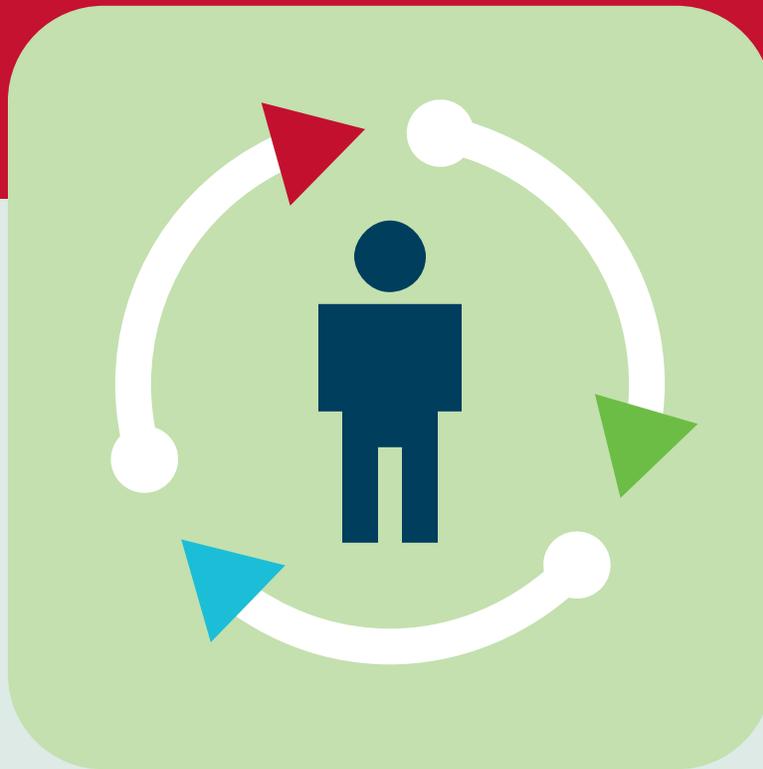


Diminished Returns:
*Low GED® Participation
Adds to Nebraska's
Workforce Challenges*



Introduction

In the United States today, earning a high school diploma or its equivalent is almost always essential for personal and professional success. For most, this credential is necessary to move on to trade schools, higher education, the military, and higher paying jobs. Nationally, high school graduates earn over \$750 more per month and have an unemployment rate nearly two percentage points lower than individuals without a diploma or high school equivalency (HSE).¹

The lack of an HSE, and the loss in earnings that can result, is a big issue in Nebraska. In fact, 9 percent of Nebraskans aged 18-64 (104,952) are without a diploma or an HSE such as one attainable by passing the General Educational Development (GED®) exam.² At the same time, there is a persistent “skills gap,” or not enough workers with the right education or skills to fill open positions, in Nebraska.³

Surveys contributing to a recent state workforce report revealed 52 percent of employers had positions requiring a high school education but less than an associate’s degree go unfilled within the past year.⁴ Future workforce projections see that gap only getting wider. One study projects that 71 percent of Nebraska jobs will require at least a postsecondary education by 2020.⁵

This means graduating from high school or getting an HSE is more important than ever to meet employer needs and to earn a decent wage. Now four years after major changes to the GED exam, Nebraska’s only recognized HSE exam, it is timely to review our state’s HSE program performance, explore programs in other states, and consider the impact to our economy.

Nebraska Appleseed hosted interviews and focus groups with Nebraska state administrators, Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) test preparation entities, nonprofit HSE providers, and HSE students themselves.⁶ These conversations revealed strengths and opportunities for Nebraska’s HSE system and adult education in general. From this discussion, recommendations intended to increase Nebraskans’ access to HSE, better fill Nebraska’s workforce skills gap, and help move more workers into jobs that can provide for their families can be made.

High School Equivalency in the US

The GED test was created in 1942 to allow U.S. soldiers returning from World War II to achieve a credential equivalent to a high school diploma that would allow them to move on to higher education or join the workforce.⁷ Over the years, the test has been revised to meet changing academic standards and also help fill nationwide gaps in workforce skills. Up until 2014, the GED was the sole HSE exam available in the U.S.

Offered in English, French, and Spanish, test topics include mathematical reasoning, reasoning through language arts, social studies, and science with questions formatted as multiple choice and essay.⁸ The GED's reliability and validity have been confirmed by independent observers and the GED Testing Service itself over the course of its existence.⁹

In 2011, the GED's nonprofit administering organization, the American Council on Education, entered into a public-private partnership with the for-profit testing company, Pearson Education, Inc.¹⁰ Significant changes were announced for 2014 including the ability to earn college credit with qualifying scores, aligning the test with Common Core standards, increasing rigor, adding fees for practice tests, eliminating paper and pencil testing options, and increasing testing fees to \$120.¹¹ Concerned about the impact this would have on students and their workforce, many states began looking for alternative HSE testing options.¹²

Alternative HSE Exams

In anticipation of the GED changes, the High School Equivalency Test (HiSET®) and Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC®) exams were developed by the Educational Testing Services (a nonprofit) with the Iowa Testing Program and CTB/McGraw-Hill (since sold to Data Recognition Corporation), respectively.¹³ Both tests offered HSE testing for costs closer in line with the pre-2014 GED. These exams also allowed paper and pencil testing options and phased in level of difficulty increases, allowing time for instructors and students to adapt to tougher standards. None of the testing organizations suggested that the difficulty should remain where it was pre-2014 but the speed at which to implement changes conflicted.¹⁴ The GED implemented difficulty changes over a single year, the HiSET and TASC exams increased difficulty incrementally over three. It does, however, appear that the tests were similarly difficult given the first year's passing rates: 2014 GED: 63%, TASC: 62%, HiSET: 59%.¹⁵

By 2015, 21 states had moved from offering only GED testing to offering the TASC, HiSET, or some combination of the three.¹⁶ In 2018, that number is up to 27 (see Appendix). Top reasons for states switching exams include offering a lower price for students (or states, who often subsidize testing), the broad need to offer paper and pencil alternatives, and a desire or legal mandate to not contract with a for-profit company for HSE services.¹⁷

Currently, Nebraska is one of 23 states that exclusively offer the GED as an HSE. Of Nebraska's neighboring states, Kansas and South Dakota are also GED-only, Iowa and Missouri exclusively offer the HiSET, Wyoming offers the HiSET and GED, and Colorado allows all three tests.

