take a test—whether they are ready or not."

Having students take the OPT or some similar diagnostic tool prior to sitting for the GED would provide several benefits. Because so many people who lack a high school diploma lack basic reading, math and writing skills, such a diagnostic tool would enable them to identify their specific areas for improvement before taking the test and in preparation for postsecondary education or training. "It would give everyone who was aiming for their GED some good upfront information about how much they might need to invest in their education before they're able to pass the exam," says Terry Grobe, Program Director of the Pathways to Postsecondary project at Jobs for the Future, a national education and policy organization.

Many local service providers and educators we interviewed also agreed that some form of practice test be used. "I am absolutely a big fan of the official practice test," says Derrick Griffith, former principal at CUNY Prep and now executive director of Groundwork Inc. "The implications of such a policy are huge and serve to remind young people and adults that this is not an exam you can just show up and take." Because we do not have such a policy now, Griffith explained, we now see a lot of people sitting for the exam who are not prepared and then fail, which "demoralizes them" and discourages them from returning.

Even for those students who are already at least somewhat prepared academically for the



Table 3: Comparison of States by OPT Policy

	OPT Requirement	Variable OPT Requirement	No OPT Requirement
Number of States <sup>28</sup>	11	14	26
Average GED Eligible Population	334,283	680,188	1,021,899
Average GED "Attempt Rate"	1.7%	2.4%	2.4%
Average GED Pass Rate	81.9%	76.7%	74.6%

Source: 2010 GED Testing Program Statistical Report, American Council on Education, GED Testing Service.

GED, taking the OPT would familiarize them with the test format, test taking environment and even simple techniques such as how to use a calculator to work through the math section. According to Bruce Carmel, Senior Director of Postsecondary Planning at F.E.G.S. Health and Human Service System, a New York-based social service organization which provides preparatory instruction in New York City, the OPT is better in providing exposure to the GED test than just having an instructor describe the format. In addition, recent research by both the Literacy Assistance Center<sup>24</sup> and the NYC DOE Office of Adult and Continuing Education<sup>25</sup> has further demonstrated these benefits of the OPT. In studies by both organizations, members of the community who were not enrolled in instructional or preparatory classes were recruited to a pilot program where they received an orientation, took the OPT and were either referred to the GED or to further study and instruction. Both reports concluded that offering the OPT to participants provided some value and that it helped raise the passage rate of people who sit for the GED.

Despite these similar conclusions about the value of the OPT, the studies did have somewhat differing perspectives as to how to administer the OPT statewide and what should constitute a "passing" score to ensure success on the GED test. Whereas the Literacy Assistance Center study indicated a minimum score on the OPT might be effectively established as a threshold before referral to the GED test, the OACE pilot demonstrated that the state might want to establish a more flexible policy, such as lowering the overall OPT score threshold or considering different scoring thresholds for individual subject sections of the OPT.<sup>26</sup> These distinctions highlight one important issue that the state would

have to address before implementing a general mandate to take the OPT, which is whether a person taking the OPT would have to obtain a certain score and how that threshold would be determined.

Although nearly everyone we interviewed for this report supported the use of some kind of diagnostic tool to help test takers understand their degree of readiness for the exam, some of those we spoke with expressed concern that establishing a statewide policy would deter some people from taking the GED test. For instance, advocates like Bruce Carmel fear that while requiring New Yorkers to take the practice test might succeed in raising the overall rate of passage on the GED test, it might end up lowering the overall numbers of those who attain a GED. "Who cares about the passage rate?" asks Carmel. "It's about how many people get [the GED]." Similarly, Sierra Stoneman-Bell, Co-Director of New York City based advocacy organization Neighborhood Family Services Coalition, believes that the OPT is a good learning tool to "improve learners' ability to pass the test and learn what their weaknesses and strengths are" but worries that a mandate would "leave out a lot of people."

Still, our analysis of results in other states strongly suggests that the benefits of the practice test would outweigh the costs. Currently, 11 states universally require the OPT, 14 states (including New York) require the OPT only among some people and 26 states have no OPT policy.<sup>27</sup> (See Table 3) We found that states with an OPT requirement show a pass rate that is, on average, 7.3 percentage points higher than states with no OPT requirement.

We also reviewed state-by-state data to determine whether states with an OPT requirement deter a significant number of

Table 4: GED Performance Before and After OPT Requirement

Jurisdiction	GED "Attempt Rate"			GED Pass Rate		
	2006	2010	Change	2006	2010	Change
District of Columbia	1.1%	1.3%	+0.2%	51.7%	62.0%	+10.3%
Rhode Island	2.0%	1.7%	-0.3%	70.8%	69.9%	-0.9%
Tennessee	1.5%	1.5%	0%	70.8%	74.4%	+3.6%
West Virginia	1.6%	1.7%	+0.1%	64.3%	78.0%	+13.7%
South Dakota	2.7%	1.9%	-0.8%	80.2%	80.5%	+0.3%
<b>5 State Average</b>	<b>1.8%</b>	<b>1.6%</b>	<b>-0.2%</b>	<b>67.6%</b>	<b>71.1%</b>	<b>+3.5%</b>
<b>U.S. Total</b>	<b>1.7%</b>	<b>1.8%</b>	<b>+0.1%</b>	<b>85.8%</b>	<b>72.6%</b>	<b>-13.2%</b>

Source: 2010 GED Testing Program Statistical Report, American Council on Education, GED Testing Service.

people from even attempting the GED test. To do that, we calculated an "attempt rate" for each state, which is the portion of the GED eligible population who sit for and complete the GED test each year. Our conclusion is that the states with an OPT requirement do show a lower attempt rate of 1.7 percent, compared to states without an OPT requirement, which have an attempt rate of about 2.4 percent. This indicates that the OPT might act as a deterrent for people who aspire to get their GED.

