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## More Harm than Good? Restricting Teenagers' Access to the GED

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For years, dropout figures for Cincinnati Public Schools have stood at epidemic levels. By official estimates, nearly 50% of all students leave school before attaining a high school diploma; among some groups the figure may be as high as 90%. As the local and national economies demand an ever more skilled and educated work force, most early school leavers face a long future of irregular employment, unstable income, and little opportunity for advancement.

Given these hard realities, public schools must do everything in their power to keep students in school through graduation and encourage them on to higher education. But many students, despite everyone's best efforts and for reasons that may well be compelling, simply find themselves unable to complete school, and the public educational system has so far not been able to develop the tools and resources to retain these students. What can be done for or about them? In reality, most are simply lost to education and struggle to make their own way in the difficult environment mentioned above. A few, however, seek out alternatives to traditional education; in recent years, the most widely used alternative has been the General Educational Development (GED) certificate.

The traditional education system's relation to the GED is complex. Many public schools conduct or support GED classes for adult learners and attempt to facilitate school leavers' return to this kind of education. At the same time, schools may fear that students see the GED as an alternative to traditional high school, posing the GED as a threat to the mission of public education. For this reason, many states and local school boards have enacted policies to restrict access to the GED to those still of high-school age. Reversing a long-standing practice, the Cincinnati Public Schools has itself adopted a policy of allowing 16-17 year olds to sit for the GED exam only in extraordinary circumstances. Many area non-profit organizations that serve and counsel young people and their parents are troubled by this new policy, finding that it blocks one of the few remaining educational avenues open to young people who have abandoned traditional education.

While motivated by the good and proper intention of keeping teenagers in school, the policy restricting access to the GED is ultimately counterproductive. It arises from two exaggerated impressions: that the GED itself is a credential with little value, and that the availability of the GED option encourages students to leave

traditional education. In what follows, I will challenge each of these impressions. The educational value of the GED may not be a true "high school equivalent," but neither is it as weak as many detractors contend. The evidence on the economic value of the GED shows it as clearly superior to recipients' most likely alternative, which is having no credential at all. And the one substantial study of the effects of opening the GED to teenagers shows that using this alternative as part of a well-designed policy can actually lower the dropout rate.

The popularity of the GED, with currently around a half-million people per year receiving the credential, has led to a backlash in recent years, as journalists, academics, and education officials have begun to question whether the program lives up to its promises. A well-known example of this rethinking came in a Chicago Tribune Magazine article of August 5, 2001, titled "Shortcut to Failure?" The article, by Bruce Murphy, paints a very critical picture of the GED, questioning its academic validity as well as its benefits to recipients in the job market. As the piece makes the strong case against the GED and was widely read in educational circles, and circulated among members of the Cincinnati Board of Education as they considered the current revision of the district's GED policy, it seems appropriate to consider its claims in some detail here.

Murphy's article recites the claim that GED holders perform no better in the job market than do non-credentialed high school dropouts. On its face this seems curious, as Murphy himself notes that most employers and colleges recognize the GED as "equivalent to a high school diploma." The claim could be a result of a simple misreading of the evidence. American Council on Education (ACE) president Stanley Ikenberry, in a letter to the Tribune, pointed out a major error committed by Murphy in using a Department of Education study to claim that GED holders earned no more than other high-school dropouts. In fact, the cited study found that GED holders earn more than non-credentialed dropouts over the long term, and that GED holders' academic abilities are roughly equal to those of high school graduates. This squares with the results of several recent studies by Richard Murnane of the Harvard School of Education and his colleagues, who show that the GED, while a less valuable economic credential than a regular high-school diploma, can provide a significant labor-market boost for high-school dropouts, particularly those who leave school with low cognitive skills. Furthermore, the GED allows access to postsecondary education, which can further improve economic outcomes.

The claim that the GED is flawed from an academic perspective also gets a thorough airing in Murphy's article, with the author asserting that the GED "is really closer to an 8th-grade reading and math test" than to a high-school diploma. Though some education officials and researchers are quoted as repeating this claim, Murphy presents little systematic evidence for it. In fact, experts in the relevant subject matters design and regularly review the test to keep both content and form as current and appropriate as possible (the most recent review led to a thorough redesign of the test implemented just this year, intended to reflect stricter state standards for high school graduation). To ensure that the GED effectively covers what high school graduates actually know, the test itself is subjected to a "norming" process in which sampled graduating high school seniors take the exam; this process has consistently shown that the pass rate for GED exam takers and actual graduates is roughly equal (typically around 70%). (Note that by this measure the intellectual requirements of the GED may be considered more rigorous than those

of a high school diploma, in that only 70% of high school graduates pass an exam that is required for a GED recipient).