HSE Participation Changes

As the 2014 GED changes went into effect, all states, but particularly states that continued to offer the GED, quickly saw significant drops in the number of program participants, attempts, and completions (i.e. individuals who scored high enough to receive an HSE credential). Nationally, the number of GED test takers dropped from around 800,000 to 250,000 (a 69 percent drop) and completers fell from around 560,000 to 86,000 (an 85 percent drop) from 2013 to 2014.¹⁸ During that year, 10 states had dropped the GED altogether, adding to the already significant losses caused by changes to the test. Participants and completions have increased in subsequent years but both remain far below pre-2014 levels.

Midwestern states may be the most relevant when looking for states with which to compare Nebraska's participation drop.¹⁹ When Missouri moved from the GED to the HiSET, it saw an overall decline in completions of 40 percent between 2013 and 2015.²⁰ Iowa switched from the GED to the HiSET as well and saw completions decrease 57 percent.²¹ Over the same timeframe, Indiana, who moved to the TASC exam exclusively in 2014, saw an overall decline in participation of 53 percent.²² These numbers provide a benchmark by which to measure Nebraska's outcomes.

Nebraska's GED

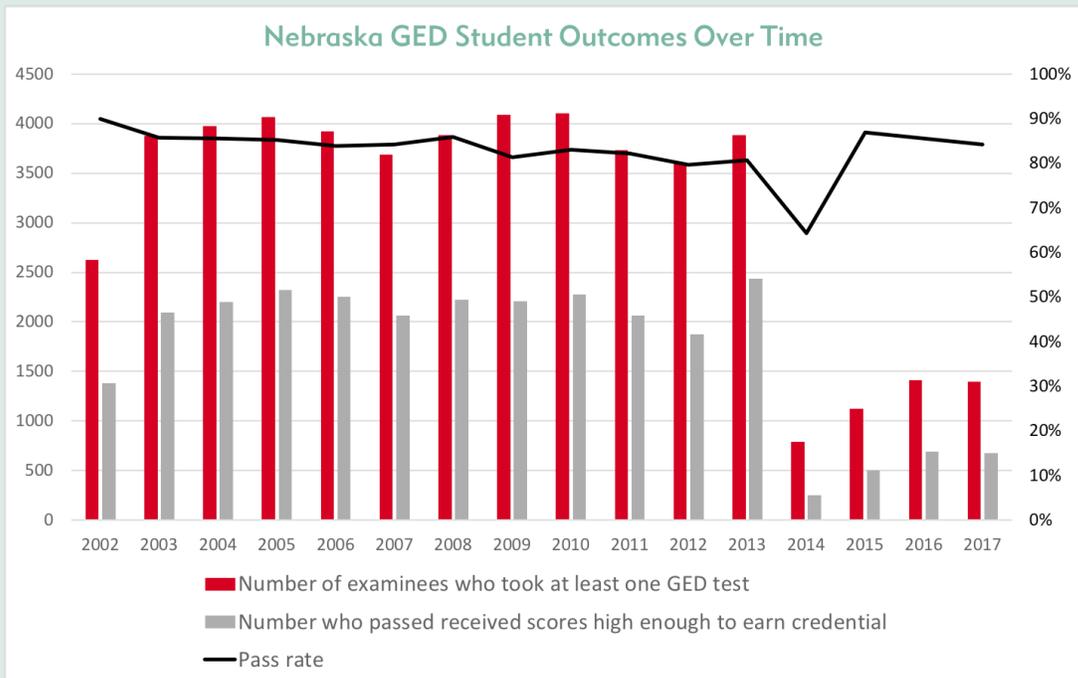
Many states' adult education programs are administered by offices of Post-Secondary Education or Departments of Labor. In Nebraska, NDE administers the adult education program and the GED test.

Nebraska's 2014 Participation Drop

Compared to the significant decreases nationally, Nebraska's GED participation fell even more steeply, and without losing a major portion of its eligible population. Nebraska GED participation fell 71 percent between 2013 and 2015.²³ Nebraska's GED completions fell 80 percent during the same time.²⁴

Compared to the states that switched exams noted above, Nebraska lost nearly 25 percent more completers than the worst comparable state that switched to an alternative exam. Numbers have not recovered subsequently, even disregarding the transition years (ie. especially high numbers for the final year of a test version and particularly low numbers for first year of a new one). For example, 2012 saw 1,874 completers across Nebraska while 2017 saw only 679, the highest since the 2014 change. Trend lines for attempts, completions, and passing rate rise from 2015-2017, but it is clear that dramatically fewer people getting their GED in Nebraska following the 2014 change (see chart below).

“Nebraska GED participants fell 71 percent between 2013 and 2015. Nebraska's GED completions fell 80 percent during the same time.”