Perhaps most telling was our analysis of five jurisdictions—four states and the District of Columbia—which have all implemented a statewide OPT requirement since 2006. Three of the five experienced remarkable increases in their GED passage rates between 2006 and 2010: West Virginia's passage rate increased from 64.3 percent to 78 percent, the District of Columbia's passage rate increased from 51.7 percent to 62 percent and Tennessee's passage rate increased from 70.8 percent to 74.4 percent. (See Table 4) Of the remaining two states, South Dakota's passage rate essentially stayed the same (it increased by 0.3 percent) and Rhode Island's declined by less than one percent (0.9 percent). However, all five did considerably better than the nation during this period; indeed, the average passage rate throughout the country dropped 13.2 percent. Moreover, the argument that implementing the OPT would act as a barrier to potential test takers does not appear to be supported by the experiences of these jurisdictions. None of the five had a meaningful change in attempt rates between 2006 and 2010.

While the experiences of other states and our own interviews suggest that requiring the OPT in New York would produce benefits for test takers and the state as a whole, it is important that state officials ensure there are adequate resources to administer the test and provide additional instruction to those who take the OPT and discover that they are not ready for the GED. The network of programs providing remedial instruction and test preparation is already over capacity, with many programs having wait lists of upwards of 200 people.

In addition to the system for providing instructional support, the GED testing system is also grossly underfunded—and the cost to administer the test will likely increase in 2014 when the GED Testing Service rolls out the online format and begins charging states more for licensing and scoring the test. Requiring a practice test would only further stress this system. Jacqueline Cook, a literacy expert who recently authored a report on GED testing operations in New York, says she would support an OPT requirement "in an ideal world," but expressed concerns about the state's resource constraints. She says that testing requires welcoming people, checking IDs, reading essays, and "a lot of investment of education resources in this screening process." Lazar Treschan of the Community Service Society agrees the system is not funded adequately as it is and warned that the proposal to require a practice test could become an unfunded mandate.

## REQUIRING A FEE FOR THE GED EXAM

New York is currently one of only four states that fully subsidize the cost to take the GED test. All other states pass down at least some of the cost to test takers in the form of a fee, which can range from as low as \$25 in Alaska to \$380 in Michigan. Earlier this year, the New York State Board of Regents, which oversees the New York State Education Department (NYSED) and State University system, recommended that the New York State legislature pass a law that would allow the state to begin charging a fee for test takers. Charging a fee would enable the state to raise revenue to support the GED system, which has suffered significant budget cuts in recent years.

Administering the GED test in New York State has several costs. The state must license the test from the American Council on Education (ACE), the organization that publishes the test and oversees GED Testing Service, at a cost of approximately \$1.1 million annually. Additionally, the state scores the exams, trains test center staff, maintains records and provides for other centralized administrative functions, which cost approximately \$1 to \$1.2 million each year. Lastly, there are 310 sites that administer the test to over 46,000 people statewide each year. Sites receive a reimbursement from the state of \$20 per test administered, which, according to many of the providers we interviewed, was considerably below the actual cost to them to provide the exam.

State funding to cover these GED system costs has been whittled away over the past several years, from \$3.9 million in 2008 to \$2.4 million in 2011. The Board of Regents has estimated a budget shortfall this year of approximately \$700,000. If it does not receive additional funding, the Board has indicated it may need to suspend the \$20 per test reimbursement to testing centers, something that was done in 2010. The suspension of the reimbursement previously led to a period during which the test was not available at these sites. Many state education officials believe charging a modest fee is the only way to avoid this from

happening again. “We are facing in 2014 the prospect of not having the GED exam available in New York State because we can’t charge for it,” says Kevin Smith. Charging even a small fee for the exam, in the range of \$15 to \$20, might at least cover the projected budget shortfall and provide some security to the system.

In addition to shoring up the already underfunded GED system, instituting a fee could have another benefit: reducing the number of “walk-ins” who show up to take the test with no preparatory instruction and often without any familiarity with the test format. As it is, two-thirds of GED test takers in New York State are walk-ins. This has contributed to New York’s very low pass rate of 56.8 percent. And experience shows that only around 60 percent of those who do not pass the test will return to re-take it. This is not only problematic for the individual test taker; it also taxes the system, since the state pays for tens of thousands of tests each year that do not end in a GED credential. “The most significant issue for the current system is unfettered access to the exam,” says Smith. “We are one of four states in the nation that has neither a fee to take the examination nor any necessity for test takers to demonstrate their readiness.”

