Policies of Test Centers and Jurisdictions and GED Candidate Test Performance
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Abstract and Executive Summary

Abstract

The economic and employment outlook for individuals without a high school diploma is bleak. For many of these individuals, passing the General Educational Development (GED) Test is the first step in competing in the increasingly demanding job market. GED test-taking policies vary across test centers and jurisdictions, and have the potential to affect several outcomes related to the GED credential, such as passing the test or preparedness for postsecondary education. However, little is known about this relationship. This study examines the relationship between GED policies and performance on the content areas and the GED Test as a whole.

The model that best fits the data, including test center- and jurisdiction-level predictors, explained approximately 15 percent of the variability in overall GED standard scores, which varies by content area, ranging from 10 percent for Language Arts, Reading to 17 percent for Science, suggesting that the importance of different variables differs as a function of the content area.

The results suggest that candidates of various backgrounds are at a disadvantage even after controlling for relevant candidate factors. The most consistent finding associated with test centers was that the gap in performance between African-American and white candidates was smaller in test centers that required the Official GED Practice Test (OPT). However, this requirement did not decrease the performance gap between Hispanic and white candidates.

In summary, although there is variability in overall GED standard scores and content area scores associated with the test center and jurisdiction levels, only one of the predictors at these levels—centers open all months of the year—helped account for this variation. Additional implications are discussed.

Executive Summary

The economic and employment outlook for individuals without a high school diploma is bleak. For many of these individuals, passing the General Educational Development (GED) Test is the first step in competing in the increasingly demanding job market. GED test-taking policies vary across test centers and jurisdictions, and have the potential to affect several outcomes related to the GED credential, such as passing the test or preparedness for postsecondary education. However, little is known about this relationship. This study examines the relationship between GED policies and performance on the content areas and the GED Test as a whole. GED Testing Service data analyzed in this study comprised 2008 candidate-level, 2007 test-center level, and 2008 jurisdiction-level information. After performing descriptive statistics, data were analyzed using multilevel modeling, also referred to as *hierarchical linear modeling*

(unconditional standard score model and conditional HLM for mean overall GED standard score) and cross-validation techniques.

In summary, policies of test centers explained a small proportion of variability in GED Test standard scores, after controlling for candidate characteristics. This study, using select variables, found that test centers and jurisdictions play less of a role in GED Test performance; however, the remainder of this variance might be captured by test center and jurisdiction characteristics and policies that were not available in the dataset. The majority of significant predictors in the models predicting both the overall GED Test standard score and content area standard scores were candidate characteristics such as ethnicity, primary language, highest grade a candidate completed, and repeat test-taker status: based on the unconditional models, 88 percent to 94 percent of the variance (depending on the score of interest) is at the candidate level. However two predictors, centers required the Official GED Practice Test (OPT) and center open all months, were found to have an impact on test performance.

Major findings include the following:

* At most, the test center and jurisdiction characteristics and policies included in the model can account for approximately 11.5 percent of the variance in the mean overall GED standard score. The remaining 88.5 percent of variance is between students.
* In test centers that are open all year, an average candidate could expect a statistically significant increase of three points in the Mathematics content area, which is generally considered one of the most challenging content areas for candidates. This variable was not statistically significant for other content areas.
* Although African Americans had lower scores than white candidates on all content areas, this disadvantage was less pronounced in test centers that required an OPT, although this effect varied across content areas. However, this requirement did nothing to decrease the gap between Hispanic and white candidates. Additionally, although most students in the sample (67 percent) took an OPT, only approximately 35 percent of test centers required the OPT.
* This study highlighted some variability in overall GED standard scores and content area scores. For each of the content areas, the models (including all predictors) accounted for a total of approximately 7 percent, 13 percent, 17 percent, 10 percent, and 14 percent of the variation in the Language Arts, Writing, Social Studies, Science, Language Arts, Reading, and Mathematics content area scores, respectively.

Implications for policies, practice, and further research include the following:

* Our results provide evidence that a test center that is open all months of a year can benefit candidate performance in the Mathematics content area of the GED Test. Mathematics generally is considered one of the most challenging content areas for candidates, and for some, it may be the final hurdle to completing, even though candidates are not required to complete content areas in a particular order. Candidates who have increased access to testing in year-round test centers may be more apt to go to the center as soon as they feel confident enough in their Mathematics skills to attempt the GED Test, either in its entirety or perhaps as a last content area. If a test

center is not open and a delay results, scores could drop. The role of access to test centers deserves further study.

* The candidate-level results from this study, and notably the consistently weak relationship between hours spent preparing for the test and actual performance, may help enhance preparation practices. Tailoring preparation to the needs of individuals seemed particularly crucial. For example, instructional centers may want to offer women preparation materials that emphasize Social Studies, Science, and Mathematics, while offering men preparation materials emphasizing Language Arts, Writing and Language Arts, Reading. It also may be beneficial for candidates who have spent several years out of school to sharpen their Language Arts, Writing and Mathematics skills.

* Both African Americans and Hispanics are at a disadvantage when taking the GED Test after controlling for other relevant factors at the center-and jurisdiction-levels. More support may need to be devoted to these two specific subgroups.

* Although the Official GED Practice Test requirement helps close the achievement gap between African-American and white candidates, the effect of taking the OPT was small and either slightly positive or slightly negative for candidates, controlling for other factors without referencing ethnicity separately. The lack of a large positive effect associated with taking the OPT may be a flag indicating that this pre-test is not being used optimally, and this issue should be explored further.

* The lack of significant predictors at the jurisdiction level suggested that the exploration of additional policies and/or characteristics of jurisdictions should be considered.