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ABSTRACT

The GED occupies a well earned position of strength as an accepted and reliable program of 30 years standing. Nearly 2.2 million civilians have passed the GED and 300,000 people in the United States are earning their high school diplomas each year by passing the GED at State-set levels. Although there will be new national norming and new forms of the examination in the spring of 1977, the basic rationale for the program, formulated mainly by E. F. Lindquist in the early 1940's, will remain unchanged. Research on the GED is sufficient to document that it has its limitations (such as uncontrollable variables) just as every attempt to measure and categorize human endeavor has. The strengths and weaknesses, however, of any approach for evaluating learning and competency (including the traditional classroom) when added up will probably balance out rather evenly. Three GED issues that relate to its impact on people and the educational process are: its need to reach more non-high school graduates, the need for alternative assessment procedures and programs with proper standards, and the need to consider the discriminatory aspects of educational credentialing and the possibility of another type of useful certification at a lower level. (Author/MS)

Let Them Take the GED Test

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The topic assigned to me today--"Let Them Take the GED Test"--is by the nature of its phrasing, provocative. My presentation, I should warn you at the outset, is less so. I don't want to make intemperate claims for GED. Nor does it behoove me to be anything other than supportive of valid alternatives to the GED Testing Program for establishing high school equivalency. On the other hand, I don't want to deprecate the increasingly valuable GED program.

GED is itself an alternative means of establishing that a person has learning and skills equivalent to the lasting outcomes of a high school education attained through regular matriculation. But to argue that it is the only means undercuts an important aspect of the educational philosophy on which GED is based, namely, that alternatives are educationally and socially desirable.

The GED occupies a well earned position of strength as an accepted and reliable program of 30 years standing. It is accepted and reliable because it has proved its worth in helping millions of adult Americans advance themselves vocationally and educationally--millions who otherwise may have been denied a second chance at becoming full and active participants in the social and economic spheres of American Society.

For background purposes, I need to cite some important facts about GED. During the past ten years, nearly 2.2 million civilians have passed the GED at a level sufficient to earn a high school diploma or equivalency certificate. Currently, more than 300,000

people in the United States are earning their high school diplomas each year by passing the GED at state-set levels. That represents approximately ten percent of all the high school diplomas awarded annually in the United States. Today, all 50 states, the District of Columbia, six U.S. territories, and seven Canadian provinces and two territories participate in the GED Testing Program. Each of these political entities has policies for awarding the high school credential upon successful passing of the examination. The GED is taking on international dimensions in terms of the Canadian participation and also by virtue of the fact that the examinations are available in three languages--English, French, and Spanish.

The battery of tests covers five general areas: language usage, social studies, physical science, literature, and mathematics. The tests are nationally normed on graduating high school seniors. There will be a new national norming in the spring of 1977 in conjunction with the release of new forms of the exam currently being constructed by the Educational Testing Service. The ACE Commission on Educational Credit approved specifications for the series of exams in September 1974. The general format will remain the same, but the recommended administration time will be decreased from the current ten hours to six.

The basic rationale for the program will remain unchanged. That rationale was formulated mainly by the renowned E.F. Lindquist

in the early 1940's as he sought to develop a testing program to serve veterans after World War II. I cannot improve on his language describing the program:

> The first requirement for the development of the Test was that the Tests be entirely objective and virtually self-administering in character so that they might be satisfactorily administered and scored by individuals with little or no training in testing, and so that they might yield comparable results for all the thousands of men who might be tested in widely varying circumstances. The second requirement was that they be as short as possible, both for reasons of administrative expediency and because long tests might discourage servicemen from volunteering to take them. Another requirement was that they be simple in organization, partly for reasons given and partly that the results might be readily understood and interpreted both by the men themselves and by the educational authorities to whom they would eventually be reported. The fourth requirement was that the organization of the Test correspond, in broad terms, to the organization of the high school curriculum. A fifth desideratum was that each Test should be broadly comprehensive in character...corresponding to the five major areas of high school instruction: the social studies, the natural sciences, the humanities, English, and mathematics. The Test should be of such character that they would not penalize the serviceman unfairly because of his lack of recent academic or classroom experience or because of the unorthodox or informal manner in which his education had been acquired. This meant to us immediately that these Tests could not be constructed of questions of the type which constituted the usual final achievement examination for high school courses. We felt that, for use with the informally educated or self-educated serviceman, the typical course examination places too much emphasis upon the detailed factual content of classroom instruction, upon the unique and arbitrary courses of study, and upon the shoptalk or technical vocabulary of the teacher-specialist in a given field. It is generally recognized that the lasting

> outcomes of a high school course are not the detailed descriptive facts which are taught--most of these are forgotten by the typical student within a short time after he completes the courses--but the broad concepts, the generalizations, attitudes, skills, and procedures that are based upon or developed through the detailed materials of instruction.[1]

In a phone conversation with Professor Lindquist last fall, the widely respected educator and psychometrician told me that if he had to do it over again, he wouldn't change a thing about GED.

The words of one of history's most outstanding contributors to the art and science of measurement should not be used by me or anyone else to promote the notion of perfection for GED. The research and data collection on the GED--while not as extensive as it ought to be or as extensive as we hope to make it--is sufficient to document that the GED has its limitations. That statement requires a perspective.

Every attempt to measure and categorize the human endeavor has its limitations. Human activity defies precise measurement. The situation becomes more complex when measurement is used in the credentialing of the individual. Credentials are relied upon by modern society to predict future performance. Yet, award of the credential is based on performance at a given point in time. Uncontrollable variables affect every performance, so untainted measurement data becomes impossible.