Murphy attempts to impugn the motives of the ACE, since, as designer and administrator of the GED, it enjoys a substantial amount of revenue from the test. But this financial motivation should actually contribute to the validity of the test itself. The ACE has a direct economic incentive in ensuring that the GED is widely recognized as a valid measure of educational achievement. Without this recognition, from employers and educational institutions, school leavers would have no reason to invest their time and energy in preparing for and taking the exam, and this source of the ACE's revenues would quickly dry up. If for no other reason, then, the ACE makes every effort to ensure that the content of the test fairly and accurately measures the real knowledge of high school graduates. And it has been widely successful - as Murphy's own article notes, "Nearly every employer and university recognizes the [GED] certificate as equivalent to a high school diploma."

Despite the fact that popular perception and a good deal of empirical evidence accept the GED as a valuable credential, the bulk of recent research on the subject has shown that it is less valuable than a traditional high school diploma. Primarily because high school graduates are more likely to continue on to further education, GED holders tend to earn less overall than those who complete high school. This raises a legitimate and important further question: does the availability of the GED option offer an incentive for teenagers to leave high school? Anecdotal evidence goes both ways: while some may suspect that school leavers are using the GED as a "lazy" alternative to high school, others argue that the factors leading teens out of school, such as harassment, pregnancy, lack of interest or trust, and disciplinary problems, exist regardless of the availability of the GED.

Fortunately, an education researcher has recently addressed this very question: Duncan Chaplin, in his 1999 paper "GEDs for Teenagers: Are There Unintended Consequences?" Chaplin finds that policies simply allowing teens without restriction to take the GED do lead some students to drop out, and that only a third of these teens who leave school with the intention of picking up the GED actually successfully complete it. On the other hand, Chaplin also identifies particular policies and criteria that reduce these problems. Specifically, requiring that students obtain their parents' permission before sitting for the exam actually increases the high school retention rate. While this may seem like a surprise, the explanation is quite plausible. The decision to leave school and take the GED is one that may (and should) be influenced by parental input. The requirement that students obtain parents' permission before taking this step can open a channel of communication at this critical time between a student and his parents that may otherwise not be there. Chaplin's study indicates that this is indeed what happens, and that many students take this opportunity to return to or stay in school. With a parental-consent policy in place (which, along with a six-month waiting period for taking the test, was set by the Cincinnati Public Schools' prior long-standing regulation), we can assume that those who still choose to leave school and take the GED are making a fully informed and advised decision and that they truly see this as their best alternative. Thus the threat of the GED contributing to the dropout problem can be mitigated by a well-designed policy.

Neither education researchers, the Urban Appalachian Council, nor even the makers

of the GED itself would suggest that students drop out of school to pursue a GED. It would be hugely irresponsible to do so. Everyone involved recognizes that the GED offers a second chance, not a shortcut, and that compared to an actual high school diploma, the GED offers smaller economic and educational benefits.

Compared to no credential at all, however, which is unfortunately the likely alternative for most school leavers, the GED has definite value. The GED is recognized as a "high school equivalency" by most employers and by most of the public at large, and 95% of American colleges and universities accept GED holders as students. The certificate may not guarantee success, but it surely opens a door to it. Even the process of preparing for the GED exam can bring lasting benefits to students. GED programs that incorporate counseling and social work (such as consortium of GED schools sponsored by the Urban Appalachian Council and affiliated organizations) offer another opportunity for students to learn of their options for employment, support, and the further education that makes either a high school diploma or a GED most valuable.

Teenagers should not, of course, use the GED as an excuse to leave high school, and there are legitimate concerns that the availability of the GED alternative may encourage students to do just that. The evidence suggests, however, that few students leave high school for this reason, and that a well-designed GED testing policy can actually encourage many to stay in school while offering an option to those already lost to the system. While blocking GED access for teenagers may seem a logical response to our high dropout rates, it actually attacks a symptom rather than the cause of the problem, and does so in a way that may leave many young people forever lost to the opportunities of an education.

The evidence on all of these questions is complicated and equivocal, providing ammunition for people to argue all sides of the issues. But evidence only goes so far; ultimately common sense must factor in as well. When at least half of our students are being lost to education and opportunity, any policy that restricts access to a chance at a better future seems counterproductive and punitive. Even if it keeps a few more students in regular schools, we may never know how many it has kept from perhaps a last, best chance at improving their lives. The dropout problem is a true crisis in our schools, and must be met by creative and challenging solutions. But the cardinal rule of any solution is "first do no harm." A restrictive GED policy may fail this basic test.

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A June 1998 survey by the Colorado Department of Education says that most of their GED sample respondents left school because of problems with "school, not education" (40% were "not interested in school"; 27% of women were pregnant; 24% reported poor grades; 18% had to find jobs; 17% had other external problems; 16% were expelled or suspended). See Keith C. Lance and Dian Bates, "Colorado GED Study: How Colorado Graduates Benefit from Passing the GED Tests." Colorado Department of Education, 1998.

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