Smith and others we interviewed say that having to pay a fee, even a small one, would discourage unprepared test takers from sitting for the exam because they will have skin in the game. “People don’t always value what’s free,” says Nicole Chestang, executive director of GEDTS. Instituting a modest fee may in fact be an important reform if doing so results in a significant increase in the number of test takers who are prepared to pass the test. Implementing a fee would also be valuable if the new revenue was dedicated to improving and expanding GED preparation programs, support teacher and curriculum development and implementing the OPT.

At the moment, however, it is far from clear that the state will invest the money generated by

a new fee into anything but plugging the system's operating deficit. Perhaps even more importantly, it is possible that charging a fee would actually deter a large number of low income people from taking the exam. Several of the advocates for the poor and GED service providers that we interviewed for this study told us that charging a fee to take the GED test would be like "balancing the budget on the backs of poor people."

"It's really important that we don't create barriers to economic opportunity if we're trying to create pathways for people," says Derrick Griffith, executive director of Groundwork Inc. "We need more access, not less."

Thus far, there has been little analysis in New York or elsewhere around the country to determine whether states that have instituted a fee actually have higher passage rates or if a fee would likely deter people from taking the GED. Our own analysis, done for this report, shows that states that have a fee for the GED do not have, on average, noticeably higher pass rates than states without a fee. The pass rate among the 46 states that charge a fee to test takers is 76.7 percent, compared to 77.5 percent for the four states without a fee. (See Table 5)

To test the argument that charging a fee would limit access to the exam and deter low income people from taking the test, we also analyzed the GED "attempt rate" across states. We calculated the attempt rate by dividing the number of people completing the GED test in each state by the portion of people who are eligible to take the test. Across states, the rate of eligible people attempting to obtain the GED credential ranged from 0.8 percent in Delaware to 5.4 percent in Alaska, with a national average of 2.3 percent. Comparing the fee charging states to the non-fee states, we found similar average attempt rates. Among the 46 states that charge a fee, the attempt rate is 2.3 percent whereas among the four states that do not charge a fee, the attempt rate is 2 percent. At first glance, this would indicate that charging a fee, in and of itself, does not deter people from taking the exam. However, given the range of fees charged by states, it is possible that there is a tipping point

Table 5: Comparison of States with and without a GED Fee

	GED Fee States	GED No Fee States
Number of States	46	4 (AR, ME, NY, WV)
Average GED Eligible Population	765,579	946,729
Average GED "Attempt Rate"	2.3%	2.0%
Average GED Pass Rate	76.7%	77.5%

Source: 2010 GED Testing Program Statistical Report, American Council on Education, GED Testing Service.

where higher fees do deter low income people from taking the test, which our general analysis would not reveal. If the state is going to charge a fee, then it should further analyze this issue to ensure that by raising revenue to support the system they do not limit access to the test among those who need it the most.

Currently, neither the Board of Regents nor NYSED have the jurisdiction to establish a fee for the GED test. In fact, it is prohibited by state law and would require an amendment to the State Education law by both houses of the legislature, no small feat. State officials may be able to win approval from the legislature if they tie the new revenues to new and expanded instructional programs. But they will also have to overcome implementation challenges that conspired to sink a previous effort to charge a fee for the GED. In 1991, when New York State instituted a \$25 fee on the GED test, there were so many bureaucratic problems that the legislature moved to end the fee within just three years. One issue was that the cost of administering the fee exceeded the revenue raised by it. Several people interviewed for this report cautioned that the same thing could happen this time around. "We desperately need revenue [for the GED system]," says Jacqueline Cook. "But the revenue from a fee could be eaten up in the administration of the fee. There would have to be an analysis of the break-even point."



## SCALING PROMISING MODELS AND TECHNIQUES

By all accounts, the most effective approach for improving GED system outcomes is by ensuring test takers possess the basic math and literacy skills to succeed on the test and as they move to postsecondary education and training. Requiring a practice test and charging a fee to test takers have been offered as macro level policies for encouraging people to arrive on GED test day prepared. However, neither of these policies directly addresses the need for remedial skill development or programmatic approaches to test preparation. As the state and city struggle to find solutions with limited resources, policymakers and educators will need to identify program models and techniques that could be replicated.

GED programming currently occurs throughout New York City in four main settings—through the NYC Department of Education, CUNY, community-based organizations and public libraries. Altogether, approximately 60,000 students receive some form of instruction.<sup>29</sup> In reviewing approaches in these different settings and in speaking with experts in the field, we identified several promising models and techniques. Some of these have been highlighted in past research, but their relevance and success continue today.

### CUNY Prep

There is a good reason CUNY Prep has a waiting list of 200 students trying to get into the program. The program has consistently demonstrated success over the past eight years in preparing students for passing the GED and going on to college. Whereas citywide GED passage rates are about 48 percent, 80 percent of students who have gone through CUNY Prep have passed the GED.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, their students have persisted in college much longer than the national rate.

