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STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

Education board seeks alternatives to GED tests

It takes a step toward soliciting bids that would allow for more than one equivalency exam.

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The State Board of Education on Friday took the first step toward providing students taking high school equivalency tests with an alternative to the new GED, which has been widely criticized.

With no dissenting votes, the board voted to develop a “request for proposals,” a solicitation for bids, that would allow for more than one equivalency exam to be used in Texas in the future. While there are three equivalency exams available on the market, the GED is the only one currently used in Texas. It will be months, however, before any testing contracts will be awarded, and the outcome is unclear.

The decision came three days after nearly 30 educators and adult literacy advocates brought concerns to the board regarding a steep decline in the number of people taking the new GED — General Educational Development — exam that was rolled out in 2014 by testing giant Pearson Education. Passing the GED is required to obtain a Texas Certificate of High School Equivalency. Critics say the cost, \$135 for the test series, is too high for the people who need it, and that the new exam is unnecessarily difficult.

“Across the state, the organizations we work with are delighted that the State Board of Education has taken a decisive step towards correcting this issue, which will open the doors for so very many Texans who want to improve their lives for themselves and their families,” said Jennifer Edwards, executive director of the Austin-based group Literacy Texas.

Education advocates say the high school equivalency exam is especially needed in Texas, which has nearly 3 million adult residents who lack a high school diploma or the equivalent. Texas ranked 50th in the nation for its high rate of adults who lack those credentials, according to the 2012 American Community Survey and Current Population Survey.

“The goal for the vast majority of folks earning a high school equivalency certificate is simply to get a better job to provide for their families,” Edwards said. “They aren’t looking to cut any corners on their education, but they’ve been hindered by a system that was unnecessarily expensive and restrictive in delivery.”

Critics also point to the elimination of the paper-and-pencil format for the GED as a reason for the drop, saying Texans without a home computer or proficient typing skills were at a disadvantage.

About half as many Texans are signing up to take it since the new version was introduced.

In 2013, which was the last year with the old test, nearly three-quarters of Texas’ 59,000 test-takers passed and earned a high school equivalency certificate. There were fewer than 20,000 Texans who took the new exam in 2014, and 51.5 percent passed the computer-based version.

Multiple states already have dropped the revised GED in favor of alternative high school equivalency exams. Those exams can cost half as much as the GED, though the price of the other tests could rise because of Texas administration and test site fees.

The board on Wednesday gave preliminary approval to have the Texas Education Agency staff develop a request for proposals from test vendors and gave input on what to include in it, calling for the same level of rigor for all exams and ensuring they are aligned with Texas high school curricula.

Kathryn Thompson, executive director of the Tarrant Literacy Coalition, which prepares students for the GED, said she was pleased with the board’s decision.

“They heard from 28 residents of Texas and one unbiased representative from Tennessee who all agreed that allowing more than one vendor in Texas would be a step in the right direction,” Thompson said. “We ... will continue to monitor the progress of the (request for proposals). If we need to return to Austin with our students and other stakeholders, we will do so.”

The board is tentatively scheduled to approve the solicitation for bids in September and select a vendor or vendors as early as January.

If the board moves forward with a vendor besides Pearson, it would be the second blow this year to the company, which lost the majority of the state's standardized testing contract in May. The state's exclusive testing vendor since 1980, Pearson saw its work in Texas shrink drastically as it was awarded a \$60 million contract for testing services for students who are learning English or have severe cognitive abilities. The state instead awarded a four-year \$280 million contract to New Jersey-based Educational Testing Services to develop, administer and score its standardized tests.

Chandra Villanueva, an analyst with the Center for Public Policy Priorities, which advocates for low-to mid-income Texans, said she's pleased with the direction the state board has been taking, but that it's early in the process and it will be "a long time before we have a new test in place."

She said the state can't afford to lose anyone else seeking to obtain a high school equivalency certificate because of a test that imposes unnecessary barriers.

"Everyone on the board does understand that we do have a problem with the current GED ... locking people out of jobs and educational advancements," Villanueva said.

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Sarah Stannard, an adult education coordinator, is one of dozens who testified before the State Board of Education in Austin on Tuesday. RODOLFO GONZALEZ / AMERICAN-STATESMAN