The track meet, where effort is measured with an electronic stop watch device, can be used to illustrate this point. Many

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[1] "The Use of Tests in the Accreditation of Military Experience and in the Educational Placement of War Veterans," Educational Record, October 1944.

variables affect the runner's performance on a given day--motivation, competition, the consistency of the track, changes in equipment, mental attitude. There is a high correlation with prior performance but no guarantee that the record holder will be a winner on a given day. Other examples could be given such as the well educated and highly credentialed physician--the graduate of a first-rate medical school, licensed, and specialty certified--who on occasion commits an error of judgment or the slip of a scalpel that costs a human life.

In addition to uncontrollable variables, the GED has other limitations, also not intrinsic to the program. It is based on the high school curriculum which includes great variation, both in content and quality. It is limited to objective items. It can only sample knowledge and skills in a broad area. It is less personal than we would prefer.

I have emphasized the negative aspects of GED. In your assessment, ponder these questions. How much validity and reliability is there in the assessment procedures utilized in the traditional classroom? Is accumulation of modular credits over a period of four years a better measure of high school competency? What about variation in testing techniques among teachers in the same school? The same system? Among the states? What about the reliability and validity of more personalized assessment techniques? How are the standards established?

The point in question can be simply put: Add up the strengths and weaknesses of any approach for evaluating learning and competency

and they probably will balance out rather evenly. Moreover, the parameters of what each method seeks to measure or certify are very broad.

If you accept that argument, the types of GED issues that I can usefully discuss today relate more to its impact on people and the educational process. Given the fact that there is a considerable body of research which, stated in its least complimentary form, has not invalidated the GED; and, given the fact that two of the most respected testing services in the nation--the Educational Testing Service and the American College Testing Program--have looked at the program; and, given the fact that ETS is taking steps to assure its continued reliability and validity, I would like to turn to points that impact on people.

Point 1

During 1974, 430,253 GED candidates took 561,203 test administrations. Of that 430,000, more than 300,000 earned the high school credential. Standing alone, those figures are impressive. Viewed in the context of the job to be done, they are less impressive. In 1974, there were 5,691,000 adults ages 18-24 in the United States without a high school diploma. There were 44.6 million 25 years old and over with no high school credential. Moreover, the dropout rate continues to hover around 25 percent.[2] GED is testing far less than the number currently dropping out of school.

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[2] Data supplied by the Center for Educational Statistics.

In the light of the above data, GED obviously needs to do more to encourage additional numbers to take advantage of the program. We are addressing the problem. Candidate information brochures for all three language editions have recently been published. The Commission on Educational Credit has authorized the development of a GED Guidance and Information Service to include materials and diagnostic procedures for adult educators to use in helping students prepare for the exams. The package will include use of the printed word and the electronic media to motivate people to become engaged with the program.

In summary on Point 1, GED needs to reach more non-high-school graduates than it is currently.

Point 2

Paper and pencil tests have their limitations, not only in terms of reliability and validity but also in appropriateness for some candidates. There are numerous stories about students who freeze or become ill at test-taking time. As a result, it is contended that many adults have high school equivalency competencies but are unable to demonstrate them by passing the GED. They can demonstrate these competencies, it is further contended, through assessment procedures such as those now being carried out by external high school diploma programs.

To me that is a credible contention. As Director of GED, I applaud efforts to establish alternative assessment procedures. My only concern relates to standard setting. Precautions must be taken to assure that only persons are credentialed who have competencies equivalent to or superior to those of the regular high school graduate. I say that with some understanding of the difficulty of setting standards and some appreciation of the declining status of the high school diploma; it, nonetheless, will remain our touchstone.

Point 3

All of us need to be concerned with discriminatory aspects of educational credentialing. The high school credential--whether attained through regular matriculation or GED--is often used as the entry-level screening device for employment purposes. For those 50 million adult Americans without a high school diploma, this often represents a tremendous barrier to economic advancement.

The high school credential more often than not may be a realistic and fair requirement for employment. I expect that many, if not most, jobs will continue to require the high school credential despite Griggs vs Duke Power Company. Decided by the U.S. Supreme Court, that case, in effect, established a standard which must be observed by employers in using the high school credential as a means of establishing eligibility for employment purposes. If the courts

follow tradition in future litigation, however, they are not likely to intervene except in very clear-cut cases. The Duke Power Company case was clear-cut, but in the future evidence will have to be weighted heavily against the high school diploma requirement, I think, before the courts will interject their decisions.

The question then arises, would the high school diploma continue to be a requirement for many jobs if another type of certification were available for use by employers--a certification that assured certain functional competencies and skills, but at a lower level than the high school diploma?

If a different certification were available that had utility, the employment-related discriminatory aspect of the high school diploma might be reduced or eliminated and new economic opportunities for a substantial number of those 50 million without the high school diplomas might result.

Such a credential might have other beneficial impacts. Credentials are useful in raising an individual's estimate of his own self worth and, in the process, raising his educational aspirations. I believe a new credential--once attained--would result in encouraging many to set their sights on the high school equivalency credential and perhaps beyond.

Additionally, another credential might systematize a useful twin focus for education for adults without a high school diploma.

One branch could focus on the basic skills, pointing to the new type of certification. The second branch could focus on educational preparation, on the complexity and rigor of the secondary school curriculum pointing to the GED, the external high school diploma, or the adult high school diploma.

Summary

Let them take the GED! By now, I hope you understand that I believe in the GED. Moreover, I believe that GED will continue to be the major program for credentialing adults at the high school level. It is a proven mechanism with credibility and acceptance. It is cost-effective in terms of the masses that need this service and by its very nature will remain more cost-effective than individualized assessment programs.

Yes, let all those who can benefit take the GED. But some can't or won't and for those GED strongly supports alternative equivalency programs. These alternatives are important, both in terms of the numbers of people served and also in terms of providing an assessment choice for those who need to be served.