CUNY Prep Principal Jenny Ristenbatt attributes their success to several program

elements. Perhaps most importantly, they are a full time program that focuses on skill development rather than GED preparation. Jenny Ristenbatt explains, “we need to reinforce skills and build on skills in order to get them college ready. It’s not a separate thing. You are basically prepping based on the skills you’ll need to pass the GED but also the skills you’ll need in order to be successful in college.” For CUNY Prep instructors, GED preparation is college preparation.

School culture also plays an important role in CUNY Prep’s success. They allow “students to be themselves” within strict rules and regulations. The principal boasts that their school culture is evident from the moment people walk in and say they feel at home. This sentiment also permeates the staff culture, which helps to make the environment “a fun or different way than [students] are used to learning in.” For example, rather than just teaching chemistry, instructors will teach cooking and help students apply scientific principles to cooking. As a result, students and teachers have a great connection and the success of students is celebrated.

CUNY Prep still has a structured learning environment. During an orientation all of the expectations for students are outlined. They have to be on time, take time management workshops and learn to operate in a professional setting. CUNY Prep also uses the OPT at the beginning of the program and at the end of classes to measure students’ progress. The curriculum itself includes core academic classes at the beginning of the program, with electives focused on building writing skills. By the time students are ready to take the GED, they are essentially ready for college. CUNY Prep also offers an important bridge to college. After students pass the GED, they then enter the college transition academy where they take “college survival classes.” Students take college tours, fill out



In the fall of 2010, CUNY found that 78 percent of entering community college students—15,000 students—needed remediation in one or more of these subject areas.

college applications and receive assistance with navigating the financial aid system.

The success of the program is also likely due to the focus on professional development with teachers. They have a teaching and curriculum director and while there are some requirements, teachers have choices about in-class curriculum. They must get their curriculum approved and make sure targets for their classes are met. The program, says Ristenbatt, “takes a special kind of teacher. This is not just a teaching position—everyone here believes in our mission.”

With their focus on basic skill development, college readiness, school culture, and teacher development, CUNY Prep has produced very good outcomes for their students. Just as importantly, they have instilled in their students an expectation of success. In short, as Principal Ristenbatt conveys, “we want them to get into the habit of wanting to be successful and knowing what it takes to be successful. That’s what we do here.”

But this success has come at a much higher price than public funding streams provide. The city’s Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO) funded the program at \$3.5 million in fiscal year 2009 for about 510 day time students.<sup>31</sup> This is much higher than the city funding levels for most students, which are about \$1,000 annually.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, although the portion of students who sit for the GED in the program and who pass the exam is 80 percent, only 111 students obtain their GED each year on average.<sup>33</sup>

### CUNY Start

A very small portion of people who are out of school and lack a high school diploma

successfully sit for and pass the GED. However, even those who do pass the GED too often consider the credential an end in itself and do not go on to postsecondary education or training. To address this problem, educational organizations have begun to develop “bridge programs” to help people on a GED track develop skills to succeed in college and to streamline the transition from GED programs to college courses. One very promising model in New York City that targets students with a high school diploma or GED as they plan to enter college is the CUNY Start program.

CUNY Start was developed because most first-time community college students require some form of remediation. When students apply to CUNY’s various community colleges, they take an assessment test of three subject areas—reading, writing, and math. In the fall of 2010, CUNY found that 78 percent of entering community college students—15,000 students—needed remediation in one or more of these subject areas.<sup>34</sup> Some even needed remediation in all three areas. While all of these incoming students have their high school diploma or GED, they are not yet ready for CUNY. “At this point, preparing for college and preparing for the GED are not the same thing,” says Suri Duitch, CUNY’s associate dean for continuing education and deputy to the senior university dean for academic affairs. With CUNY Start, the staff is trying to better align the GED and college systems to ensure students not only enter college, but finish.

Approximately 43 percent of GED holders nationally transition to postsecondary education, but according to a recent study by the GED Testing Service, only about 11.6 percent will

graduate.<sup>35</sup> How well a student scores on the GED test may help predict their success in postsecondary education. Whereas 53 percent of those scoring in the top 80th percentile go on to postsecondary education, only 38 percent in the bottom 20th percentile continue to postsecondary programs.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, students who drop out of postsecondary programs usually do so early on—within their first or second semester. This strongly indicates that programs should target students' basic skill development to ensure success on the GED and in postsecondary education. As GED Testing Service has concluded, "adult educators must encourage GED candidates to prepare thoroughly for the GED Test, not simply to achieve high scores but also to gain skills needed to demonstrate a high level of education and preparedness for postsecondary work."<sup>37</sup>

CUNY Start does exactly this with students who have already attained their GED or diploma. They offer an intensive, 25 hour per week, full-time program at Kingsborough and LaGuardia Community Colleges. This full time program consists of two phases. In the first phase, students participate in 12 weeks of core instruction, after which they are re-assessed. If needed, students will then participate in the second phase, which offers six weeks of additional core instruction, but with some college credits earned. Early outcomes from the 2009-2010 school year are very promising. Of the nearly 200 students in the full time program, over 80 percent finished with math proficiency, 84 percent with reading proficiency and 76 percent with writing proficiency. Overall, 68 percent demonstrated proficiency in all three subject areas. Beginning in the fall of 2010,

CUNY Start offered a part time program as well. Again, early outcomes were positive, with most students demonstrating vastly improved reading, writing and math skills.<sup>38</sup>

Mia Simon, the program director of CUNY Start, attributes its success to several elements. CUNY Start focuses first and foremost on the quality of instruction. They invest in their teachers to make sure students are getting the instruction they need. Teachers in the program must have some experience to begin with and then undergo a semester's worth of training. They also have curriculum developers who can track the curriculum and identify any needs for improvement along the way. Another important program element is college advisement. They intertwine academic advisement with instruction to ensure student retention and that the teachers and advisors are communicating to identify students' individual needs. Because the first year of college is so important, CUNY Start instructors and advisors work with students so they know what to expect academically and socially. In doing so, they directly target the problem of student persistence beyond the first or second semester.