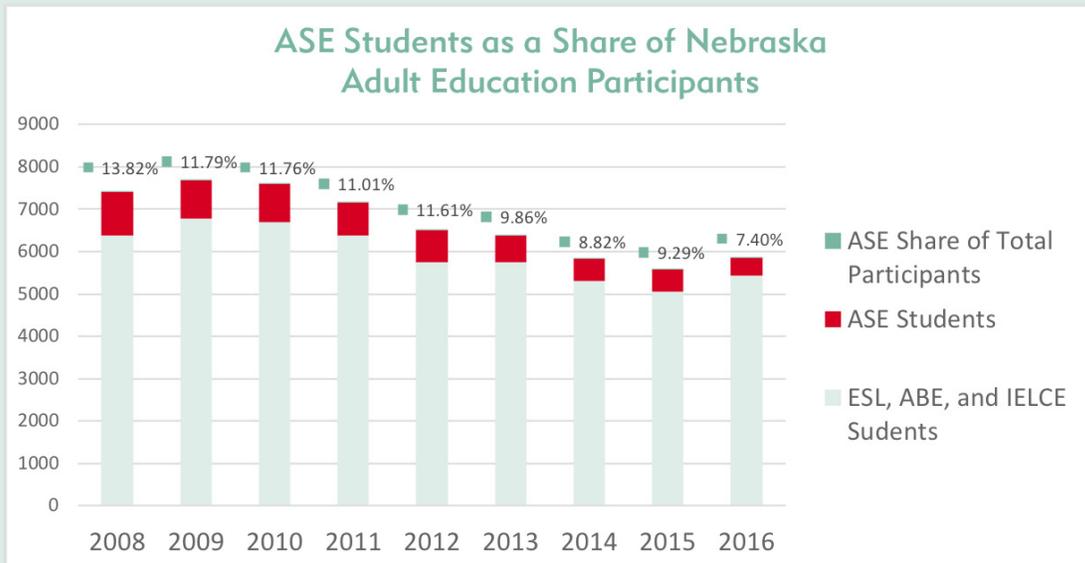


Adult Education Data and Definitions

State adult education program data is publicly available through the Federal Department of Education's National Reporting System (NRS). NRS data is posted online in aggregate tables and includes totals from all four federally required adult education programs: Adult Basic Education (ABE), Adult Secondary Education (ASE - which includes GED training), English Language Learners (ELL), and Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education (IELCE). This makes isolating specific outcomes for individual programs difficult. For example, if one were interested in seeing how many self-identified low income ASE/GED participants completed their GED compared to non-low-income participants, it would be impossible without access to internal, disaggregated state data. In parts of this report, we have used NRS aggregate data, among other sources, but acknowledge its limitations.

The NRS also reports student performance and demographic data. Performance data includes attempts (taking a portion of an HSE exam but not passing), completions (finishing all four parts of the exam to attain the GED credential) and separations (dropping or stopping out). Demographic data includes status as a dislocated worker, learning disabled, displaced homemaker, single parent, and low income.

NRS data shows that not only has the number of GED participants and completers statewide fallen significantly, but so has participation in Nebraska Adult Education overall (see chart below).²⁵ Nebraska's Adult Education program serves approximately 6,000 students a year. Of these students, the number of ASE students who have the goal of attaining their GED has fallen yearly to only 434 in 2016.²⁶ Similarly, the proportion of ASE/GED students has fluctuated slightly or decreased during the same time period. By engaging proportionally fewer ASE/GED students year after year, the state loses students of higher education, potential tax dollars, employers cannot fill their employee needs, and a relatively large group of people are left without a means to advance.



Funding

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act (WIOA) provides federal dollars to enact adult education programming in all states and U.S. territories through Title II, the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA). These acts make up the framework for adult education practice and adult education funding in the U.S.

Funding from the AEFLA is very limited in Nebraska due to our relatively small population. A total of \$2M was passed down for local education agency subgrants, corrections, administration and citizenship education throughout the state in 2018.²⁷

Nebraska, as a state, provides relatively little funding for adult education, including for the GED. Nebraska’s High School Equivalency Assistance Act allocated \$750,000 in fiscal years 13-14 and 14-15, renewing each year at the legislature’s discretion to provide assistance to institutions that offer high school equivalency programs from the state general fund.²⁸ These funds are distributed on a per-participant basis so programs with higher enrollment and more attempts receive more funds. The state also annually distributes around \$214,000 for adult education programs to hire part-time volunteer coordinators to recruit, train, and evaluate volunteers to assist in ABE programs, GED preparation, and ELL classes.²⁹

There is a marked difference between Nebraska’s K-12 and adult education expenditure and our national rankings on the two (see chart below). Additionally, Nebraska spent only \$8.48 per resident aged 18-64 without a diploma or HSE in 2015, ranking us 47th in the nation for this measure.³⁰

Nebraska’s K-12 Population and Expenditure Compared to Adult Education, 2016

	Expenditure per pupil	Number of Students	National Rank
K-12 Education	\$12,230.02 ³¹	315,688	18th ³²
Adult Education	\$164.53 ³³	5,863	43rd ³⁴

Two kinds of fees that once supported Nebraska’s adult education providers are now significantly reduced or unavailable. The first relates to changes to funding structures for official GED testing centers from the 2014 GED implementation. Whereas the previous version of the exam offered providers \$30 per student sitting for the exam, they are now given only \$7.50.³⁵ This decrease has caused an overall shrinking of services and less accessibility for rural students including official GED testing centers falling from 26 in 2012, to 22 currently.³⁶

The second fee change involves registration fees. In Nebraska, fees of up to \$25 per pupil were previously allowed when a student registered for adult education programming. These fees were used by local program providers to pay for instructors’ time, books, additional materials, and other expenses.³⁷ Roughly half of programs collected a \$20 registration fee from students, which was waived for those who expressed difficulty in paying.

