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WE SAY EDUCATION

GED needs high standards, accessibility

When it comes to the GED test, Central Texas has been bucking the state and national trends — but no longer.

While nationally the number of students taking and passing the test has been dropping, Austin Community College has been producing increasing numbers of GED “graduates,” peaking at 488 in 2013. That ended in 2014 with the introduction of the new national GED test. The number of graduates that year? Fewer than 30.

Talk about a workforce crisis for Central Texas.

The Texas State Board of Education has an important decision to make that will affect not only the livelihoods of thousands of adult Texans who do not have a high school diploma but also the future economy of this state. Directing the Texas Education Agency to look at an alternative test is a good first step, as the board did Friday, but education officials’ emphasis should be on improving access, not diluting educational standards.

More than two dozen advocates spoke to the state board this week, many begging for an alternative to the new, harder and more expensive version of the GED test that has formed the cornerstone of the nation’s adult education program since World War II. A final decision is likely later this fall.

At the heart of the debate is whether the GED as a high school equivalent certifies access to the workforce or is a credential that guarantees to employers and colleges a specific level of knowledge and academic competence. In a perfect world, both should be true.

Texas currently leads the nation in its share of citizens lacking a high school degree or its equivalent. According to the Center for Public Policy Priorities, more than 2.8 million Texans, or 17.4 percent of the state’s residents, lack this important credential. According to the Texas Association of Business, by 2020 more than 65 percent of jobs will require some sort of postsecondary education, leaving the state with a significant skills gap, especially in technical fields.

Started in 1942 as a way to assess the academic skills of servicemen returning from World War II without a high school diploma, the certificate has morphed into a second-chance high school diploma. Despite the GED’s acceptance by the American public as a high school equivalent, the reality is that the outcomes for GED holders are not equal to those who obtain a high school diploma.

GED holders do participate in the workforce at higher rates than dropouts, but they still earn lower incomes than high school graduates. Additionally, while nearly half of all GED holders enroll in postsecondary education, only 4 percent persist to earn a degree, according to a 2007 report from Jobs for the Future, a national nonprofit dedicated to studying and filling workforce gaps.

“The old GED had fallen into disrespect by employers. The requirements were so far off those of a high school diploma that the GED was of very limited value — something had to be done,” says Bill Hammond, president of the Texas Association of Business. However, even Hammond concedes that the new GED, created by national testing juggernaut Pearson VUE, may have gone too far too fast, making the state’s school-to-career pipeline worse.

Charged with creating a GED that more accurately predicted college and career readiness, Pearson, in conjunction with the American Council on Education, launched the new GED test in 2014. Test-taking and passing rates, which have been on the decline since 2007, have taken a dramatic dive in most states, including Texas. In 2012, the last comparable year, 43,994 students passed the GED, according to the Texas Education Agency. In 2014, only 12,372 students passed.

The GED needs to be a meaningful certification. Anything less is a disservice to those adult learners who put their time and energy into studying for the test. Those who pass should be just as prepared for the next economic step in their lives as those who graduate from high school.

Several studies suggest that the lack of rigor in the old GED actually provided an incentive for 16- and 17-year-olds to drop out. The tougher test removes that incentive. That said, there are issues with the new test, which erects significant barriers for low-income students.

Paying \$135 for a one-time administration of a test is a significant burden for minimum-wage earners; it is also more than twice the cost of the SAT and the old version of the GED. The state should offer waivers to those who successfully complete a state-certified adult education prep program, and paper-based alternatives should be

available. Access to a computer and the ability to type 25 words per minute should not be requirements to obtain a high school equivalency certificate. Large swaths of the population still do not have reliable access to computers, including the state's prison population.

Texas has choices. The GED is not the only national high school equivalency certification, and more than 20 states now provide more accessible alternatives. The Iowa Testing Service's HiSET and McGraw-Hill's Education TASC both offer paper and computer versions based on the same set of standards as the Pearson test, and they cost less than half as much.

Everyone deserves a second chance at education. Texas should keep standards high for employers and colleges but give test-takers accessible choices.



State Board of Education member Sue Melton-Malone discusses GED practices during the board's meeting in Austin on Tuesday. RODOLFO GONZALEZ / AMERICAN-STATESMAN