After demonstrating success in their initial pilot, CUNY Start will be expanded to the College of Staten Island and all community colleges this year, with Kingsborough and LaGuardia remaining the only full time programs. The program anticipates serving approximately 1,200 students this year. Although this is only a portion of the 15,000 students requiring some remediation, it is a significant start and is one of the larger programs in the city.

"Adult educators must encourage GED candidates to prepare thoroughly for the GED Test, not simply to achieve high scores but also to gain skills needed to demonstrate a high level of education and preparedness for postsecondary work."

Expanding the CUNY Start model elsewhere to a much larger scale would face some potential hurdles. As Mia Simon explains, the model “is fairly intensive” and requires planning out every day of instruction. She believes scaling up something so small and so detailed, with such a focus on quality instruction and teacher development, could be difficult. “What makes CUNY Start unique is how much of our belief system is in the teaching and on the ground with the advisors.” This level of detail and commitment could be difficult to maintain on a large scale and could be more expensive than other programs run in the city and state.

Students pay a \$75 fee to enroll in the program, which helps cover books, instruction, advisement and materials. This is an important feature of the program because it helps CUNY offset the cost of the program and allows the student to save any financial aid for their later credit bearing courses. So far, it does not seem as though the fee has been a deterrent. Anna Mae Dick from La Guardia College says they don’t do any recruiting. “It’s all word of mouth and we’re overwhelmed with candidates.” Even with the student fee, CUNY pays for the program out of their regular budget. CUNY estimates it costs \$2,500 to \$3,000 per full-time student or for two part-time students enrolled in the program.

### **Bridge to Tomorrow**

Several of the education advocates and GED experts we interviewed in New York City mentioned an innovative new program started in 2010, called Bridge to Tomorrow. This program, originally announced by City Council Speaker Quinn in her 2010 State of the City address, targets adult jobseekers coming to the city’s Workforce 1 Career Centers who lack a high school diploma or GED. These Workforce 1 Centers receive approximately 160,000 people throughout the five boroughs each year and provide them with services and information to help them obtain jobs.<sup>39</sup> Of those clients, approximately 27,000 lack a high school diploma or GED, which in many cases is a major impediment to their job search.<sup>40</sup> Before the Bridge to Tomorrow, the Centers would

provide the same type of job search services for these clients as they would for all of their clients. Because the Centers’ success has been measured by job placements and clients served, the need for a GED or basic literacy skills had traditionally not been addressed.

Bridge to Tomorrow “is designed to improve the employment prospects of New York job seekers without a high school diploma.”<sup>41</sup> The pilot program addresses what Lazar Treschan identifies as “a big inefficiency in the system now.” The city’s \$54 million Back To Work program does not focus on people’s basic skills.<sup>42</sup> Rather, Treschan says it has been focused on “resume building for people who have nothing to put on their resume.” He and others consider Bridge to Tomorrow a promising model for cross-agency communication and cooperation between adult education and workforce programming.

The Bridge to Tomorrow program features a streamlined process to get clients on track to attain their GED and transition to the workforce. When job seekers enter the Center, they are asked whether they would like to get their GED. Those who do enter into an “information portal” where they learn about the benefits of earning their GED and take one section of the OPT. If they score well on the initial OPT section, they will then go on to the “GED Bridge,” where they take the full OPT. Their scores on the full OPT then determine if they need a six week preparation course or if they can schedule the GED. For clients who demonstrate greater need for remediation at their initial contact with the program, they will be referred to an Office of Adult Education program or other instructional program. All clients who finish the GED exam also participate in “transition sessions” while awaiting their GED scores. These sessions focus on resume building, interviewing skills, and what jobs are in high demand.

By the end of its first year in 2011, program operators anticipate 6,000 clients will enter the initial portal, 4,000 will be referred to the “Ed Bridge” for adult education programming and 300 will earn their GED. The pilot program currently operates only in Manhattan and

Brooklyn. It has required several different types of staffing—an overall manager, liaisons at each Workforce1 center who help clients navigate the program, case managers who provide assistance in the “Ed Bridge,” two teachers and staff for collecting and analyzing data. While some of the resources required are being provided as “in-kind” contributions by the two main agencies involved—the NYC Department of Education (DOE) and the city’s Department of Small Business Services (SBS)—the pilot program has also received a \$1.25 million grant from the City Council.