In 2017, NDE officials determined that no registration fees should be collected to align NDE with the other Nebraska workforce agencies that do not collect fees for services.³⁸ Some providers shared that this had a large impact on their adult education services.³⁹ With thousands of dollars in revenue lost, NDE providers were put in the position of seeking additional funding to fill the gap or reducing services.⁴⁰ Most providers decreased class offerings and increased class sizes.

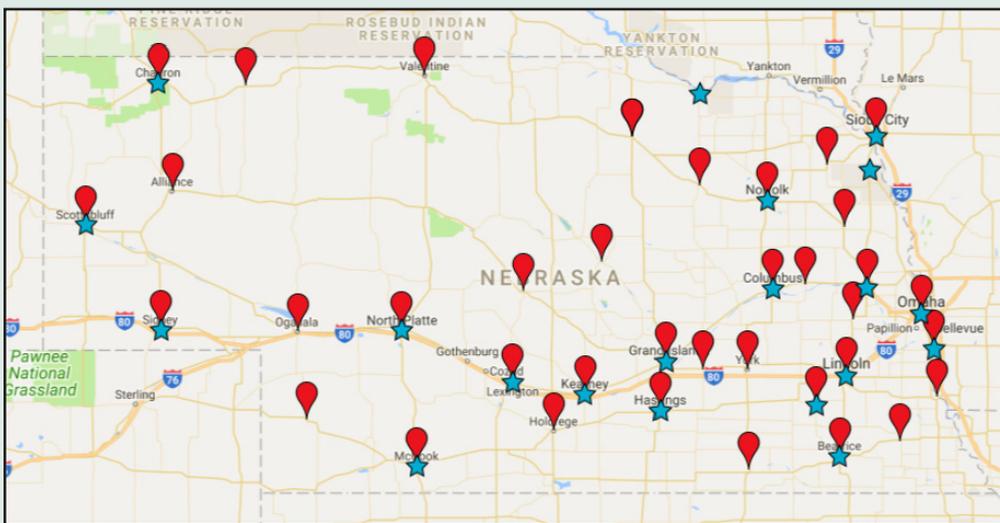
Access to the GED Examination

Nebraskans wishing to pursue an HSE have several options available to them depending on their location,

preparedness, and language needs. Many individuals simply study for the exam and then attempt to pass without supports. Others find privately funded nonprofit organizations that offer classes or drop-in locations, usually located in large population centers like Lincoln and Omaha. Others utilize NDE adult education programs such as those discussed above. NDE and nonprofit entities provide GED preparation services with differing requirements and restrictions and describing the two can reveal important distinctions.

Regarding NDE test preparation entities, there are currently nine AEFLA subgrantees in Nebraska including six Community Colleges, the Department of Corrections, and two public school systems.⁴¹ These NDE providers, as we will refer to them throughout this report, host classes in 37 communities around the state and through distance education.⁴²

Nebraska adult education class sites and GED testing locations⁴³



 *Adult Education Sites*
 *GED Testing Locations*
Adult Education

Staffing

Data shows Nebraska Adult Education programs employed 196 part-time and 27 full time instructors in 2015.⁴⁴ A 2015 report described 23 of the 27 as part of the corrections system.⁴⁵ The report states, “A common concern of some local program directors is the almost constant hiring, training of part-time teachers - who then quit six months later for a full-time job, with benefits.”⁴⁶ This type of turnover can be challenging for student completion. Both students and teachers interviewed for this report agreed that the teacher’s role in welcoming, encouraging, and building relationships with students was essential to student retention and success.⁴⁷ Student focus group participants shared that without consistent teachers, student and program outcomes suffer.

“A common concern of some local program directors is the almost constant hiring, training of part-time teachers - who then quit six months later for a full-time job, with benefits.”

Given the lack of funding for teachers and staff, volunteers play a major, and growing, role in adult education. In 2016, Nebraska Adult Education programs across the state benefited from 527 volunteers.⁴⁸ Some programs benefited from federal work-study and college-level service learning students to assist with tutoring and teaching, however programs outside of higher education are unable to do the same.

GED Student Performance

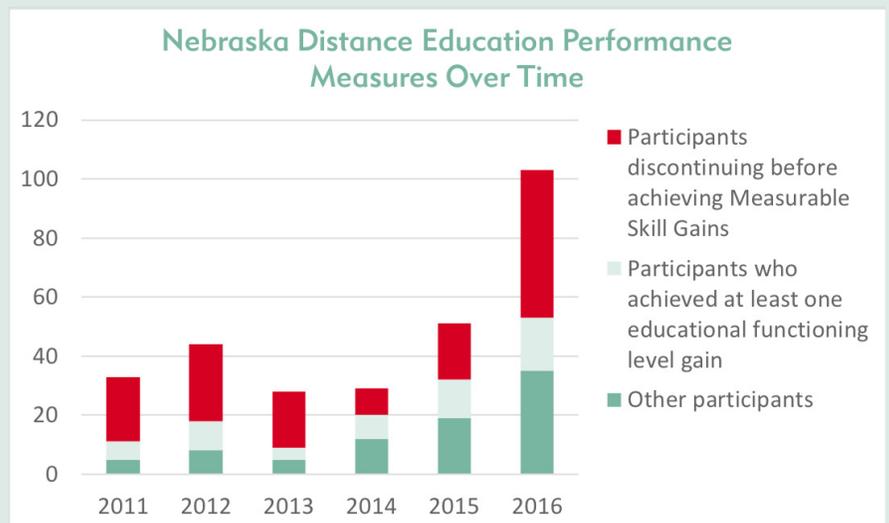
Federal regulators oversee state adult education programs around the country to ensure appropriate management of funds and student gains. Individual state goals are set in collaboration between federal and state officials based on a state's unique population, historic performance, and federal requirements. These goals are called "negotiated performance standards."

A 2016 Nebraska-specific report noted that achieving performance standards has been challenging in the recent past.⁴⁹ In program year 2017, the state achieved its negotiated performance standard in four of eleven educational functioning levels across the state. This means that the state successfully post-tested a set percentage of students in only four of eleven educational functioning levels (such as ABE level 2 or ELL level 6).⁵⁰ Actions taken by the newly transitioned Director of Adult Education included re-training and refocusing local NDE providers to better monitor performance, post-test students, and educate teachers. Improvements were noted within the reporting timeframe but several other activities appeared unfinished. Notable benchmarks required for reporting but not completed included aligning updated K-12 content standards with adult education standards and evaluating corrections recidivism following contact with adult education training.⁵¹ These benchmarks may have been completed by this time however this is not known through public reporting.

Distance Education

Nebraska distance education was first piloted for adult education in the Fall of 2011.⁵² This program allows students who are not able to attend traditional adult education classes to participate in programming "via technology in combination with designated classroom and blended learning" to maximize learning.⁵³ For students preparing for the GED exam, distance education entails software and web-based courses taught through state-approved third-party educational programs. Students work at their own pace to study required skills and travel to adult education class sites to fulfill twice monthly in-person instructional / check in requirements with instructors.⁵⁴ To maintain active status, students must complete 20 instructional hours per month in classrooms or via computer.⁵⁵

According to NRS data, distance education as a whole has been gaining popularity while achieving some success.⁵⁶ However, enrollment remains proportionally low with a high rate of separation or dropping out. Traditional students generally have a 15 percent separation rate while distance is nearly 50 (see the chart below).⁵⁷



Attendance Requirements

Students participating in adult education classes, including GED, are required to complete post-testing (to measure educational functioning level gains) at least once a year.⁵⁸ 30 to 60 hours of instructional time is

required before post-testing depending on the level at which students enter. In at least one location, when students do not meet the required number of hours to post-test, policies require students to sit out of classes for a quarter.⁵⁹ After being brought to the attention of NDE leadership before publication of this report, this policy is being changed to comply with state and federal requirements.

Language

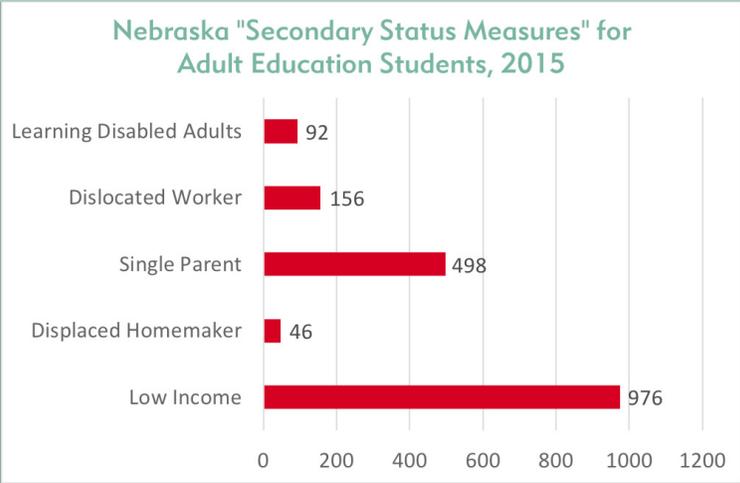
The national GED test is available in English, Spanish, and French.⁶⁰ However, in Nebraska, GED Testing Centers test only in English and Spanish.⁶¹ In most states, testing in languages other than English requires an additional ELL test, however, Nebraska is one state that does not.⁶² This is positive for students who 1) are continuing to study English but have mastered GED content, 2) are not forced to sequentially learn English then GED content in the case that they are slower English learners and, 3) whose work and education goals may not require English.

Federal WIOA and AEFLA regulations could be interpreted to, but do not appear to explicitly deny, states the possibility of providing HSE instruction in languages other than English but that is the practice around the country. Some states, like Texas,⁶³ Illinois⁶⁴ and New York,⁶⁵ do teach GED in Spanish but use non-federal dollars to fund it. Officials in Nebraska limit their instruction to English.⁶⁶ That leaves Spanish-language GED instruction to grant-dependent nonprofit providers, of which there are far fewer, who are primarily in population centers like Lincoln and Omaha.

Nebraska GED Students

Conversations with Nebraska’s GED students highlighted the difficulty and the variety of paths Nebraskans take before pursuing a GED. Of the total adult education population, three-fifths of students are non-U.S. born and the majority of students entered with education levels between a 9th and 12th grade.⁶⁶ Demographic indicators reveal this group also contains a high number of students who are low-income or single parents, noted on the chart below.⁶⁷

During focus groups, U.S.-born students who lacked an HSE or diploma shared many reasons for pursuing their GED: one shared that as a teenager they had issues with drugs; another was homeschooled and had a break with parents; and another took a paid position that did not require a diploma. Non-U.S. students pursuing their GED reported education costs in their home country as a major barrier. Others shared they had completed degrees but could not transfer foreign credentials, forcing them to start over.



Focus group students were pursuing their GED to better provide for their families or themselves. Jobs were cited as the biggest motivator: getting a job, getting a better paying job, or getting out of a job that was prone to injury were common. GED students were also looking toward higher education as a next step toward a higher paying job. Students were also motivated by their families. Spousal support and setting a positive example for children kept students coming back to classes when they might not have otherwise.