Although the program is only in its first year, an initial evaluation of its implementation process indicates a strong model that is supported by the staff and agencies involved. With a total cost of \$1.25 million, each GED earned this first year would amount to an expenditure of just over \$4,100, not accounting for the in-kind contributions provided by the agencies. If the Bridge to Tomorrow does meet its projections, it offers one of the more cost effective programs in the city. Another positive feature of the program is its focus on the reorganization of existing resources and programs to support GED attainment and transition to the workforce. Scaling the program could therefore be a less expensive option for policymakers.

### New York City Office of Adult Education GED Official Practice Test Pilot

In early 2010, the New York City Department of Education’s Office of Adult and Continuing Education (OACE) conducted a small but compelling pilot of a new model to administer the OPT to members of the general public.<sup>43</sup> The pilot intended to demonstrate whether taking the OPT at all would impact GED passage and whether achieving a certain score on the OPT could predict GED test takers’ performance. These questions and the study’s findings are of particular importance now as the state contemplates requiring the OPT of all who take the GED.

OACE began their project by recruiting people who applied to take the GED, but had not

yet been given a test date. They reached out to 490 people, with 109 agreeing to participate in the project. The model included three parts—an orientation, a standardized administration of the OPT, and a “next steps” session. Altogether, the entire process took participants one week, or 11 hours—two hours for orientation, five hours for the OPT and four hours for the final session. In total, 88 people completed all three components of the program.

The participants in the pilot who were referred to the GED exam passed at a much higher rate than all test takers in the city. Whereas about 48 percent of people in New York City pass the GED exam, 81 percent of the pilot participants passed the test. Moreover, the study found that the minimum OPT score the state requires of its funded program participants may not necessarily be the best indicator of GED performance. Students in State Education Department funded programs must score at least 2,250 on the OPT before being referred to the GED test and students in the state-funded Employment Preparation Education (EPE) program must achieve an even higher score of 2,400. While only 24 percent of the pilot participants met the EPE threshold, 88.9 percent still passed the GED test. Surprisingly, the pilot participants passed the GED test at a higher rate than non-participants who scored about the same on the OPT. OACE attributed this disparity to the fact that they administered the OPT in a more structured environment during the pilot and provided more targeted advice to participants.

The pilot suggests a few conclusions that should inform state policy. First, taking the OPT would very likely improve GED test passage rates. Second, setting the minimum score for the OPT should be considered carefully and there is a balance that can be struck between maintaining access to the test and setting the bar high enough to improve success on the GED test. Lastly, providing the OPT in a structured environment to mimic the test taking environment should be a component of any broad-based GED system policy.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

Improving the GED system is a vital economic issue facing the state and city. Unfortunately, for too long, policies to support the system have been short-sighted and insufficient to produce meaningful educational and economic gains among the working poor. Not only are too few people getting the GED in New York, but even among those who do make it through the system, the GED is a dead end, not a gateway to a future career. To improve the GED system, New York City government agencies, educators and community based organizations have tried in recent years to demonstrate new innovations with some very promising results. At the same time, state officials are struggling with how to implement broad-based policies to improve the system with limited resources and without limiting access to the exam. Our research suggests that there are meaningful changes that would produce systemic improvement, but they will require investment and collaboration among state and city officials and educators.

The new GED test planned for 2014 will usher in a major transformation in the GED system and a higher standard for test takers. To meet this new challenge, investment must be made in the already overwhelmed GED system. That investment will ensure that test takers alone will not shoulder the burden of higher expectations, but that New York state and city officials, educators, program operators and community based organizations have the resources to raise the bar for the GED system as a whole. We recommend a number of policies and practices to begin the hard task of moving New York's GED system in the right direction.

## **Require the OPT or Similar Diagnostic Tool**

There is significant research that indicates preparation for the GED test is vital to passing it and that taking a practice test can be a critical part of someone's preparation. A practice test not only helps the individual acclimate to the testing

format and environment, but also serves as a diagnostic tool to help them identify areas for further study before taking the GED test. By all accounts, expanding use of the Official Practice Test (OPT) in New York would likely improve GED outcomes. Whether or not the state should mandate its usage as a statewide policy hinges on several factors.

Given other states' experiences with a broad OPT mandate, a similarly broad policy here would likely improve the state's overall GED passage rate. However, such a broad mandate should be implemented in a way that supports test takers and preparation providers, rather than as a stand-alone policy. As demonstrated by the OACE pilot and by the Bridge to Tomorrow programs, using the OPT will have to occur as part of a structured process. In both of these examples, the OPT was administered as a diagnostic tool for test takers, but only after some form of orientation. This enabled the program operators to efficiently identify people who could be "fast tracked" to the GED and those who needed further basic skill development. As the OACE pilot further demonstrated, the state would need to carefully consider what minimum score would qualify for referral to the GED, a decision that should involve instructional providers on the ground.

One major consideration to mandating the OPT is whether the network of providers will have the capacity to absorb the students who would require further remediation after taking the OPT. Currently, without the OPT, many programs we interviewed already have waiting lists and could become inundated with demand for instruction. The state will have to work with program operators and with researchers to estimate the range in demand for services. However, as the OACE pilot and research conducted by the Literacy Assistance Center indicates, many students score higher on the GED after taking the OPT because it is a form of practice in and of



itself. It may also enable some students to study independently.