Student Barriers to Completing the GED

Students were asked to respond to the question, “What challenges do you have working toward or achieving the GED?” and given a list of options.⁶⁸ One notable comment revealed that several Lincoln students actually drove to Wyoming to take the HiSet exam on paper, rather than take the GED on the computer in Lincoln. The infographic below describes top issues from student and provider focus groups.



Computer Literacy



Internet Access



Costs



Language



Childcare

Students

“They changed from paper to computer and it wasn’t really a benefit. There are lot of people who used to study but now they don’t because they don’t feel familiar with computers.”

“I have a laptop but it’s difficult to find internet. I sometimes go to McDonalds but having access to these computers on campus is awesome.”

“I do know that I’ve had people express to me that [not having enough money for the test] is an issue and then they kind of disappear.”

“For me one of the main challenges when I took the test was there wasn’t any key for the enye (ñ).”

“I have two kids, I have an eleven month and a three year old and it’s hard for me to leave them anywhere. And my mom is not always in the house so that has been a problem for me.”

“It took a major pay cut to find a job that didn’t mind it. I have to work for myself basically in order to make ends meet.”

NDE & Nonprofit Providers

“There are so many people in Omaha who have never touched a computer.”
- April Lawton, MCC

“Most [students] don’t have internet, don’t have computers. They have to go to the library and the libraries in small rural areas aren’t open.”
- Mary Kay Versen, WNCC

“[Students] don’t have have the money, oftentimes, to commit to a GED class because they are just trying to put food on the table.”
- Robin Rankin, MPCC

“I would say for English Language Learners and people who have diplomas from other countries...there is not really good pathway...without people spending years and years and years trying to get reading and language skills for the test.”
- Dasha Sudar, Creighton

“A lot of times students won’t actually make it to class because their students aren’t in public school yet or they tend to miss classes when their children are out of school.”
- April Lawton, MPCC

“I have had a decent number of students who report issues with homelessness. Constantly having to move from home to home, apartment to apartment, couch-surfing, not having a consistent living situation.”
- April Lawton, MPCC

Provider Barriers to Offering the GED

NDE providers were candid with their thoughts on improving the GED in Nebraska. Themes around these conversations and direct quotes are found on the infographic below.



Overall Funding

“I think our state is completely underfunded. We could do a lot more if we could have full time instructors.” - *Ann Chambers, CCC*

“We do an amazing job for the amount of money that we get per student and the success that we’re able to produce on that.”

- *Ryan Hinz, Crete Public Schools*



Cut Fees

“[The cut] has had a huge impact on our program.”

- *Diane Vesely Robb, SCC*

“With more funding I could provide better services with more intensity and duration which would help kids be more successful.”

- *Mary Kay Versen, WNCC*



Alternative Exams

“Do you want a real high school equivalency test or a test they can just pass and receive a diploma? The GED is extensively researched, rigorous, comparable to an average high school senior in the US.”

- *Ryan Hinz, Crete Public Schools*

“[The GED is] a great test, and it’s worth a lot...but within the United States there are a lot of states adding different options”

- *Diane Bruha, Crete Public Schools*



Lower Participation

“I think our numbers are consistently lower than they were with the old test.”

- *Robin Rankin, MPCC*

“For ones that [the difficulty of the 2014 test] didn’t encourage [to finish by 2013], they disappeared for years.”

- *Alfred Pettinger, Community Action Partnership of Lancaster and Saunders Counties*



Stigma in Business Community

“We want our students to be employable after they graduate with their GED...There needs to be a little help on the state end, educating the businesses on exactly how that marries up to a high school diploma.” - *Mary Kay Versen, WNCC*

“There has got to be more education throughout the business community because GED® still has a stigma of ‘oh it’s just a test anyone can walk in and pass.’ Well that’s not true anymore.” - *Jeff Maddox, WNCC*



Location & Distance Education

“Students are having to travel an excessive distance to take the test out here.”

- *Robin Rankin, MPCC*

“I know there are areas that are not as well served that could be served and we don’t have the money to have the classes at this time.”

- *Lynn Saffer, SCC Beatrice*

Recommendations

Given the issues identified above, we submit the following recommendations to improve the HSE landscape in Nebraska.

1. Increase state investment in HSE preparation and Adult Education

Nebraska's investment in adult education lags far behind those of most other states in the nation. While nearly 105,000 Nebraskans aged 18-64 live without a diploma or HSE, our Adult Education ASE/GED program serves only 434 students per year.

Adult education program participation growth is not financially incentivized by our state on the local level. If programs were to increase enrollment, providers would still pull from the same pot of state and federal funds at a reduced per person level rather than grow at a relative rate. Providers are currently unable to collect registration fees that previously would have increased revenue based on participation. Programs are limited by this situation and that is realized by the shrinking number of ASE/GED participants.

Creating a system that incentivizes local and state programs to recruit more participants would bring in more students and allow programs to grow without contributing to overcrowded classrooms or straining limited finances. An incentive system would need to be devised on the state level but the investment to create that system would need to come first. **We recommend doubling Nebraska's investment in adult education from \$964,664 per year to \$1,929,328.** This doubling would increase our state expenditure per eligible adult from \$9.19 to \$18.38, moving us from 45th to 37th nationally, while also contributing to the specific recommendations below.

a. Subsidize GED tests for students

The \$120 price tag for the full battery of GED tests can be a major burden for low-income students trying to balance work, education, and family. Subsidizing most or all of these testing costs would remove a major barrier for participants. Offering these subsidies based on passing the GED Ready® (online GED practice tests) would be the easiest way to ensure student preparedness and responsible use of funds.

In fact, one NDE provider reported that they already had local funding designated to subsidize testing costs. Sadly, the fear of being overwhelmed by the response if they announced this subsidy publicly was also voiced. If the state were to step in to cover these costs, the "overwhelming" volume of students interested in attaining their HSE would be something to be celebrated and not dreaded.

b. Increase access to work supports for GED students

Our focus groups reaffirmed the many challenges adult learners face when returning to school to pursue their GED. State data also shows the high number of single-parent and low-income Nebraskans participating in programming. Increasing access to work supports like Nebraska's child care subsidy is one path to addressing this need. The child care subsidy program helps low income Nebraskans to pursue education

or work. The current eligibility level for the child care subsidy program (130 percent of the federal poverty level or below) is low compared to the rest of the United States. Nebraska should raise its eligibility level, both initial and when eligibility is redetermined, allowing more students to pursue education, including ASE/GED, and receive child care support.

In addition, providers can help to target work support programs to their students. Ensuring provider awareness and proactive promotion of state and federal benefits would ensure students are getting the supports they need. Providers and teachers should be trained in basic eligibility and promotion for SNAP, Aid to Dependent Children, housing subsidies like Section 8 and vouchers, WIC, and the above mentioned child care subsidy so that they can share this information with eligible students.

c. Increase the number of full-time and paid instructors

Of the 27 full-time adult education instructors working for Nebraska's Adult Education program in 2015, only four worked outside of Nebraska Corrections. Focus groups indicated that teacher turnover can prevent continuity and affect student completion. With more full time staff, there will be less turnover among instructors and stronger connections between students and teachers leading to stronger outcome achievement. Additional participation through incentivized growth would justify these new teachers as well.

Increasing NDE program director capacity by fully funding their time would also support program growth and performance. During focus groups, directors shared their struggles with wearing multiple hats. Allowing all programs, urban and rural, small and large, the chance to fully focus on adult education outcomes would allow them to clear their plate of additional responsibilities and increase performance in their core programs.

d. Implement a marketing campaign targeting businesses and employers

GED students and providers alike shared their experiences of employer bias against the GED rooted in the perception that achieving the GED is less difficult than a diploma. Similarly, employers held the perception that people who earned their GED are less prepared, capable, or skilled than those who earned a diploma. Employers' lack of respect for the exam is unfair and their perception untrue.

We recommend that NDE and relevant workforce partners initiate an employer awareness marketing campaign to emphasize the rigor of the current GED test. This campaign should highlight the time, skills, and persistence necessary to complete the test and encourage employers to favor GED completer applicants. As more employers get this message, Nebraska's adult education graduates will be in a better situation to enter the workforce with less stigma and realize greater market value.

e. Implement a marketing campaign targeting students

Both NDE providers and students suggested that increasing awareness of local GED services would be beneficial for prospective students. Students shared that amid changing circumstances, reminders of the GED's benefits, availability, and potential impact would bring more students to participate. A statewide marketing and awareness campaign focused on adults without a diploma would make details of NDE's GED

program more common knowledge and would encourage participants who have never received services or who have dropped out the chance to engage. New branding would highlight these services.

f. Supporting computer and internet access for program participants

Students and providers reported that computer literacy was one of the biggest barriers to GED participation and completion in the state. If Nebraska continues to exclusively offer the GED, a computer-only HSE, doing more for students without access to computers at home or in their communities is necessary. Loaner computers preloaded with distance education software would be valuable for students without a personal computer or ready access to a public computer or library. Home internet subsidies could also allow students without internet access the chance to study at home, rather than at a McDonald's or via smartphones. Closing the gap around computer access will help more students with a fear of computers enroll in adult education programs and persist.

2. Formally explore offering alternative HSE tests in Nebraska such as the HiSET or TASC exams

Nebraska is one of 23 states that has chosen to continue exclusively offering the GED as an HSE exam. This is despite the significant drop in GED class participation, attempts, and completion caused by changes to the exam in 2014. In Nebraska, participants fell 71 percent and completions fell by 80 percent within two years, with only 434 individuals out of nearly 105,000 18-64 year olds living in our state without a diploma completing. This could be the reason for the national trend away from the GED.

Student focus groups and nonprofit providers saw advantages to Nebraska offering alternative exams including testing on paper and lower costs for students.⁷⁰ As Nebraskans continue to travel as far as Wyoming to take an alternative exam, we must consider what best meets the needs of students and employers - not just GED providers. We recommend our state formally explore offering an alternative test to accommodate paper-based and lower cost testing. NDE and state senators should explore these options through a legislative interim study.

3. Make higher quality student barrier, separation, and completion data public to better recognize trends and needed supports

Adult education data available through the federal NRS system is conglomerated and reported in static tables. To increase transparency, we recommend Nebraska publish yearly outcomes data broken down by program, student characteristics, and demographics that can be easily understood, parsed, and organized. This additional and more detailed reporting could help state decision makers and the public better understand the causes of the significant drop in GED participation between 2013 and 2014 and what factors have changed since.

Nebraska should also collect data beyond what is currently collected. NDE providers shared that most do significant follow up to retain absentee students and to learn student motivations for separation. Collecting this data centrally and then making it public would allow lawmakers to target interventions based on the most common reasons students drop out. For example, if the majority of students drop out because of lack

of transportation, NDE or the state legislature could work to provide travel vouchers or bus passes to help get students to class. While we know how many students separate from programming, more accessible and centralized information on why they separate would be valuable.