Having test takers first sit for a practice test would serve another potential benefit—providing valuable information about test takers’ abilities when they enter programs and their development over time. The State Department of Education could provide this and other performance data publicly to enable policymakers to better plan for system improvements in the future as well.

All of these components of implementing the OPT statewide would require some additional resources. However, in the long run, they would certainly provide economic gain to the state. Currently, the state pays for every test someone takes, over 40 percent of which do not result in a credential attained. This sad fact is a drain on already limited statewide resources. Implementing the OPT would potentially reduce the number of test seats filled by people who are not yet ready to take the test. That could produce some cost savings that could then be reinvested into the GED testing and preparation systems. Additionally, if the state does implement a fee for the GED test, those revenues should be used to support the OPT, as we explain below.

Yet even with both of these potential resources, effectively implementing the OPT and absorbing the demand for preparation will require further financial support. The OPT could allow for better targeting of services, but there will continue to be a population of test takers who need remediation. Given the long term value of each GED attained, upwards of \$300,000, a few thousand dollars for preparation seems a worthy investment.

### **Implement a Reasonable Fee to Invest in the OPT and System Improvement**

Whether the state should charge a fee for GED test takers has been a contentious issue in New York State. Both testing centers and the network of educational providers have been grossly underfunded and continue to face an uncertain financial future. Charging a fee, if administered efficiently, could raise much needed revenue to shore up this system.

The first thing the state should do is to conduct a cost-benefit analysis to determine how best to collect a fee so that the process for collecting it does not cost more than the revenue raised by it, again ensuring its defeat by the legislature. This planning process must involve representatives of the testing center and preparatory provider networks as their needs and operations will certainly impact the effectiveness of the fee collection.

However, even if the state were to determine an efficient process for collecting a fee, it would face opposition from local educators and community based organizations that fear the fee would limit access among low income New Yorkers. The data analysis we conducted for this report paints a somewhat less grim picture. State officials should take the next step in this analysis and examine results in other states that have already implemented fees to understand whether a tipping point for GED attempt rates occurs once a fee passes a certain threshold.

In part, opposition to the fee has been based on concerns that it would prevent low income people from attaining their GED. Yet there is another question surrounding the implementation of the fee. That is whether the state and city are committed to the GED system as a whole and to its future success as an economic development strategy. If the fee intends merely to address a budget shortfall, then it should not be implemented. However, if charging a fee would raise revenue to shore up the system as a whole, improve and expand GED preparation programs, support teacher and curriculum development and implementing the OPT, then the state legislature would be wise to consider it.

### **Scaling Models & Techniques**

In reviewing several successful programs for this report, we found several key ingredients that cut across the different models. Although scaling up some of these programs in their entirety could be a challenge, they offer some helpful insight into what approaches can be adopted to improve GED attainment and postsecondary transition.

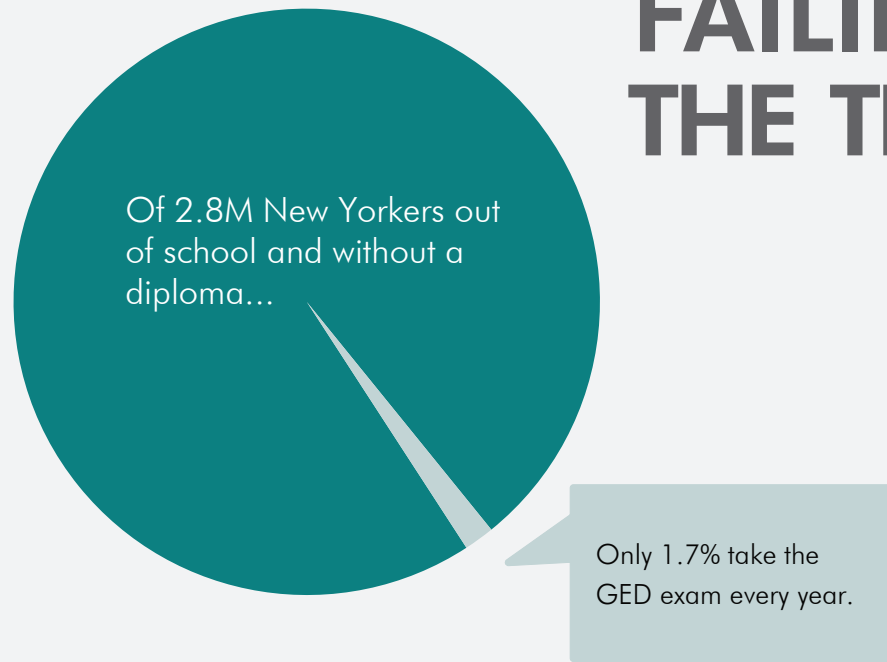
The key program elements we identified as cross-cutting in successful programs are:

- Use of the OPT or a similar diagnostic tool to identify students' needs before they sit for the GED and to track preparatory programs' effectiveness
- Establishing a referral system for potential test takers to the level of service they need, as determined by the initial assessment
- Professionalizing the instructional approach by training teachers, supporting them with ongoing development
- Developing and monitoring curricula that will produce basic skill development for successful transition to postsecondary education and training
- Where basic instruction is needed, also providing academic advisement and test taking techniques
- Creating a culture that assumes students are college and career bound
- Partnering across secondary and postsecondary institutions to create a bridge to college

## ENDNOTES

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21. Ibid.
22. The New York State legislature created the EPE program in 1984 to support adult education throughout the state. The program provides over \$90 million in aid to school districts and Boards of Cooperational Education Services (BOCES) for adults over 21 without a high school diploma or GED. Specific types of programs that receive EPE funding include Adult Basic Education, English as a Second Language, GED Test Preparation, Parenting and Family Literacy, Job Readiness Training and Citizenship Education. For more information: <http://www.acces.nysed.gov/aep/documents/EPEManualrevisionSeptember-13-2010.pdf>
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26. See further discussion of the OACE pilot later in this report.
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30. The percentage of students passing the GED refers to the percentage of students across all cohorts who have taken the GED as part of the CUNY Prep program. CUNY Prep Annual Report 2009.
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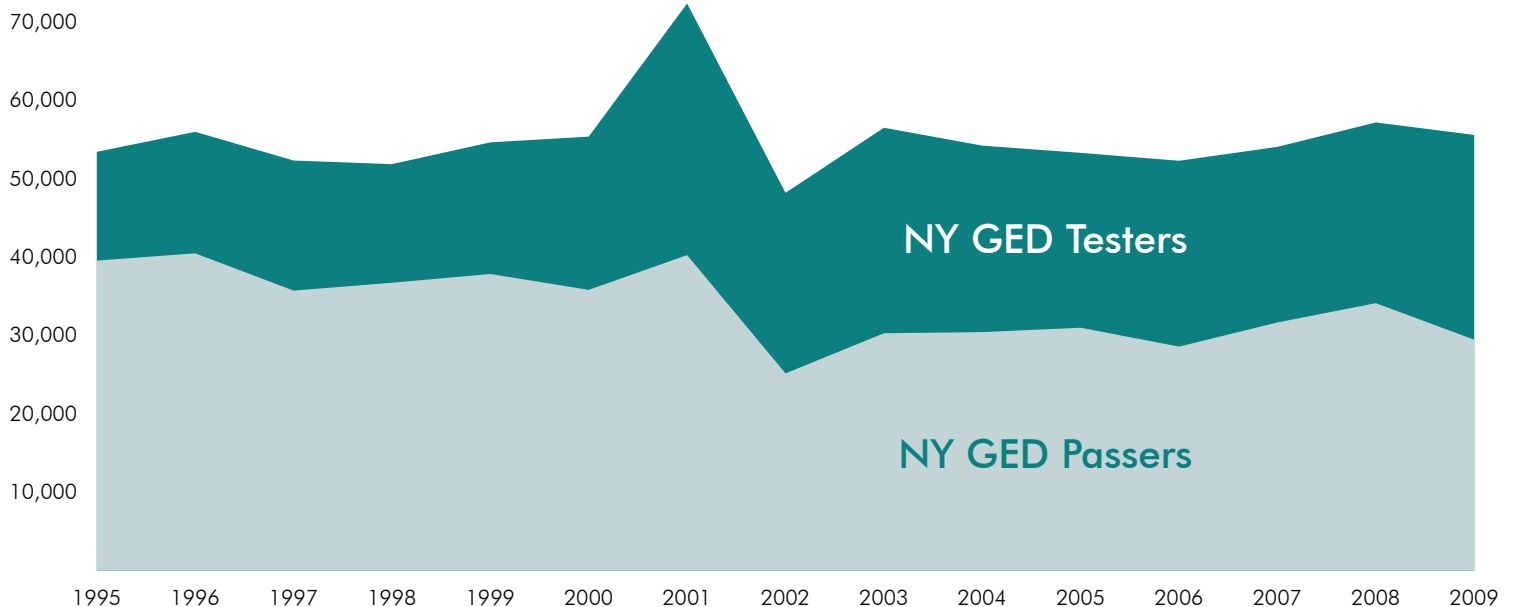
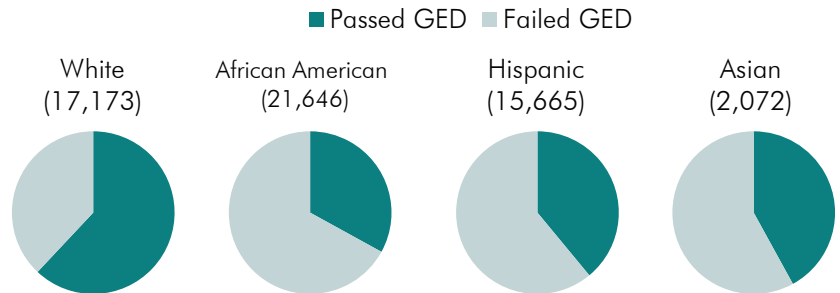
# FAILING THE TEST



## Every single high school diploma or GED...



## NYS Passage Rate by Reported Ethnicity



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