4. Remove administrative barriers and expand access so more Nebraskans can participate in adult education programming

Based on focus group conversations, changes to the administrative policies noted below could maintain student accountability while better accommodating the diverse situations of adult learners.

a. Eliminate exclusion from failure to meet post-test hour requirements

A concern shared by students and providers was the length of time necessary for students entering the program at lower function levels to complete their GED. For ASE/GED students, the state requires 40 hours of instruction before post-testing or 12 hours before taking the GED. For lower functioning levels, that hour requirement can climb to 60. If students do not meet the instructional hour requirement within the allotted time frame, some programs ask students to sit out until the next quarter. At the time of publishing, NDE assured us that this policy was being addressed at the local level and being revised. This is a positive development given the instability of many families with low-income and low-education and the reality of adult education programs.

b. Reduce in-person requirements for distance education in rural or remote areas

Distance education is a growing part of the adult education system. It is wise for Nebraska to invest in this given the reduced number of AEFLA sub-grantees and GED testing centers in our state, the wider availability of technology, and an increasing online culture. Retention, however, remains a challenge for this method of instruction. Students enrolled in distance education drop out at a rate of 50 percent while that number for classroom instruction is nearer 15.

One rural NDE provider suggested Nebraska's distance education policy requiring students to meet in-person with adult education personnel twice a month could be to blame. This policy requires some rural students to travel hours each way to attend classes, put their signature on a sign in sheet, and then return home after an hour of instruction.

To increase retention, the state should adopt "e-learning" software and systems whereby students can participate remotely in live classes in addition to standard distance education methods. Removing or lessening the in-person meeting requirement can only encourage rural participation and grow distance education participation in years to come.

5. HSE accommodations for non-English speakers

Students who do not speak English as their first language shared the difficulty of achieving an HSE in English during our focus groups. Below are recommendations based on this feedback.

a. Use state dollars for non-English instruction classes

Nebraska, like other states, has interpreted federal regulations around English-language proficiency as requirements that all HSE instruction should take place in English. Federal dollars limit states in this way. This has limited the state's Spanish-language instruction to a limited number of grant-dependent nonprofit organizations in population centers around the state.

Although speaking English is an asset to residents of the U.S., there are numerous workforce opportunities for limited or non-English speaking individuals. Additionally, Nebraska families and communities benefit from individuals advancing their HSE learning in math and other subjects even while they work to learn English. NDE should review existing budgets and set aside state dollars to allow Spanish-language instruction at locations where there is a demand. This would engage more adults across the state, be more inclusive for diverse populations, and be a strategic use of state dollars.

b. Spanish-language keyboards for Spanish-language GED tests

Student focus group participants pursuing the GED in Spanish shared that adding Spanish-language keyboards to GED testing facility computers would be highly beneficial to their speed and efficiency. Without Spanish punctuation, common accents, and letter combinations accessible by keystroke, as they are on keyboards designed for Spanish-speakers, students have a much harder time completing essays. This small but impactful change would allow more individuals to achieve their HSE through existing GED testing centers.

c. Consider combining ELL and GED instruction

One NDE provider shared the example of a student completing six levels of ELL and then six levels of adult basic education before completing their GED. It took four years from start to finish. A student shared that even after completing all ELL levels, language barriers continued to slow and confuse her while taking the GED test multiple times. For students interested in both learning English and attaining their GED, it may be beneficial to teach both in an integrated setting.

One model on which to base this new program would be the Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education (IELCE) available in Nebraska and other adult education providers across the country. Contextual learning, potentially offered through a program, would allow students to complete their programs more quickly and with fewer events that may derail their participation. We recommend NDE seek other state models to this end or consider working with the federal department of education to pilot their own.

Conclusion

The State of Nebraska should be doing more to encourage and support Nebraskans working to achieve an HSE credential. Not only can an HSE support an individual or family in their social and professional goals, but more workers with the skills and education required for Nebraska's changing job market can support our Nebraska economy. Concerns and solutions shared by students, NDE, and nonprofit providers reveal potential next steps for HSE programming in Nebraska. Starting an open dialogue between NDE and an interested public and implementing the recommendations above will only serve to strengthen a program that can do more.

Appendix

High School Equivalency Exams Allowed in Each State as of April 2018

	GED	HiSET	TASC
Alabama	X		
Alaska	X		
Arizona	X		
Arkansas	X		
California	X	X	X
Colorado	X	X	X
Connecticut	X		
Delaware	X		
Florida	X		
Georgia	X		
Hawaii	X	X	
Idaho	X		
Illinois	X	X	X
Indiana			X
Iowa		X	
Kansas	X		
Kentucky	X		
Louisiana		X	
Maine		X	
Maryland	X		
Massachusetts	X	X	
Michigan	X	X	X
Minnesota	X		
Mississippi	X	X	X
Missou		X	

	GED	HiSET	TASC
Montana		X	
Nebraska	X		
Nevada	X	X	X
New Hampshire		X	
New Jersey	X	X	X
New Mexico	X	X	
New York			X
North Carolina	X	X	X
North Dakota	X		
Ohio	X	X	X
Oklahoma	X	X	X
Oregon	X		
Pennsylvania	X	X	
Rhode Islan	X		
South Carolina	X		X
South Dakota	X		
Tennessee		X	
Texas	X	X	X
Utah	X		
Vermont	X		
Virginia	X		
Washington	X		
West Virginia			X
Wisconsin	X		
Wyoming	X	X	

Acknowledgements

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This report is supported by the Working Poor Families Project. The project was launched in 2002 and is currently supported by The Annie E. Casey, Joyce, and W.K. Kellogg foundations. The project partners with state nonprofit organizations and supports their state policy efforts to better prepare America's working families for a more secure economic future. For more information: www.workingpoorfamilies.org.



Nebraska Appleseed is a nonprofit organization that fights for justice and opportunity for all Nebraskans. We take a systemic approach to complex issues – such as child welfare, immigration policy, affordable health care, and poverty – and

we take our work wherever we believe we can do the most good, whether that's at the courthouse, in the statehouse, or in the community. We would like to thank the Working Poor Families Project for its support, which allowed this project to happen.

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